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Managing in Local Government

Richard Kerley

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To Liam and Sandra

Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xii
1 Public Management: Fashion or Fixture?	1
Managing public services – a phenomenon of this decade?	1
Public and private management – similar or different?	5
Managing in local government – is it different?	11
The environment	12
The link between the organisation and the environment	14
The structures and processes of the organisation	18
A cross-party view	21
Summary	23
2 Local Government: Developments and Trends	24
The reasons for change	26
Local government – an institution in decline?	26
Raising and spending money	30
Some other influences on local government	34
The changing user of public services	44
Summary	46
3 Managing Services	48
Who are the managers in local government?	48
The strategic managers	48
The operational managers	52
What do managers do when they manage?	54

The transition to management	59
Summary	67
4 Managing People	68
Why are people important?	69
The impact of the manager	73
The paradox of managing people	74
The changing personnel environment	77
Action by the manager	81
5 Managing Finance	85
The financial function in local government	88
Who does manage the money?	92
What do managers need to know (1)	97
What do managers need to know (2)	99
How must the organisation change?	102
6 Managing Competitively	107
Background	110
The development of competition	112
The impact of competition – changes in the organisation	120
The new skills of management in a competitive climate	122
Conclusion	126
7 Managing Performance	128
The background	130
Performance trends in local government	133
Some recent developments	137
Performance indicators – background and reality	141
What should the manager do?	151
8 Users and Consumers	154
Citizens or consumers?	156
The citizen as consumer	162
The consumer as citizen	165
Some action to be taken	171

<i>Contents</i>	ix
9 Managing Members or Members Managing?	174
Who is elected?	176
What do councillors do?	179
A new working relationship?	185
The implications for management and managers	189
10 The Future Management of Local Government	194
The future of local government	195
The management of local government in the 1990s	196
The future manager in local government	200
Conclusion	202
<i>Bibliography</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	218

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

2.1	Total public expenditure controlled by the Scottish Office, and amount allocated to local government expenditure	29
2.2	Expectations of home ownership	41

Figures

Note: The terms used in this book refer to: Scotland, England, England and Wales. Great Britain is the term used for all three countries and the phrase the United Kingdom includes Northern Ireland.

1.1	Total public expenditure as percentage of GDP 1880–1990	5
2.1	Local government expenditure as percentage of GDP United Kingdom 1950–81	28
2.2	Rate support grant for local authorities	32
2.3	External financial support to Scottish Regions 1991/2	34
2.4	Changing age composition of Grampian Region	39
2.5	Changing household composition in Great Britain	42
2.6	Spending on major public services, 1885–1975	45
3.1	Management career development	63
3.2	The changing balance of professional and managerial demands	64
3.3	Balancing the individual workload	66
4.1	The different roles of the manager	76
4.2	Managing people: the individual and the group	80
5.1	The corporate budget cycle	93
7.1	Modified business planning framework	131
8.1	Changes in local councils	169
9.1	Councillors' views on whether officials have too much influence	188

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University of Strathclyde

RICHARD KERLEY

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Introduction

‘A government ill executed, whatever it might be in theory must be in practice a poor government.’ — Alexander Hamilton, 1787

This book is about the way in which local government is run in Britain. It is written for those who are involved in running local government and those who are interested in how it works.

The way in which local government works is changing dramatically and rapidly. The reasons for that change are many and various, and they are explored in the first section of the book, Chapters 1 and 2. The change is significant: ‘From being a quiet backwater of routine administration and parochial politics, local government has been pushed into the limelight’ (Stoker, 1991, p. xiv).

Such changes have forced local government to think not simply about what services it provides, but about the way in which it provides them. This has in turn forced members and officers to think about what they do, and the way they work within the organisation. Education officials who have been accustomed to telling schools what to do – and what not to do – now find they are obliged to negotiate with school governors and school boards. Finance officials have to adjust to service departments asking what a particular financial service will cost, and whether it compares favourably with the service offered by the local bank. Members have had to adjust to the idea that a separation between client and contractor means their request for ‘a little extra work in the local park’ is now a contract variation. Through all of this, managers and senior staff in every council find they are facing challenges and dilemmas for which their initial training did not equip them. They are being expected to operate as *managers*, not as social workers, planners, architects or accountants.

To exchange the certainty of professional expertise for the uncertainty of management is a difficult transition, and one that some people never make successfully. The way in which this

transition is made, and its implications for the role of manager within a council, are explained and discussed in Chapter 3. Managing the resources of the organisation more effectively is covered in Chapters 4 to 6. The purpose of effective management in local government is further explored and developed in Chapters 7 and 8. The argument advanced is that the shift toward a more outward-oriented and consumer-led view of what services local government should provide and how it should provide them will actually help local government to prepare for a greater emphasis on its role as 'government' and not simply as provider of services. Chapter 9 considers the role of councillors in the management of the council, and considers the changing relationship between councillors and managers. Chapter 10 takes a look at the future of management in local government.

This book is written for people who are doing the kind of jobs which are described, discussed and analysed here. It is also written for those who work with these people and are interested in the work that they do. It is not in any sense an open learning text, but there are points in the text where the reader is asked to pause and think about some aspects of local government practice he or she has observed. At the end of each chapter are prompt questions to help *you* think about the way you have seen these changes affecting local government. This is intended as a means of encouraging thought about some of the practical consequences of the theoretical or general issues raised. A good reader interrogates a book whilst working through it – here the book also interrogates the reader.

This book is written on the basis that we cannot simply refer to 'managers' in local government as though they are an undifferentiated, homogeneous mass, any more than in industry and commerce. The text therefore distinguishes at numerous points between operational managers, support managers and those with strategic management responsibilities. They all have individually demanding roles, but of course need to integrate their work effectively in order to achieve the desired results for the organisation. As Hamilton in effect observed, if they do not perform effectively, then the fine sentiments of council and committee debate remain just that.

The examples cited in the text are drawn from councils in Scotland, where I principally work, and from authorities in

England and Wales. In some instances I have not given the name of the council from which the example is drawn, nor have I at any point named any of those who have spoken to me about their work as managers or members. The individual anonymity reflects the desire of some of those staff and councillors who were interviewed not to have their views attributed. In some cases I have not named the council where a particular practice is described because, while there are few councils that are direct competitors with each other, there are many which are in a sense 'comparative competitors', and to record a particular practice as being carried out in Council X is to invite the observation 'typical of them' – a comment which in some ways indicates how parochial local government can still be.