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Sunderland's Community Leadership Programme: a social productivity analysis

2020
Public Services Hub
at the RSA


Sunderland
City Council

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About 2020 Public Services Hub

The 2020PSH is a research and policy development hub at the RSA, created from the legacy of the 2020 Public Services Trust, the charity which convened and supported the Commission between December 2008 and its final report in September 2010. 2020PSH specialises in developing practice-based research on social productivity in public services. As part of RSA Projects, the Hub works collaboratively with local public service organisations, national sector leaders and other national partners to develop social value and social productivity thinking into local and national practice. The pressures on public services are many and varied – spending cuts, future demands, and the challenge of engaging more effectively and creatively with citizens and communities. Within this context, the 2020PSH seeks to apply a long-term, strategic perspective and develop socially productive responses in collaboration with its partners.

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Foreword

Sunderland has undergone tremendous upheaval from the 1980s to date – making a speciality out of bouncing back from tough economic times. The development of the Sunderland Strategic Transport Corridor and the success of car manufacturer Nissan in the face of a national manufacturing downturn is testament to the resilience and innovation of the city’s people. And as the UK economy faces a period of sustained fragility, the city must show its sense of purpose once again.

The Community Leadership Programme described in this report is at the centre of this purpose. Through strengthening the connections between elected members, the city’s communities, and the council’s public service reform agenda, the potential is there to innovate in service delivery, generate new forms of engagement and enterprise, and foster a culture of capacity building and support. We are already seeing positive results: services are becoming more responsive, and the old departmental silos are being reconfigured around people and place.

It is important for us to know that, what we do is rooted in the real lives of Sunderland’s citizens and communities. Our approach to community leadership and public services must continue to reflect this, and as we build on this report from the 2020 Public Services Hub at the RSA, we look forward to taking this agenda forward in partnership.

Cllr Paul Watson

1 Introduction

The Commission on 2020 Public Services conducted its research and developed its conclusions in the aftermath of the global financial crash of 2008. It was very clear to us that the magnitude of the social and economic challenges facing Britain meant that business as usual would not be an option for our public services. That is why we argued for a new social settlement based on the idea of social productivity. In our view, the objective of public services and state action should be to foster social and economic resilience by enabling people and communities to lead the lives they choose. This is not just about meeting need – it is also about running with the grain of communities to identify and build on social assets, unlock social resource and enhance autonomy. The question of how we can enable people and communities to be productive is, if anything, even more pressing today than it was two years ago, given that we now know that Britain faces a decade of austerity and low-to-no growth.

The 2020 Public Services Hub at the RSA is working with a range of partner organisations in public services and localities to help develop a new body of social productivity practices. We are exploring how new models of networked collaboration, co-operation and enterprise can help socialise public services. This has led us to work with national service areas such as Further Education, Fire and Health on how they can embody social productivity in their approach. But it is at local level where social innovation will have its most significant impact on people's lives. Many cities are responding to these bleak times by rethinking the role of local governance and civic leadership. They don't want to preside over the residualisation of their services. Instead, they want to develop new approaches to the social and economic challenges of their places. At the heart of this is a fundamental question about the role of local democracy and the legitimacy of local government.

There is a growing danger that the challenges we face as citizens, families and communities seem beyond politics. And yet democratic politics is the best way in which communities can promote their interests. The task is to realign local democratic politics to the circumstances, needs and aspirations of today's communities. This is not a separate and unrelated

process from the imperative of promoting social productivity in public services. They are two sides of the same coin. That is why we were so pleased to be asked to work with Sunderland City Council to assess their Community Leadership Programme. The Council has decided that it wants to simultaneously turn itself into a platform for local social and economic productivity and at the same time reinvigorate the role of local councillors as community leaders.

Sunderland is a place with a strong sense of history and identity. It is known for making things and for the resilience and practical ingenuity of its people. For many decades until the 1980s, the local shipyards were the iconic symbol of local manufacturing as well as being the major employers. But whilst Sunderland was hit hard by deindustrialisation in the 1980s it also became an early pioneer of the next wave of manufacturing, based on inward investment. Its Nissan plant is now one of the major employers in the area, and one of the big economic success stories of the north east. Famed for its high levels of productivity, the plant is also at the cutting edge of low carbon economic development, as signified by the decision to manufacture the new Leaf car in Sunderland.

Reflecting its local culture, the Council has had a good record of service delivery and has been willing to buck the national trend by improving customer based services like Telecare at a time when these have been cut elsewhere. The Council is a major employer and has always seen itself as having a crucial role to play in being both a catalyst and a platform for economic growth in the city. So it has thought carefully about its role during the downturn and planned in advance for the spending cuts, which it knew would be coming in 2011. Whilst the £58m of cuts the Council has made have been painful, careful planning means they have not had as severe an effect on jobs and services as in some other places identified in a recent Audit Commission report.¹

The strategy has been to develop the “Sunderland way of working” as a response to the service, funding and economic pressures which the Council and city faces. This places great emphasis on partnership working and building trust and consensus while at the same time recognising that

¹ Audit Commission (2011) 'Tough Times: councils' responses to a changing financial climate'

Sunderland will have to do things differently, with greater imagination, innovation and community engagement. The deal with employees in a city which can ill afford further unemployment, has been no compulsory redundancies, in return for which there has been significant flexibility about staff roles and how people are deployed, with a big shift away from the town hall to area and neighbourhood based working. The Council has also developed an innovative redeployment and internal labour market programme in which several hundred staff have been moved away from their old jobs into a 'switch' team ready to be retrained and redesignated to new priority areas for staffing, such as in area based services and community engagement.

At the heart of this approach is the Community Leadership Programme, which is about refashioning the role of the Council and the way in which it engages Councillors, employees and partners with the local community. The ingredients of the CLP add up to a distinctive vision of what the Council is there for. But it is characteristic of Sunderland's pragmatism that it would rather see the outlines of this new model emerge through practice than through pronouncement. What is critical in a place like Sunderland, with its long collective memory, is to build change incrementally on the basis of establishing trust in new ways of doing things. Only once trust has been established about doing the basics in new and responsive ways, can the Council begin to tap the potential for community engagement to help respond to the big social and economic challenges which the City faces.

The Challenge for Sunderland

The challenges for Sunderland City Council are real and immediate. The public services landscape is in flux, and the UK economy shows no sign of an immediate recovery. Despite no projected let up in the diversity or scale of social demand, public spending cuts are creating new resource dilemmas for local authorities.

Research for the 2020 Public Services Trust by Professor Howard Glennerster estimated that, by 2030, the attendant costs of an ageing population will have added almost 4% of GDP onto public expenditure demands. We now know that Britain suffered a permanent loss of economic productivity as a result of the global financial crash in 2008 and

that we are in for, at best, a long period of painfully slow growth. UK unemployment is forecast to hit 2.8 million in 2012, with youth unemployment now already standing at over 1 million. At the household level, living standards look likely to be further squeezed: the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has concluded that median earnings will be no higher in 2015–16 than they were over a decade earlier in 2003.

The scale of resource and demand challenges means that the status quo is no longer viable for central government, nor for England's local authorities. All councils have been forced to cut their cloth according to stringent new fiscal constraints. And central government departments face their own cuts in expenditure as part of an efficiency drive virtually unprecedented in the public sector.

Few underestimate the scale of these challenges, or the pace of change that is needed to address them. But herein many also see opportunities. Doing more with less is part of it. But emerging new freedoms and responsibilities – for planning, local growth, skills budgets and business rates, for example – mean that policymakers are being forced to get beyond the idea of doing the same things with less money. Even in political opposition, many councils are using the crisis as an opportunity to radically rethink the way their services and internal processes are configured. As newly appointed Minister for Decentralisation and Cities Greg Clark has argued, ‘those who get localism know that they will succeed by working with communities in creative, progressive and sometimes, unexpected ways.’²

The 2020 Public Services Hub has argued that, to create sustainable and citizen-centric public services for the long-term, reform must be rooted in people, place and *social productivity*: the relationship between citizens, services and institutions that creates better outcomes and improves public service productivity.

The starting point for social productivity is citizens, families and communities – and this has been a central part of Sunderland City Council's strategy in developing its own ways of responding to the challenges it faces. The ‘Sunderland Way of Working’ over-arches various strands of reform.

² ‘A new settlement for planning’ Speech given by Minister for Decentralisation and Cities Greg Clark, 14.06.11 online at www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/newsettlement

As Council Leader Paul Watson has said, it represents a way of working rooted in the history, values and capabilities of local citizens – which have been severely tested as a result of industrial decline and economic transition since the 1980s.

“This is not just about making instant, wholesale cuts to budgets, services and jobs, but taking into consideration how we can maintain high service standards, develop and deliver services into the future based on local people’s needs and priorities, and find a way to do more, and better, with less.”³

The 2020 Public Services Hub has been asked to evaluate Sunderland City Council’s Community Leadership Programme – a key strand of the Sunderland Way of Working. The programme has ambitious aims: to ‘develop and instil a philosophy and approach that transcends organisational barriers and facilitates a transformation of the relationship between people, public services and governance’. Our evaluation assesses the impact of the programme – on the ground, and as a set of policy initiatives – against these aims. We offer a framework for analysis, and a set of challenges against which the future development of the programme should be measured.

Big Society... but with the politics brought back in?

Our findings suggest that both government and opposition could learn from the experience of Sunderland’s Community Leadership Programme. Its key dynamics tap into a growing consensus across the political spectrum: the need to nurture and tap into the latent capacity of citizens and communities; the need to mobilise a range of resources across public, private and civil society; the need to embed citizen engagement and bottom-up service accountability as key principles of service reform; and the inextricable links between the role of the local council, and the economic trajectory of a locality.

³ Cllr Paul Watson quoted in ‘Leader’s Blog’ 24.01.11 online at www.sunderland.gov.uk

Most of all, the CLP brings the role of democratic politics back into play. It does this through parallel processes of service redesign and the re-engagement of elected members with their communities and officers. Sunderland's historical, political and economic journey points to the reality that engaged citizens and communities and a vibrant civil society cannot be achieved without an active and catalytic role for the local authority, and the elected members that represent the city's communities.

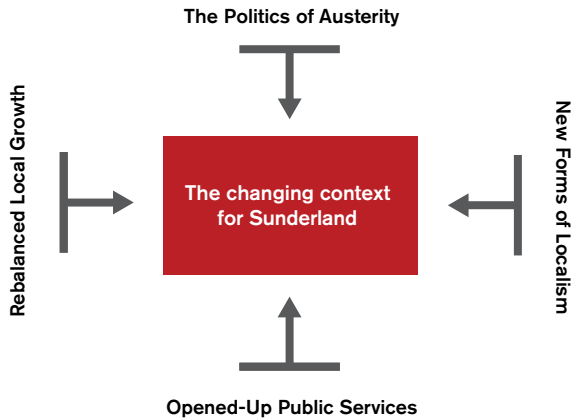
“The Big Society makes sense, but I don't see much of it here.”

Elected Member

The CLP is making incremental steps towards realising the goals it has set out. Not everyone has yet been brought along. One councillor told us, ‘it is doubtful how much value we will get out of this’. However, most that we spoke to were very positive about the CLP. This local scrutiny and critique means that the programme must continue to be reflexive, to evolve and reform. The next stages will be crucial, as policymakers learn from progress so far, and reflect on the hurdles ahead. In this report we offer them some tools to help do this.

2 The Changing Context for Sunderland: national policy in flux

The Coalition government has been ambitious in the scope of its reform agenda, and this rapid, radical approach is already creating an uneven and shifting set of policy dynamics. For local authorities such as Sunderland, four areas are key:



1 The Politics of Austerity

Deficit reduction and spending cuts are the dominant short term imperative for this government. The 2010 Spending Review signalled an average ‘19% four-year cut in departmental budgets’ as part of a raft of measures designed to eliminate the structural deficit by 2015. Councils have been particularly hard hit, with front-loaded cuts totalling an average 11% in 2011, followed by an average 6.5% in 2012–13. In Sunderland, these have been estimated at a total of £57.8 million for 2011/2.⁴ The impacts are felt across the organisation. As one front-line worker put it, ‘you can only screw in so many bolts with a single spanner’.

⁴ Sunderland City Council, Cabinet Budget Report, mtg of 16.02.11

The potential distribution and impact of cuts and reform has been subject to intense debate. Greater reliance on central government grant funding means that councils in less affluent areas – what the Audit Commission characterises as ‘deprived areas in the north, the midlands and inner London’ – have been badly affected by its removal. Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles has argued that ‘funding fairness underpins (the) settlement’,⁵ but the Institute for Fiscal Studies has predicted that Coalition reforms could rapidly increase relative and absolute poverty, in contrast to government claims.⁶ Public sector job losses are estimated at 710,000 by 2017. The following table sets out planned grant reductions in Sunderland, giving an idea of the scale of the spending challenge.

	2010/11 Adjusted (£m)	2011/12 (£m)	Change (£m)	Change (%)
Formula Grant	178.243	158.102	-20.141	-11.3
Learning & Disabilities	10.834	11.056	0.222	2.05
Early Intervention Grant	17.968	15.651	-2.317	-12.9
New Deal for Communities	2.366	0	-2.366	-100
Cohesion	0.107	0	-0.107	-100
Working Neighbourhood Fund	9.940	0	-9.940	-100
Prevent	0.116	0	-0.116	-100
Housing and Council Tax Benefit	3.682	3.383	-0.299	-8.12
Preventing Homelessness	0.181	0.216	0.035	19.34
Children's Grants	4.555	-	-4.555	-100
Flood and Water Management	-	0.120	0.120	100
Transitional Grant	-	0.267	0.267	100
Grant Changes*	227.992	188.795	-39.197	-17.2

*Before Council Tax freeze grant of £2.376m and inclusion of NHS funding £4.339m which will be channelled through the Health Authority for Supporting Social Care

⁵ www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/dec/13/eric-pickles-council-budget-cuts

⁶ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2010) Child and Working Age Poverty from 2010 to 2013 www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5373

At the same time, councils are being warned to make savings in a responsible and measured way – not simply protecting in-house jobs and services at the expense of voluntary sector provision. Eric Pickles has warned that councils ‘must resist any temptation to pull up the drawbridge and pass on disproportionate cuts’.⁷ And despite unprecedented spending pressures, some within local government have seen the ‘burning platform’ as an opportunity for change that the fiscal crisis has provided – giving creative councillors and officers the opportunity to innovate and do things better and at less cost.⁸

Sunderland and other North-East councils have already signalled their intentions in this direction, recognising that emerging from recession and spending retrenchment without major crises of social need and economic stagnation will require ‘smarter, enterprising leadership between the public and private sectors’.⁹ Our research shows how the council has begun to explore this territory, under the ‘Sunderland Way of Working’, developing ways of dealing with austerity that prioritise the protection of both front line services and council jobs. Creative approaches to preventative social care and employment services have been part of this mix.¹⁰

2 New Forms of Localism

We have argued that, in many respects, the Coalition’s vision of Big Society promotes ‘localism without the politics’ or ‘hyper localism’ – taking key public services out of local authority control, and emphasising direct citizen choice over local accountability. But this is far from being the only dynamic at play. The 2011 Localism Act set out several new powers for councils, including a general power of competence and a commitment to directly elected mayors in several of England’s major cities. Moreover, the

⁷ <http://thirdsector.co.uk/news/Article/1057806/pickles-says-councils-disproportionate-cuts-face-statutory-force/>

⁸ The Public Services Bill (known as the social value bill) has the potential to support the development of some of these creative approaches. For more information and for an exploration of the social value ethos, see Transition Institute (2011) ‘Social Value Ethos’ online at www.transitioninstitute.org.uk/publications/

⁹ Association of North East Councils (2010) ‘The North East Commitment’ p. 5

¹⁰ See for example ‘How does Sunderland provide social care to all residents who need it?’ The Guardian, 15.06.11 and ‘Make it Work: Northern Way Worklessness Pilot Project review’ at www.livework.co.uk

recent public services white paper takes a more pragmatic line, emphasising the strong role for local authorities in re-shaping public services so they are more aligned with the particular needs and requirements of local communities.

Local government responses to fiscal austerity have been varied. Lambeth Council has been at the forefront of developing a co-operative Council model in which as many services as possible are run as community and employee co-operatives. Thirteen councils – including Sunderland – have become part of the Labour Co-operative Councils network, which is pledged to explore co-operative ways of running local services. At the other end of the spectrum, councils such as Barnet and Suffolk have been developing more minimal-state, strategic outsourcing models. In the north – Manchester for example – the imperative to combine public service efficiency with a clear economic growth plan is strong. A recent review from the New Local Government Network¹¹ sets out some of these archetypes, as listed in the box below:

Trendwatching the council of 2015

1. Commissioning – not just conventional outsourcing but neighbourhood and individual budgets and civil society
2. Decentralised – more direct democracy and control over services to area managers and neighbourhood forums
3. Integrated – a move to place-based commissioning and sharing services
4. Commercial – councils trading, charging, using bonds
5. Participative – more direct democracy, less direct service control, members focusing on new role as civic entrepreneurs.

The local government resource review adds another dimension to this tableau, proposing the effective part-decentralisation of business rates. For North-East councils such as Sunderland, this is a serious challenge; but it also perhaps points to an opportunity. The possibility of exacerbating

¹¹ Parker, S. (2011) 'Future Councils: life after the spending cuts' London, New Local Government Network p.14

national geographical inequalities is real. Yet the opportunity exists to create a virtuous cycle of enterprise within localities that can grasp the nettle and create a more localised base for growth and public service reform. At the same time, the menu of options for greater negotiated decentralisation set out in the Cabinet Office document *Unlocking Growth in Cities*, suggests a wider opportunity for cities to play a much bigger part in shaping their own economic futures.¹²

3 Opened-Up Public Services

Running in parallel to the Coalition's deficit reduction and localism plans is a long-term commitment to open up the provision of public services. This is the 'Big Society': a set of ideas that promote the diversification of service delivery models – through greater private and voluntary sector involvement, for example; and an expansion of citizen engagement through opportunities to volunteer, to exercise greater choice, and to 'give' more effectively.

The Public Services white paper offers a framework for these plans, and for the gradual reform of the 'old fashioned, top-down, take-what-you-are-given model of public services'.¹³ As the Economist notes, this is 'reform but not transformation', yet some clear themes are already beginning to reshape the way local authorities think about the way they deliver and account for public services.

Councils across the country are responding in different ways to this imperative, as one might expect from a country in which community resources, capacity and capability are unevenly distributed. This means considerable variance in the role of the state in the design, funding and delivery of local public services. As the 2020 Public Services Hub has argued, the role of the state has been the 'missing piece' in the government's vision of Big Society public services.

“In practice, we know that the state will continue to be responsible for funding and regulating many public services, as well as

¹² www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files_dpm/resources/CO_Unlocking%20GrowthCities_acc.pdf

¹³ HMG (2011) *Open Public Services White Paper* p.6 online at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/open-public-services-white-paper.pdf

ensuring their provision (if not directly providing them). And we also know that such is the inequality of social capital and capacity across the UK that the state will have to do more than stand back if civil society is to flourish on an equitable basis. But there is no new framework or consensus that helps provide policy makers, the public and civil society organisations with a guide to action about the proper balance between state and community.”¹⁴

The challenge is particularly acute in areas such as Tyne & Wear, where instances of social deprivation are high, and public sector investment and spending has been high as a result. Yet realising this makes the imperative to reform even greater. There are insights within the Coalition’s approach – decentralisation, bottom-up service design and early intervention, accountability, open data and a ‘principle of subsidiarity’ – that tap into an emerging cross-party consensus on the future of public service delivery. The key for Sunderland is to utilise them in a way that supports its citizens, focusing on social value and community capacity – whoever is delivering the service.

4 Rebalanced Local Growth

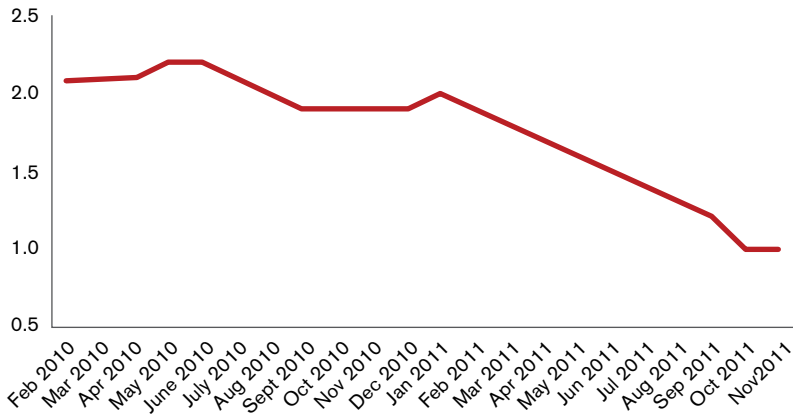
Just as public service governance is being decentralised and liberalised, so is the government’s strategy and infrastructure for economic growth. In place of regional development agencies (RDAs), the Coalition has encouraged the creation of local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), which are designed to be bottom-up platforms for growth policy guided by local business needs. This is a distinct shift in approach – away from a coordinated north-east (albeit top-down) infrastructure represented by the former RDA One North East, to a system within which city councils, industry stakeholders and other business interests must self-organise to create a coherent local approach.

Local debate over the focus of the LEP’s bid to host one of (currently) twenty-one national ‘Enterprise Zones’ illustrates the opportunity and the challenges of this approach. A successful bid could offer Sunderland the opportunity to develop latent local assets such as the former Vaux

¹⁴ Kippin, H. & Lucas, B. (2011) ‘From Big Society to Social Productivity’ RSA & 2020 Public Services Hub

Brewery site and the Port of Sunderland. Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude has called this a ‘compelling case’¹⁵ – an example of the potential of Sunderland to attract large-scale investment and make the case for itself as a centre of industrial and low-carbon economic development within the region. But the consequences of failure would arguably be worse than not bidding for localities acting without regional support, with the propensity for strategic thinking and long-term investment potentially undermined.

GDP growth (per cent)



Local authorities must navigate this new territory within the context of fiscal austerity and public service cutbacks. As the Association of North East Councils has noted, the north-east region has been ‘much more resilient this time than in other periods of difficulty and uncertainty’.¹⁶ But this resilience will be further challenged as spending retrenchment is

¹⁵ ‘Sunderland’s Strong Case for Enterprise Zone, say Ministers’ Sunderland Echo 29.03.11 online at www.sunderlandecho.com/news/local/sunderland_s_strong_case_for_enterprise_zone_say_ministers_1_3230400?commentspage=0

¹⁶ ANEC (2010) ‘The North East Commitment’, p.10

sustained and national economic recovery remains uncertain, as HM Treasury comparative figures (see above) suggest.¹⁷

Sunderland City Council's 'Economic Masterplan' is a recognition of the need to be locally proactive within this challenging new context, arguing that 'the next three to four years will be especially difficult'. Obviously, Sunderland is not unique in this regard. Across Europe, creative local authorities are attempting to boost the economic potential of cities, re-drawing the blueprint of economic growth around high-tech, low-carbon and socially sustainable principles. In this sense, Sunderland is following a pattern set by European 'smart' urban growth and development plans such as Amsterdam Smart City, Innovation City Ruhr and Stockholm Royal Seaport.¹⁸ As we discuss below, the challenge for Sunderland is to develop similar 'integrated'¹⁹ plans for green growth and regeneration alongside a coherent public service reform and community leadership agenda.

¹⁷ H.M. Treasury (2011) 'Forecasts for the UK Economy: a comparison of independent forecasts' online at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/201111forcomp.pdf

¹⁸ See for example www.economist.com/node/17388368

¹⁹ 'Local Initiatives: cities take big steps to trim carbon footprints' in the Financial Times, 28.10.11 online at www.ft.com/cms/s/0/313d1a10-fe59-11e0-bac4-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1eXuZPmVi

3 Community Leadership and Social Productivity

“Understanding and actually defining community leadership is a key challenge for us... the question of how you engage and involve the community is by no means bottomed out.”

Senior Council Manager

Sunderland has chosen community leadership as its way of navigating through this complex set of issues. It is a potentially powerful narrative – offering a modernised form of local democracy in a context where others are pursuing a ‘minimal state’. Political parties themselves are developing their own versions of community leadership theory and practice.²⁰ But what does it mean?



²⁰ See for example LGA Liberal Democrat Group (2010) ‘Community Politics in the 21st Century’ LGA Leadership Centre online at www.localleadership.gov.uk/images/Community%20Politics%20Sept%202010.pdf and LGA Labour Group (2010) ‘Cooperative Communities’ LGA Leadership Centre online at www.localleadership.gov.uk/images/Co-operative%20Communities%20Sept%202010.pdf

²¹ Sullivan, H. (2007) ‘Interpreting ‘community leadership’ in English local government’ *Policy & Politics* 35(1): 141-61

Community leadership is a contested term with multiple meanings and a long policy history. Research conducted for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published in 2007 traces its roots back to the ‘mid-nineteenth century activism of elected local authorities in England’s industrial cities’, which was later partly subsumed by post-war delivery plans for a newly nationalised welfare state.²² More currently, the Local Government Leadership Centre defines the term as ‘councils, both councillors and officers, enabling local communities to steer their own future’, using ‘all the tools at their disposal to engage communities in making their own difference’. There are several elements to this broad theme (adapted from Sullivan 2007):

- » *Creating a New Narrative* – this is about community leadership as the conceptual focal point for a new reform programme that builds trust between citizens and local authorities, and builds the capacity of councillors and officers to enable this.
- » *Council as Strategic Enabler* – this is about community leadership as the central theme around which new local partnerships and shared goals are created. The council’s role within the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) or LEP is an example of this.
- » *Empowerment and Citizen Voice* – this is about community leadership as empowering citizens and communities; through devolution of influence (e.g. to wards or neighbourhoods), and through empowering councillors to play lead role.
- » *Re-Asserting Council Influence* – this is about community leadership as asserting local authority influence within a much reduced area of purview; most relevant where public service provision is de-linked from local political processes.

Sunderland’s own Community Leadership Programme draws on each of these themes to some extent. Designed in 2009 as part of the council’s strategy to deal with the prospect of funding cuts and new demand

²² This diagram and the following sections draw on work by Helen Sullivan (2007, see reference above)

challenges, the programme has begun to reshape the way citizens, elected members and council officers work together in the city. In the following sections, we pull out some key themes from the programme, creating a framework from which to then sketch out some key challenges, and some future directions for stakeholders in Sunderland to consider. We do this using the idea of social productivity.

Sunderland Council – democratic structures

Sunderland has 75 councillors – predominantly Labour, and including four independent members. The breakdown is as follows:

- » 56 Labour members
- » 14 Conservative members
- » 3 independent members
- » 1 Liberal Democrat member
- » 1 independent Conservative member

The city is administrated through five area committees – each made up of 4–6 wards. They split the city according to its five ‘regeneration areas’, which are West, East and North Sunderland, Coalfields and Washington areas.

The committees currently ‘consider reports on the delivery of council services’ and ‘consult with local people and organisations’ about this delivery. They also act as investment decision-making bodies for the Strategic Investment Plan (SIP), the Strategic Initiatives Budget (SIB), and local Community Chest funding. Our research highlighted the role of area committees as an area for exploration in future, and a potential focus point for the CLP development plan. As we were told:

“They are good as a point of communication, but not as a vehicle for citizen engagement... Area Committees are open to the public, but no-one ever turns up.”

Elected Member

“(The Area Committees) can descend into pork barrel politics... (They) are too large. Could they be devolved to wards themselves, or broken up?”

Elected Member

A Social Productivity Framework

Social productivity is a fresh approach to policy and practice that can give practitioners and policymakers the means to make sense of the change around them, and begin shaping new realities on the ground. It is

- » *An analytical framework for making sense of profound change over the long-term*
- » *A set of analytical and strategic tools to begin reshaping realities on the ground*
- » *A means to re-think the role of the Council within a changing ecosystem of public services*

The idea of social productivity is about long term culture change in public services – shifting from a culture of top-down, silo-based service delivery, to a culture that recognises that social value is co-created between the service and user. It is an approach that puts engagement, co-production and civic responsibility at the heart of public services – creating sustainable systems that build social capacity, foster community resilience, and work with the grain of people’s lives.

According to the Commission on 2020 Public Services, social productivity is the idea that ‘public services should explicitly be judged by the extent to which they help citizens, families and communities to achieve the social outcomes they desire’.²³ This means less focus on the particular services that are being – or have always been – delivered, and more focus on how the confluence of citizen agency, civil society and the state can collaboratively create the right conditions to improve social outcomes. It means thinking less ideologically about the role of the state, focusing instead on how citizens can be engaged, and how state, market and society can work together to solve public problems.

Social Productivity is our analytical framework for assessing Sunderland’s CLP. In section six we use it to set out the key challenges for the programme, and some future directions as it develops. But how have

²³ Commission on 2020 Public Services, ‘From Social Security to Social Productivity: a Vision for 2020 Public Services’, London, 2020 PST

we made sense of the programme as a whole? In the next section will pull out some key themes.

How can social productivity help address the challenges faced in Sunderland?

- » *The need for a rebalanced account of economic growth* – the relationship between citizens, state and society must be rebalanced – not rocked from state dominance to state retrenchment. This means a larger share of growth must come from SMEs, social enterprise and new businesses embedded within local communities. Within a challenging macro-economic climate, local authorities must play an enabling and catalysing role.
- » *The need to tap into the ‘hidden wealth’ of citizens* – social productivity is about services that are built around the capabilities citizens have, and the outcomes they want. Over the long-term, this means holistic approaches that hold local commissioners to account for outcomes defined by people and communities – not only the services being delivered.
- » *The need to get ‘more with less’ from local services* – the principle of co-production is key. This recognises that value can be generated more efficiently from more cooperative and collaborative relationships between the service being delivered, and the citizens and communities consuming it.
- » *The need to generate community coherence and civic responsibility* – different people and places will have very different starting points in terms of their needs, resources and capabilities. This means that the local state and public services will need to play a strong role in building capacity and supporting collective capacity where it is needed.
- » *The need for sustainable ways of meeting future demands* – emerging social and economic demands – such as an ageing society and climate change – cannot be met through our existing delivery model. So public services must get better at unlocking resources and building long-term community resilience, and local authorities must take the lead in doing this.
- » *The need to be reflexive to changing citizen behaviours* – patterns of living, learning and working are changing. For new demands to become opportunities, local authorities must get better at working with the grain of people’s lives, mobilising a broader range of (public private and social) resources, and deploying them more intelligently within communities.

4 Sunderland's Community Leadership Programme

The CLP is one – albeit central – strand to a broader narrative being developed by Sunderland City Council known as the Sunderland Way of Working. This is part strategic planning, part branding exercise, and part system reconfiguration and culture change – providing an overarching narrative and a set of principles against which the council reconfigures its activities to reflect a changing set of fiscal, demand and productivity challenges. How, it asks, can the council help create better service outcomes, more productive working relationships and a more sustainable basis for the future? What kind of shifts in policy and practice would be needed? And how could the existing capacity and resources of the council be mobilised to realise them?

“It’s important to us to know that, what we do, we invented here.”

Cllr Paul Watson, Sunderland City Council Leader

As we have already shown, the context for this strategy has been multi-layered and complex, reflecting the pattern of Sunderland’s contemporary history, and its position within local, regional and national economies. Those at the centre of operations have attempted to create a uniquely local way of working, with analysis and response rooted in local realities. This has generated a difficult balance – between redesigning services that better reflect the lives and needs of the city’s residents; engineering better ways of working between elected members, their communities and public servants; and designing a programme that taps into the wider economic and social trajectory of the city, and the capacity of the council to deliver.

These are bold aims. So how have they been attempted?

Key Strands of the Community Leadership Programme

The CLP is a multi-layered programme incubating several different initiatives as part of three broad strategic directions. The first aims to engage elected members more effectively as community leaders, creating

new processes that can improve communication and empower councillors at the community front-line. The second is about reconfiguring local public services to get ‘closer to citizens’ and more locally responsive, creating new forms of delivery and accountability in partnership with citizens. The third is about gluing these strands together with a set of broader economic questions faced by the city – asking how people, place and council could contribute to economic sustainability and growth at a time of political and economic flux.



1 Engaging Councillors as Community Leaders

The CLP places ward councillors ‘at the centre of its approach’, and in doing so begins to re-define their role. The programme poses the question of how better engagement of councillors at the front line could both deepen democratic engagement within communities, and improve the way the City Council delivers services and responds to local needs. It does this principally in two ways:

Listening to the voice of councillors – the CLP has put into place a number of initiatives that strengthen the relationship between elected members and council officers. These include a member satisfaction flow chart and a member satisfaction survey – the result of strategic ‘gap’ analysis designed to assess the performance and responsiveness of the council to

the needs of local elected members. Both councillors and officers point to a more ‘open and frank’ set of relationships, and much greater engagement in their own roles as community leaders. In the longer term, it is hoped that this trusted feedback loop will enable a more personalised and efficient set of support mechanisms for councillors at the front line.

“There has always been a ‘them and us’ culture. But over the last 12 to 18 months, things have started shifting.”

Elected Member

Giving councillors the tools to lead – this is about supporting the capacity and wherewithal of councillors to become community leaders within their wards through better information flows, and stronger links to responsive local services. Key to this strategy is the establishment of account managers – volunteer officers who provide a personalised support function for elected members. Support was initially centred around the adoption of new technology such as laptop computers and smartphones, but, in those cases where relationships are strong, has extended into providing information on services and council working processes. Backing up this function is a ward bulletin service and a comprehensive service directory. These have both increased awareness among elected members of council developments within their wards, and provided a more direct link between the issues brought to councillors by residents, and the places they can go to resolve them.²⁴

“You can see a change in the councillors’ role – from officer-led, so councillors are more aware of their own role and responsibilities.”

Service Lead and CLP Account Manager

²⁴ Officers note that focusing on the effective induction of new councillors has the potential to strengthen the basis for community leadership and engagement in future.

Supporting Community Leadership: strengthening relationships with elected members

The *Account Managers* (AM) scheme began in May 2010 as a newly personalised approach to supporting councillors. It is supported by a *Ward Bulletin Service* (WBS) and a comprehensive *Service Directory* (SD). The key features are as follows:

- » 48 account managers have been recruited since May 2010. They are allocated to councillors on a 1:2 ratio.
- » A large part of the AM-Councillor relationship has been around helping councillors to navigate new technology and utilise new sources of council information.
- » The WBS responded to members' need for an 'early warning' system for information on local issues – such as planning and licensing, roadworks and maintenance.
- » Members are sent personalised email alerts, and the system uses sharepoint technology to aggregate information from across the council network.
- » The SD enables members to follow-up local queries much more efficiently and find the 'right person first time'. It has been developed using direct citizen feedback on their priorities and service needs.
- » Results from these schemes have been promising. Member satisfaction with officer support has increased from 65%–85% since the schemes were initiated.
- » Use of new technologies has increased in parallel with the AM scheme – with members ICT takeup increasing from 35% in 2009, to 97% currently.
- » More councillors are embracing remote working and mobile communications. This has meant faster member-council communication, with one recent survey on ICT usage 66% returned within two days.
- » A personalised and reflexive approach has made it easier for new councillors to get up to speed and aware of how the council can help address the needs of their residents, though some challenges remain in generating sustained engagement across the spectrum of elected members.

2 Reconfiguring Responsive Local Services

Designing more responsive local services (RLS) is about listening to – and better responding to – the needs of Sunderland's citizens; but is also part of a broader drive to use public resources more efficiently and effectively. For

those within the Council, the aim has been to demonstrate responsiveness in dealing with the things people care about. For those at the frontline, the opportunity has been to replace traditional ways of working with a more reflexive, adaptive set of techniques. Two strands are key:

Being Reflexive at the Front Line – the drive towards more locally responsive services has begun to fundamentally re-shape the way front-line teams are organised, and the way they interact with communities. The first ‘wave’ of RLS has focused on environmental services – dealing with problems such as litter, graffiti, fly-tipping and dog-fouling. These are services that people care about, and that have a visible and tangible impact on community life. Improving the responsiveness of these services is key to establishing a trust relationship between the Council and the community. Demonstrating that the Council can be trusted to match and exceed expectations on these basic services raises the potential of developing more ambitious, ‘socially productive’ relationships to deal with the big social and economic issues and challenges that Sunderland faces.

“[there is an] ‘empirical streak’ in people’s thinking about public services; if new service arrangements are to be put in place, people are keen to see evidence.”

Ipsos MORI & 2020 Commission²⁵

Environmental services are now operated through five Area Response Teams, which are based on areas of between 4–6 wards, and have responsibility and authority to make quick decisions across a range of service areas. Team members are embedded within communities, and are equipped with mobile devices that enable the rapid communication of local problems and issues. They can also draw on information from the ‘Area Intelligence Hub’, which pulls together local insight from a variety of sources (including residents enquiries, survey data and local petitions). Our research uncovered very positive responses to these teams, and an appetite to roll out this way of working across other council service areas. The next phase

²⁵ Ipsos MORI & 2020 Public Services Trust (2010) ‘Citizen Engagement: testing policy ideas for public service reform’ online at www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1362_sri-centralgov-citizen-engagement-testing-policy-ideas-for-public-service-reform-june-2010.pdf

of RLS will apply to people-based services, such as children's and youth services and adult care. This will be a major test for RLS, deepening both horizontal and vertical 'squeeze' – processes that blend service silos and bring front line staff closer to communities and to decision-making. We discuss the implications of this below.

“I've been working here for 30 years and I've never seen so much change as there as there has been in the last year.”

Frontline service manager, Sunderland coalfields area

Responsive Local Services

RLS is designed to make local council services more responsive to the people they serve. It is designed to:

- » Increase local people's influence over local services
- » Provide a rationale for 'refreshed governance arrangements'
- » Begin driving 'steady but ongoing' service decentralisation
- » Build impetus for developing the capacity of citizens & service providers

The first wave of RLS is environmental services – including litter & graffiti removal, dog-fouling, environmental enforcement & fly-tipping. This area was chosen for two main reasons: first, as a response to data from Ipsos MORI indicating the importance of these services to local people; and second, as a means of building trust through 'non-core' services as a precursor to developing RLS in other areas.

“The teams are building autonomy, trust and community understanding in one particular area of need... but this leads to massive potential for community-driven, integrated services in areas such as independent living.”

Senior Service Manager

New Structures, New Challenges

Street Scene services across Sunderland have been reconfigured around single-point 'team leaders' at ward level. Above this, six area response teams have 'total place' responsibility for one of five areas of the city (plus one for the City Centre). These integrated teams pull together functions from a range of individual service silos (see diagram).

The impact of RLS on Street Scene services has been significant. Front line workers we spoke to are enthusiastic that they can respond more quickly and effectively to the needs of resident. Mobile technologies and an integrated Geographic Information System (GIS) allow managers to deploy resources more effectively. And the reconfiguring of services into area based teams has generated cultural challenges for existing staff, but also a sense of pride in place demonstrated by near-95% of initial call-ins (in response to local issues) coming from staff themselves.

As the council explores the potential of RLS in a number of areas, resolving potential conflicts between these new structures and existing accountability and administrative frameworks will be key. For example:

- » *Where do the existing Area Committees fit in?* These are currently forums for councillors, officers and local residents – but we found little enthusiasm for their role as hubs of community engagement. As services are increasingly decentralised and community leadership is deepened, Sunderland faces a choice: to expand the remit of Area Committees into local service boards, or reconsider the way services and engagement is administered in the city.
- » *What role for residents associations?* For those at the heart of the CLP, responsive local services and community leadership are two sides of the same coin: building accountability mechanisms and capacity alongside deepening direct engagement and responsiveness at the front line. But what are the right forums to achieve this in addition to direct engagement with individuals? Currently, residents associations are a focus for engagement between citizens, ward team leaders and elected members. Their significance has increased since RLS and the Response Teams were set up. But should their role be more formalised or embedded within CLP accountability structures?
- » *How can RLS drive further innovation in service delivery?* RLS is in its early stages, but its bottom-up focus raises the possibility of more confident communities and more autonomous staff driving new ways of commissioning and delivering local services. Key issues to explore will include the potential role of residents associations or area committees in holding integrated local commissioning to account; or the potential of service providers to create spin-off co-operative or social enterprise models. The role of the council will be key here: it must support innovation, and build local capacity. As Social Business International has argued, ‘at the moment we’re in the rhetoric phase – there has to be a lot more work to actually build capacity and there’s a vital role for government in taking the lead’.



Generating a Deeper Understanding of Communities – building responsive local services relies on generating a nuanced understanding of the lives of citizens and communities – recognising that different people will engage in different ways. In Sunderland, this is being addressed through a proactive approach to social networking and online communities, direct engagement in communities through Area Response Teams, and through collaboration between councillors and members of these teams through ‘ward walks’, and through supporting and developing active residents associations. Bottom-up forms of online engagement are being pursued through a scheme tentatively called ‘In Touch’ – a self-selecting network of citizens who are already ‘in-touch’ with the council, and who can act as the seeding group for a broader network of people communicating and sharing information.

“the unified front-end, directly talking to people, the rapid response... this is a totally new delivery structure that gets you much more quickly to the underlying causes of local problems.”

Director of City Services

Behaviour Change at the Micro-Level



An interesting model of micro-level behaviour change is being promoted as part of the Shop Sunderland First campaign – which is designed to support retailers in the city’s beleaguered city centre.

As part of the scheme, Local Area Response Teams who have cleaned up areas of the city are leaving postcards with residents highlighting the clean-up work they have done, the value to the city, and asking residents themselves to take more responsibility for ‘keeping their property clean and tidy’.

The scheme is a way of making sure citizens are aware of the services available to them, but also to encourage co-production and civic responsibility at a household level.

The CLP could explore more systematic opportunities to integrate insights from behavioural economics into local service design in future, drawing on policy work such as the Institute for Government’s Mindspace framework, and the work of David Halpern’s Cabinet Office ‘nudge’ unit.

The ‘In-Touch’ initiative is in its early stages, and is being developed alongside a locally-focused market research function that draws on the council’s SWITCH team (see below). This will allow rapid research, information gathering and opinion testing to be quickly designed and deployed, generating more lines of communication and information between communities and the local authority. The integrated working of these functions should be an underlying goal for policymakers.

“Internal restructuring creates new transitional challenges... market research is still at the ideas stage, but there are strong arguments for developing it further.”

Senior Council Manager, Organisational Development

The 'In Touch' Network

'In Touch' is being planned as a prototype initiative exploring the potential of multi-channel engagement (including digital social networking) to drive citizen engagement and service transformation in Sunderland. The principles behind it are as follows:

- » Provide a 'sounding board' for innovations in service delivery and standards.
- » Provide an opportunity for 'already engaged' citizens to become community correspondents.
- » Offer multi-level opportunities to engage – from awareness through weekly emails, to online pulse surveys, to 'direct involvement' in local affairs.
- » Give local councillors the opportunity to engage, strengthen and develop these networks. Designers argue that elected members have a 'key role to play' in developing this agenda.

The initiative is likely to draw on the resources and expertise of the council's SWITCH team, as well as tapping into the proposed market research functionality currently being developed in this space. The city is already well connected into social networking and social media, with a 2010 BBC survey naming the city 'Facebook capital of Britain'. According to the survey, the city's online population is '24% more likely' to visit the site than the national average. As the initiative develops and the role of the Council in fostering this network potentially expands, policymakers will need to ask themselves some key questions:

- » *Fostering Digital Inclusion* – for 'In Touch' to be truly inclusive, it will need to find ways of expanding its network from existing community partners, to those parts of the community who have traditionally been excluded from online networks and communication with the council. There is unique potential to achieve this in Sunderland as a result of its already high social network penetration. This is not only about awareness and communication. As Digital Champion Martha Lane Fox has argued, the future of public services will be increasingly digital, and increasingly about co-productive relationships between citizens and services based on open data and online platforms. Beginning to build community capacity to engage in these new relationships will be a vital part of sustaining local services in the future.
- » *Expanding Social Networks* – understanding social networks can be a powerful driver of service reform, as it offers the potential of better

understanding how to ‘work with the grain’ of people’s lives. Sunderland Voices begins with the networks already known to council officers – but the potential is there in future for a deeper exploration that could open up new possibilities for service design. At the RSA for example, the Connected Communities team has piloted social network analysis in New Cross Gate area of London, exploring how stronger community connections can reduce isolation and empower communities. As Responsive Local Services are developed in different service areas (particularly independent living services), similar insights could help local service providers ‘work with the grain’ in Sunderland’s communities, and tap into the latent resources of its citizens.

“The Council currently isn’t as into this agenda as it should be... we need to be more in the digital loop.”

Senior Council Officer

3 Creating Partnerships for Local Growth

The CLP is seen by executives as the ‘glue’ that binds several strands of Sunderland’s reform and restructuring programme together. So although the programme itself is focused principally on engaging councillors and redesigning local responsive services, the linking of these strands with the city’s economic sustainability, community resilience and growth agendas is vital. Dealing with tough economic times is far from an unknown quantity for Sunderland’s citizens. Yet now the financial squeeze is both private and public – and building a sustainable future means much closer links between public services and economic growth. The CLP is contributing to this in two ways:

Innovating in Human Resources – great emphasis has been placed on creative thinking in the face of significant budget cuts – part of the Sunderland Way of Working. A pro-active and early approach to spending reductions meant that the council has been able to avoid making compulsory redundancies, instead developing a staff redeployment programme based on the value set of the council and the skills of its workers.²⁶ A key

²⁶ This involved an assessment framework used to test personality strengths, verbal and numerical reasoning. See ‘Sunderland Council: a switch in time’ People Management, 01.07.11 online at www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/pm/articles/2011/06/business-case-a-switch-in-time.htm

element of this restructuring has been the establishment of a transition team – named SWITCH after consultation between the Council and union representatives. The SWITCH team is comprised of a temporary and changing workforce of people in transition between roles, which has itself been deployed as a flexible resource to address organisational development issues. As a recent article noted, the team has ‘run projects to identify efficiency savings, help identify future job roles, and provided career advice and learning and development opportunities for staff in transition’.²⁷ One spin-off from this restructuring effort has been the ‘be your own boss’ scheme, which allows staff 20 days paid leave and the assistance of a small business advisor. It is hoped that this incentive – alongside the ability to keep working on a part-time basis – will be a catalyst for more council staff to think entrepreneurially in future.

“The (Be Your Own Boss) scheme gives people the chance to test their own levels of commitment and entrepreneurialism without prejudice... it gets them to a position where they are ‘enterprise ready’...”

Council Officer, Human Resources

“There is a sense that Sunderland is being proactive and not making big redundancies... change is challenging to people, but given the alternatives, people are coming round to accepting different ways of working.”

Union Representative

Tapping into Local Growth Imperatives – binding the council’s political, public service, growth and organisational development strands together inevitably means tapping into the economic agenda of the city. The challenges for Sunderland are huge, especially as regional infrastructure is pared back and council spending is reduced. For these challenges to become opportunities, stakeholders across the private sector, public sector

²⁷ *ibid*

and civil society know that working together is crucial to creating the right conditions for investment and growth in the city. The impact of this imperative on the CLP is indirect but highly significant. For example, the city's Economic Masterplan calls for a 'well-connected', 'sustainable', 'inclusive' and entrepreneurial future for Sunderland. But these dynamics will not create themselves – they rely on socially productive relationships between citizens, the council and public services that build social and economic capacity, and that support people in taking new economic and social risks. Our research found that many people from across the political spectrum see the potential of 'Big Society' initiatives to help create this culture. But they are also realistic, understanding that social capital and community entrepreneurialism have been severely tested over the last twenty years. This is why a cooperative approach is being developed, in which the Council is encouraging the development of alternative delivery mechanisms such as social enterprises and mutuals, both as a way to improve service delivery and as a spur to local social and economic growth.

“Eighty per cent of our workforce both live and work in the city... so thinking entrepreneurially can create co-productive capacity and opportunities to engage.”

Senior Council Executive

These are three interdependent strands of Sunderland's Community Leadership Programme, which in themselves encapsulate a continuum of activity from the community through front-line services, elected members, area-based service accountability and back-office reconfiguration. As we have described, there is much to be positive about, especially in the face of such daunting social and economic dynamics. Yet our research also threw up some questions and challenges for the CLP – some emerge from the programme so far; some from what the Council is already planning in the next phase; and some that will need to be addressed as it develops further. In the following section we reflect on these challenges and offer some potential avenues to explore in future.

5 Reflections on the Community Leadership Programme: what are the challenges ahead?

The social and economic renewal of Sunderland is not a new set of aims; nor is recovery in the face of daunting macro-economic challenges. Industrial decline and a changing global market blew a ‘massive hole’ in the local economy during the 1980s, with a quarter of all local jobs lost between 1975 and 1989.²⁸ Huge efforts at recovery have been made ever since. As a recent Financial Times analysis special report noted, ‘for a decade to 2008, the city had the fastest-growing economy in north-east England’.²⁹ But as the whole of Europe counts the cost of financial overheating and debt crisis, the challenges for Sunderland are new and more complex.

The local economy needs support, but access to finance and consumer markets is tighter than ever. Local government must meet sustained social demand, but must do so with a much-reduced budget. Front-line and management staff are being asked to innovate and work smarter, at the very same time their livelihoods are under threat. Citizens and communities are being asked to do more, but recent polling data from Ipsos MORI suggests a decline in informal volunteering and charitable giving.³⁰ This suggests that qualitatively changing behaviour will be about more than just ‘nudging’.

Our research shows that Sunderland City Council has been proactive in addressing these challenges. Its growth strategy has made a virtue of what a recent Financial Times report called a ‘sense of working together’,³¹ and what Council Leader Paul Watson has called ‘getting the product right’. Its HR and organisational development strategy has eschewed mass-scale redundancies in favour of a more creative approach to transition and restructuring. And its Community Leadership Programme has begun

28 Cooper, M. (2009) ‘Sunderland: the challenges of the future’ London, Centre for Cities online at www.centreforcities.org/assets/files/09-01-29

29 Financial Times special report, 19.10.10 ‘Business Guide to Sunderland’

30 Ipsos MORI research notes a ‘significant decline’ in informal volunteering – from 35% in 2008/9 to 29% in 2009/10. A recent decline in charitable giving can also be identified – from 74% in 2008/9 to 72% in 2010

31 www.ft.com/cms/s/0/24e3ea46-da47-11df-bdd7-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1eMmUAq35

pulling these dynamics closer to the citizens of Sunderland, through linking communities, councillors and public service delivery much more closely.

We found a strong sense both within and outside of the Council that people are pushing in the same direction. Yet real challenges remain if the Community Leadership Programme is to be the bedrock upon which a more engaged, communicative and responsive council can build more socially productive relationships with the people, businesses and civil society of Sunderland. Below we sketch out these challenges, before suggesting some ways the CLP could meet them in future.

CHALLENGE 1 – Policy Coherence and Working with the Grain

A key challenge for the CLP – and indeed for Sunderland’s strategy for public service reform and economic growth as a whole – is weaving together multiple strands, via different institutions and working norms at a number of levels. If the aim is to work with the grain of people’s lives and build on – not overlay or duplicate – existing ways of working, then the coherence and strategic direction of the CLP is key. Our research uncovered two key issues:

- » *An integrated approach at the front-line is key.* The success of responsive local services to date has been in integrating a complex array of back-office and service delivery functions around a single point of contact for local residents. As one senior service manager told us, ‘the practical application is that *multiple* public sector people intervene, but responsive to *personalised* needs’. As RLS is expanded into independent living and other ‘people’ services, it will be even more crucial that services are built around the identified needs, wants and capabilities of citizens – many of whom may be vulnerable and isolated. This is especially true given that the delivery of services in this sector is often diversified between public, private and third sector; so policy coherence and integration in this area is vital. As the Commission on 2020 Public Services argued, policymakers should ‘start with citizens and integrate around them’. One practical example of this in practice is the LIFE Programme being developed by social enterprise Participle and Swindon Borough Council, which works with families in ‘chronic crisis’. Research conducted by Participle likens the mesh of services

for these families to a ‘gyroscope’ spinning around them, but without addressing their deeper, underlying issues. As RLS expands into other service areas, it must create a similar dialogue with citizens based on deep, lived understanding of citizens. Integrated assessment and commissioning and response will be a vital part of sustaining this.

“The opportunity (is) involving communities in really meaningful ways that make public services reflect the needs of individuals and/or communities...”

Lord Victor Adebowale, Chief Executive of Turning Point & 2020 Commissioner³²

- » *Institutional frameworks must be mutually supportive.* In driving closer engagement between citizens, councillors and council officers, the CLP is directly impacting on a democratic deficit at the local level. As the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) note, only 11% of citizens in the North-East feel able to influence decisions that affect their area. Their data also shows that only 11% of people had previously contacted a local official working for the council, and only 11% had contacted an elected member.³³ In attempting to address this democratic deficit, policymakers must be aware of the danger in ignoring or overlaying existing institutions and ways of working.

How, for example, do forums such as Sunderland’s Area Committees (covering 4–6 wards each, and bringing together councillors and citizens) work closely with other local partners, and with the information generated through front-line councillor engagement, ward walks and area response teams? As the requirement to sustain Local Strategic Partnerships is removed, how does the ‘Sunderland Partnership’ fit in with plans at the front line? New economically-focused partnerships add another layer of

³² Lord Adebowale quoted in an interview with The Social Investment Business magazine, online at www.thesocialinvestmentbusiness.org/aninterviewwith/

³³ NCVO (2011) ‘Participation: trends, facts and figures’ online at www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/news/civil-society/participation-trends-facts-figures Data taken from the Citizenship Survey 2008/9: Empowered Communities topic report.

complexity – with the north-east LEP and the economic leadership board both involved in creating a new economic narrative for the city. The CLP has the potential to be the glue that binds these strands together. So as the programme develops, maintaining spatial and policy coherence alongside strong collaborative relationships will be key.

“the risk is that everything becomes disjointed... the will is there, but is the capacity?”

Local Business Leader

CHALLENGE 2 – Maintaining and Deepening Engagement

Engaging better with citizens is a central aim of the Community Leadership Programme – both via more responsive and locally directed services, and through the improved community leadership potential of elected members. Internally, organisational reconfiguration has been profound – in part due to the way in which senior managers have communicated the scale, nature and pace of change to staff. At a city-wide level, the Economic Masterplan is attempting to engage and cohere stakeholders around a central strategy. Yet all processes of substantial and sustainable change demand a mixed economy of engagement, and there are lessons that can be learned from some of the key stakeholders:

- » *Communities need to be involved in commissioning.* As Council Chief Executive Dave Smith has argued, the CLP puts the onus on the Council to both generate a ‘fine grain understanding’ of the communities it serves, and also give those communities opportunities to engage on an ‘industrial scale’. As the CLP develops, its multiple strands will be key. Local responsive services are generating direct feedback at the front line. Councillors are being supported to play an active leadership role. And In Touch – the CLPs nascent online engagement tool – will be a key tool in a city that already has country-leading levels of digital literacy and social networking.

Yet maintaining a mixed economy (and fair distribution) of engagement also means looking for gaps and areas that can be strengthened. We

heard about positive opportunities for young people to engage in initiatives such as the young people’s State of the City debate and ‘Youth Villages’, yet less so for the city’s elderly population. We heard positive noises about the potential of a ‘connected communities’ approach to understanding the city’s residents – which would evaluate the connections between people, and the ‘hubs’ that bring people together and incubate community assets. The CLP could look to explore this territory in future, perhaps drawing on evaluation tools such as the RSA’s Civic Pulse (see box below), and linking this knowledge with tangible policy change.

Evaluating Community Capacity – the RSA’s Civic Pulse tool

As the CLP develops, questions of how to account for – and how to *measure* – the impact of responsive services and community leadership will be increasingly important. This is not only about service outcomes, but about the capacity of Sunderland’s residents to become ‘active’ citizens who can help shape public services in their neighbourhoods. Here, Sunderland could engage with lessons from Peterborough, where the RSA has developed the Civic Pulse – a survey tool to assess the ‘absence or presence’ of key mechanisms that would enable this.

Civic Pulse marks a break from traditional measurements such as the Place and Citizenship surveys, which have been criticised for focusing too heavily on the satisfaction and perception of public services rather than on the underlying drivers of participation. Civic Pulse is designed to address these gaps and be more fitting for the current context. Specifically, it would measure:

- » Subtler aspects of ‘everyday citizenship’, such as acts of kindness and reciprocity
- » Contemporary forms of civic behaviour, for instance time-banking and local blogging
- » Underlying drivers of active citizenship, including ‘softer’ elements such as confidence and emotional resilience
- » Social assets as well as deficits, for instance the presence of civic skills and strong social networks.

Information collected through this survey could support policy redesign and commissioning processes through identifying gaps in local capacity, and understanding how to tap into local resources more effectively.

“Older people have a big voice that needs to be heard. And at the moment it isn’t being heard.”

Local voluntary sector leader

- » *Public Service Innovation demands Continuous Engagement.* The relative success of the SWITCH programme and the council’s restructuring programme is testament to the value of engagement, both within and outside of the council, and between the executive, staff and unions. Yet as one senior manager told us, creating responsive services is a continuous process: one in which people are brought together across silos, and in which good information about community need and existing delivery patterns is used.

Innovation comes through dialogue, ‘space’ and a coherent vision or endpoint. Developing a shared purpose and vision is key – so the Council must continue to lead on developing and communicating this set of shared values, and ensuring this permeates through to the front line of service delivery and community engagement. As Lewisham Council’s Chief Executive Barry Quirk has argued, ‘public service reform is an exercise of perpetual motion’. Sunderland Council must ensure that the CLP remains proactive as the driver of this.

“Change is often sold as a finite entity. But that is disingenuous. Change is a consistent process, but values become the benchmark – and they should be open to constant evolution against those processes”

Senior Council Official

CHALLENGE 3 – From Planning to Delivery: the Economic Challenge and the CLP

The UK’s macroeconomic climate means that the growth agenda permeates everything that Sunderland Council is doing. This reflects a changing national policy direction, which is increasingly moving away from regionally-planned economic policy, but at the same time recognising the limits of laissez-faire. CBI Director General John Cridland has argued

that the pendulum has ‘swung too far’ towards laissez-faire, and that a ‘less agnostic view’ about the role of government is now needed.³⁴ But the challenge for cities and localities is not only to make sense of where the national policy balance now lies, but to make real change happen on the ground. Those in the local business community we spoke to talked of the ‘doing challenge’ – the journey from creating the collaborative framework for change, to setting out clear milestones and beginning to deliver.

“Sunderland has been good at working in partnership... but the challenge is turning these partnerships into tangible results within the city.”

Local Business Leader

Our research indicates that the CLP can support this agenda in two ways:

- » *The CLP can be a driver for Economic Engagement.* A key strand of thinking within Sunderland’s business community is the relationship between the city’s residents, and the mix of public and private services that create employment and growth in the city. The Economic Masterplan acknowledges that, despite huge progress in job creation since the 1980s, the balance between these sectors must shift again, away from the public sector. For the business community, the issue is partly one of culture – the lack of intra-city SME growth, and the difficulty in translating a high rate of start-up businesses into a thriving SME and social innovation sector.

Addressing this long-term issue should be a priority for the CLP. Could elected members do more to raise awareness of opportunities, or encourage community entrepreneurialism? Could participating in bottom-up public service design become a forerunner for neighbourhood-run services? Could the council’s internal initiatives – such as ‘Be Your Own Boss’ – be

³⁴ Quoted by David Wighton in ‘A Tory Industrial Policy? You’d better believe it’ The Times, 11.07.11

flipped outwards to help stimulate community activism in this area? Local business leaders told us about the need for a coherent set of economic milestones to make the masterplan a reality. But how could the CLP further support this process?

“Instead of greater introspection, (councils) should be looking far beyond traditional boundaries for opportunities to improve services.”

Lord Andrew Adonis, Director of the Institute for Government³⁵

- » *Local Public Services should become a Catalyst for Growth.* Debates around Big Society, public services and growth frequently miss the point: that we should be talking not about how the state pulls back to allow a flourishing private sector; but how public services and the local state can be catalysts for growth. Efficiency, targeting and a focus on prevention are three pillars for achieving this – delivering long-term savings and getting to the nub of complex social problems. Therefore exploring other areas where Responsive Local Services can be created should be a policy priority.

The second pillar is about creating – through smarter public service delivery – the conditions for local markets to flourish. As Cabinet Office advisor David Halpern puts it, ‘one of the biggest tricks governments often miss is nurturing the markets around public sector provision’. This is about reconfigured local services – as we discuss below. But it is also about looking outwards at national, European and global initiatives such as Amsterdam’s Smart City³⁶ – where public and private sector players within the city are working together to achieve common environmental goals. This kind of collaboration and cross-sector working should be the model for Sunderland as it moves towards a low-carbon, high-tech and well-connected knowledge economy.

³⁵ Lord Adonis is quoted in Ethos Magazine, Spring 2011

³⁶ Several UK cities are developing integrated ‘smart’ and ‘sustainable’ plans along these lines, notably including Bristol and Glasgow.

“Under the government’s ‘Plugged in Places’ programme aimed at supporting recharging infrastructure for electric cars, 1,300 charging points are being installed across the region by 2013. Nissan was active in lobbying government for the low carbon economic area and support for the charging spots.”

Financial Times special report, October 2010

CHALLENGE 4 – Mapping the Future for Local Services in Sunderland

The CLP is a fundamental strand of a broader narrative for Sunderland – based on its agenda for economic growth, and its plans for local public service reform. Here, the national context is crucial. Public service reform is in real flux, with some services effectively being decoupled from local authorities (such as academies or free schools), and others being reconfigured as part of a different mix of central, local and bottom up accountability (health reform plans might fit into this category). Councils are losing purview over some service areas, but gaining greater freedom to make changes over others. And in answer to the question: “how do we get more with less?”, many are beginning to re-think their strategies for commissioning, exploring new forms of design, delivery and co-production. We believe that the CLP could provide a sound footing for opening up these issues in Sunderland. Two factors are vital:

- » *Responsive Local Services can transform the Public Services Market.* The CLP sets the backdrop for exploring the potential of local integrated services. Through the mixed economy of engagement described above, Area Response Teams can build up a rich picture of the lives, needs, wants and capabilities of citizens – which can in turn be used to drive new commissioning models, and new forms of integrated delivery. This is already happening in environmental services – where the first RLS pilots have been rolled out. But the long-term potential is to integrate a range of services using a single Area Response Team at the front-end, but also to commission from a single point across a range of service areas. A good example of this is provided by Turning Point’s Connected

Care initiative, which builds an integrated commissioning process through peer-to-peer community research, and direct accountability between commissioners and members of the community.

A Sunderland model could draw on this practice, but look very different. The CLP already offers a twin-track model of direct service engagement with communities, alongside deeper political engagement via elected members' community leadership activities. Could these functions be integrated in future? How could councillors and citizens be more involved in commissioning processes? And in what areas would RLS be appropriate, and how could a similar approach be developed in family services, adult social care and youth services, for example? New delivery models are also part of this mix – with the potential of social enterprise, mutual or cooperative models of delivery being developed as links between front-line workers, commissioners and communities create more trusting relationships and more opportunities for collaboration. The CLP must ensure that, as it helps to incubate these local delivery models, they are locally driven and accountable to communities.

“We are very open to new forms of delivery and accountability in the long term... but this can't start too early, and it must evolve naturally.”

Senior Service Manager

- » *Community Leadership can drive Social Productivity in Sunderland.* We found that a good proportion of the policy community in Sunderland is receptive to the idea of community empowerment – but with one key caveat: that it cannot flourish without support, resources, engagement and education from local government. That public services can do more to unlock and build the latent capacity of citizens is broadly agreed upon. But there is more than one way to do this, and it is far from obvious that liberalising service accountability, cutting budgets and pulling back service provision is the right policy mix. The CLP is taking a different approach, rolling out what is effectively ‘Big Society with Local Politics’ – with the potential of generating greater

citizen engagement and entrepreneurialism through the role of elected members, as well as direct engagement through services.

“We had a big society but communities have been destroyed... if you are asking communities to take on risks and responsibilities, you need the finance and the backing.”

Elected Member

Key to the sustainability of the CLP will be getting the aforementioned structures of governance and accountability right, alongside balancing the capacity and wherewithal of different people and communities within the system. Some key questions emerge: to what extent should supporting councillors be balanced with building their capacity if they were to play a more engaged role in service commissioning or accountability? Could governance at a neighbourhood level emerge, as is suggested in the government's Open Public Services white paper? And if so, how would these structures be balanced with the role of councillors, the Area Response structures and the Area Committees that already make up the map of local accountability in Sunderland? Any future review of public service provision would need to unpick these dynamics and foster a combination of bottom-up accountability with democratic oversight and coherence. As the CLP is developed, it must engage creatively and quickly with these issues.

6 What Next? Meeting the Challenges with a Social Productivity Approach

The four challenges we have set out speak to the development of the Community Leadership Programme over the medium term. They speak to the potential of moving from service improvement to service transformation, and the potential to create mutually reinforcing strands of policy that pull together to help the city overcome the daunting social and economic challenges it faces. Those we spoke to were under no illusions about the scale of change – in terms of council ways of working, community leadership from councillors, and more ‘socially productive’ engagement between services and citizens. But the city has a history of partnership and collaboration, and draws on a tangible sense of pride and resilience in the way it has hauled itself out of the economic doldrums in the recent past. The question is, how can this be leveraged to create the strategic partnerships of the future – partnerships that will enable Sunderland to become a ‘smart city’ that can catalyse and incubate innovation, foster local growth, and respond to the needs and aspirations of citizens in ways that mobilise and build on the energy and resources of the city’s communities, service providers and civil society organisations.

From Improvement to Transformation – Potential Next Steps For Sunderland

“The new frontier for innovation will be less about redesigning individual services and more about questioning the fundamentals of what a local authority is.”

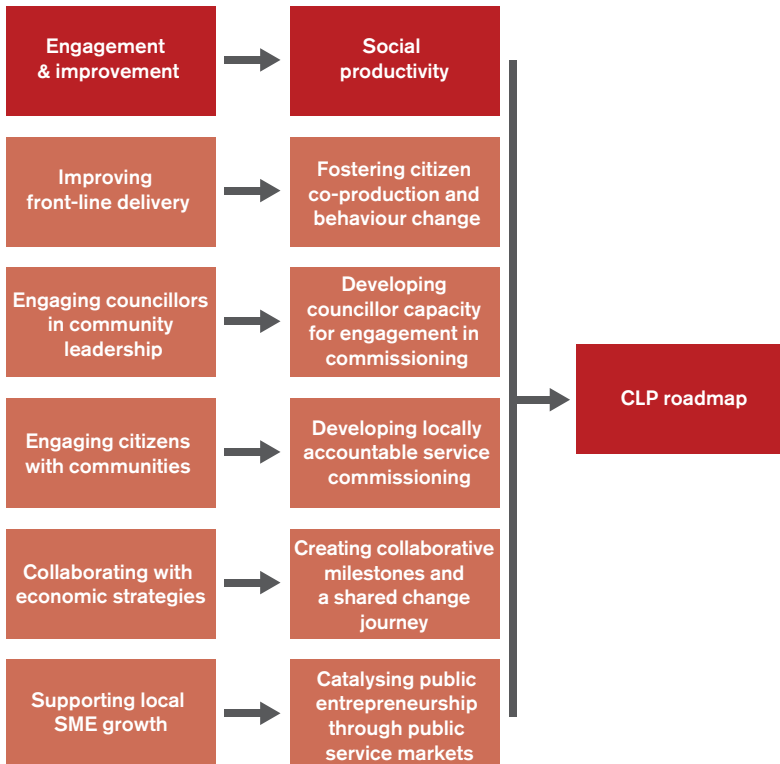
NLGN & NESTA, 2011³⁷

As the quote above argues, local policymakers must begin thinking hard about life after the cuts, and about how the long term challenges of

³⁷ Parker, S. (2011) ‘Future Councils: life after the spending cuts’ New Local Government Network p.9

changing demand, behaviour and funding patterns will begin to reshape the role and purpose of local authorities in different parts of the country. Having already been proactive in dealing with the impact of the cuts on council services and internal processes, Sunderland City Council is well-placed to begin this. As the Commission on 2020 Public Services argued in 2010, the key is to make decisions now that underpin – not undercut – a strategic and long-term vision. But what might these next steps look like?

Moving from Improvement to Transformation in Service Commissioning



As we have seen in this report, the CLP opens up huge potential to begin re-thinking the way services are not only delivered, but also commissioned. Yet this would require serious thinking about how moves towards front-line responsiveness and integration, community leadership and public entrepreneurship could be combined as part of integrated, strategic commissioning models. Capacity building across the council would be key, as would mobilising the resources and knowledge of stakeholders both within and outside of the ecosystem of council services.

“Engaging councillors in commissioning processes is relatively new... A deeper role for councillors in commissioning would need a lot in terms of capacity building.”

Account Manager

The Sunderland Way of Working reinforces the belief that local integrated commissioning must be bottom up, emerging from the spatial reconfigurations already happening at a local level (for example, the relevance of ward teams and area committees), and must build on the experience and insight gained through trialling RLS in environmental services. If the future is to include local public service boards, community or neighbourhood commissioning and other forms of decentralised service accountability, then these new commissioners need a comprehensive set of tools to do the job. This is where a ‘commissioner’s toolkit’ would fit in – offering a set of possibilities for decision-makers, a means of evaluating service design against a range of options, and a ready-reckoner of examples demonstrating what has ‘worked’ in different places and circumstances, and how politicians, professionals and citizens have been engaged in the process. As NCVO’s Pathways to Participation project has recently argued, being realistic about policy impact and citizen motivation is a vital part of this.³⁸

We have already discussed how coherence in policy, delivery and communication are key challenges for the council as it looks to bring together

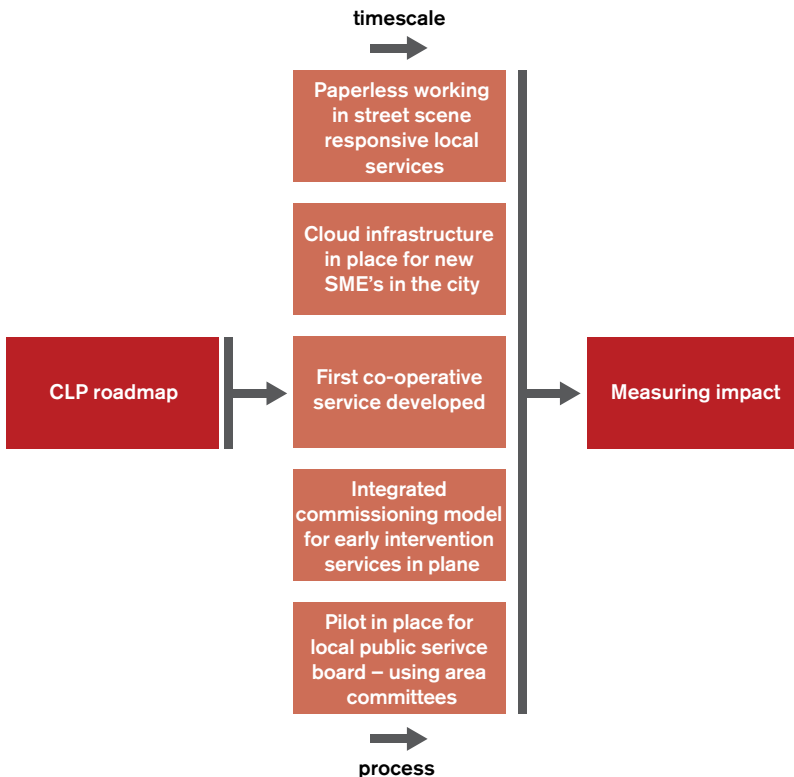
³⁸ Brodie, E. *et al* (2011) Pathways through Participation: what creates and sustains active citizenship? NCVO, Involve and the Institute for Volunteering Research

the three key strands of its Community Leadership Programme. Integrating the long-term goals of the CLP with the council's re-calibrated vision, purpose and organisational philosophy will be key. Generating a sense of shared purpose and organisational clarity is difficult enough at a time of job uncertainty and spending pressure:

“It wasn't until I started working here that I realised how much effort it is to translate change management strategies into something that can really be done on the ground.”

Service Manager, environmental services

Mapping out the Strategic Journey for Citizens



Yet this is only one side of the coin. The other – and perhaps something even more difficult to achieve – is communicating the journey to citizens and other stakeholders within the city. One suggestion we have explored is of a ‘roadmap’, which would articulate the journey so far, the medium-term goals of the CLP, and the long term vision of a more reflexive, strategic and catalytic council that underpins the whole programme. This would stand as a reference point around which internal coherence could be generated, and around which citizens could hold the progress of the CLP to account. As a recent NLGN report has argued, many councils are now sitting along a spectrum of market-oriented strategic reformers and neo-traditionalists – councils that are strengthening existing democratic processes and ways of working. A strategic roadmap would clearly mark out Sunderland’s own position within this emerging landscape. In the chart above we set out some indicative suggestions of what this could include, and the need for strategic thinking about the timescale, process and measurement of impact that this would require.

Making the Shift: towards Social and Economic Productivity in Sunderland

At root, the CLP is about marking the beginnings of an evolution: towards a new type of council that acts as a responsive provider of services and builder of local social capacity, and as a catalyst for local growth. We have moved from the old committee system, through the era of executive/scrutiny split, to an emerging model based on area and neighbourhood leadership and governance.

This means that a key question for the CLP is around the potential to develop area committees into something more fundamental to the public services landscape in the city. Could area committees develop into more democratic forums for community engagement over the long term? How would they potentially map against – and integrate effectively with – the neighbourhood councils and urban parishes called for in the Coalition government’s Open Public Services White Paper? What we know is that such changes would require deeper and more engaged community leadership roles for elected members.

“(The public) would be very suspicious without the trust-base within the community.”

Elected Member

This means maintaining and communicating all three elements of the CLP in concert, so that capacity building for community leadership is developed alongside the reconfigured public services it is there to support and account for. It means building in even more support for councillors, more engagement with local political parties and even community leadership training for Council candidates. The relationship between Councillors and community organisers in the city is crucially important, and could be codified through a Sunderland Community Leadership Compact, which would set out a series of local outcome objectives across the range of social and economic challenges facing communities: such as health and wellbeing, education, community resilience and local employment.³⁹ As the economic context becomes more constrained, building reciprocity between the Council, elected members and communities will be increasingly important.

This codification of purpose and progress should also be part of the council’s economic mission. To meet the ‘doing challenge’ set out by the City’s business leaders, public service innovation and economic stimulus must go hand in hand. This is already happening as the Council looks to leverage resources from international technology companies and local partners to help generate the conditions for high-tech, low-carbon growth. And the potential is there for reconfigured public services to become a real engine for entrepreneurialism via co-operatives, social enterprise and growth partnerships across the public-private divide. The RSA 2020 Public Services Hub will be working with Sunderland City Council and its local and national partners to ensure that social productivity is at the heart of this future.

39 A range of indicators could be considered to help construct outcomes goals for a potential Community Leadership Compact – including unemployment rates, NEET rates, training and businesses start-up interventions, new business survival rates and public recorded outcome measures.

Appendix

Brief Note on Methodology


The 2020 Public Services Hub at the RSA was commissioned by Sunderland City Council to review its Community Leadership Programme. In particular we were asked to:

- » look at how it has developed so far
- » assess what it has achieved
- » analyse the public policy context for Community Leadership over the next period
- » assess the challenges the Programme will face in its next phase, and;
- » make recommendations about how these might be met

Our research process has involved the following;

- » Literature review of Community Leadership development
- » Assessment of trends in Government policy towards local government and public services
- » Analysis of Sunderland Council strategy, policy and finance papers
- » Interviews with key stakeholders including:
 - » Council Leader
 - » Chief Executive
 - » Other Councillors both in Labour Group and Opposition
 - » Local business leaders
 - » Service Directors
 - » Trade Union representative
 - » Local Voluntary Sector leader
 - » Officers leading the Community Leadership Programme
 - » Account Managers
 - » Area Managers
 - » Ward Team Leaders and Neighbourhood Enforcement Officers
- » Area and neighbourhood visit to see the CLP programme in practice on the ground

The research was conducted over the summer and early autumn of 2011 and its findings will feed into the next stage of the Community Leadership Programme.



The 2020 Public Services Hub is a research and policy development hub created from the legacy of the 2020 Public Services Trust in early 2011. It specialises in developing practice-based research on social productivity in public services. As part of RSA Projects, the Hub works collaboratively with local public service organisations, national sector leaders and other national partners to develop social value and social productivity thinking into local and national practice.

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