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MONITORING CITIZENS' SITUATIONS AND OPINIONS
AS AN AID TO RESPONSIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

British local authorities have wide discretionary powers which offers them the possibility of making a flexible response to changing local needs. However, developing that response depends critically upon the information to which they are exposed. In my second paper I argued that though some UK Local Authorities had developed effective integrative mechanisms, this had sometimes been acquired at the expense of a sensitivity to the needs and opinions of their local citizens.

My contention is that responsive local government depends on the development of an adequate set of structures and systems to ensure the authority is well informed about the needs, wishes and preferences of its citizens and is accountable to them for its interpretation and action.

How Do Local Authorities Keep Themselves Informed about
the Needs, Wishes and Preferences of Their Citizens ?

The fact that British local authorities are ostensibly controlled by elected amateurs (in the sense that most of them are not also local government officers) and the fact that they have to live in the area of their authority, means that in a real sense, a small group of citizens are directly involved with their local authorities.

However, a number of studies have shown that these elected

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representatives are a-typical of the population they represent (Maud, 1967; Robinson, 1977). Women are highly underrepresented, as are the young and the very old, the single, tenants and manual workers. So if councillors are to provide the link with the public which keeps the authority informed and responsive, they would have to look beyond their normal circle of friends and acquaintances to do it.

In fact, in 1976, the average councillor did devote about twenty hours per week to council service, half as much again than in 1964. There are no systematic studies of national samples since 1976, but it does seem likely that the proportion of "full time" councillors has increased since then, given higher unemployment, earlier retirement, and the greater party political organisation of most councils. Nevertheless, two thirds of that time is spent in council on committee meetings, or preparing for them or travelling to them. Well under twenty percent is spent on dealing with electors' problems, and little of that is actually spent with the citizens themselves. (Robinson, 1977).

This paper examines the way in which a sample of chief officers and leading members in five local authorities in North East England keep in touch with public opinion. No claim is made that a tiny sample of only 53 is representative even of its local area, far less of the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, there have been a number of other studies in Barking (Rees, A. and Smith, T., 1964), Sheffield, (Hampton, W., 1970), Kensington and Chelsea (Dearlove, J., 1973), Birmingham (Newton, K., 1976), Croydon (Saunders, P., 1980) and Bristol (Barker, B., 1981) which show many of the same tendencies. The purpose of the present paper is merely to raise questions. By putting some quantities on well-known propositions about contact with the public, propositions about ward-surgeries, about the party at ward level, about pressure groups activities and the contribution of the media, surveys and casual contact, we hope to examine the actual capacity of local authorities to listen to their citizens.

Surgeries

Most council newspapers encourage all citizens to contact their councillors at regular ward surgeries. But in Cleveland, only just over three quarters of the district councillors we talked to and just under two thirds of the county councillors we interviewed actually hold ward surgeries. Labour councillors are much more likely than conservatives to hold ward surgeries; only 4 out of 10 conservatives regularly hold surgeries. "They all know where to find me", one councillor explained. "People are more likely to phone now than wait until the next surgery", said another. Of course, some local citizens do not know who and where their councillors are and an increasing number of households do have a phone available. But these propositions don't apply to everyone. Another councillor said, "we used to have them regularly, but on the last two occasions no-one came so we've abandoned a fixed pattern". If surgeries are irregular it's difficult for people to know when and where they are going to be.

It would be wrong to give the impression that all conservative councillors have lost faith in surgeries. Two Middlesbrough conservative councillors have a surgery every Sunday morning at one of their homes. One labour councillor does much the same thing. But most councillors who hold surgeries have them once a month or once every six weeks to coincide with the committee cycle.

One labour councillor in Hartlepool claims that on average 40 or 50 people attend his surgery. Most councillors are not so lucky. The median number of people attending surgeries is 4; several surgeries are attended by only one or two people. Generally speaking labour party surgeries are attended by more people than those held by conservative councillors. This probably reflects the kinds of areas which each party represents and the availability of other forms of contact such as telephones.

Party Apparatus in the Ward

All but one conservative and one labour member said that they regularly attended ward meetings. The exceptional labour member explained that he had been "so busy as a committee chairman that he had not got round to developing the branch party at ward level". The conservative, who was also leader of her group on another district council said she had no intention of developing her party at the ward level. "I haven't got time for all that". Neither the liberal nor the SDP councillors had any ward meetings, though the SDP member did imply that he would have liked to develop one if he had time. Both claimed to be active in their branch of their party, as of course, were most of the other councillors. The independent, though lacking a party, and not holding surgery, claimed to attend monthly meetings of his residents' association.

Most of these meetings were held at six weekly intervals to fit in with the council's business cycle, though some were held quarterly. Two members, one from each of the main parties mentioned that the ward meetings were neither frequent enough nor sufficiently well-attended to develop an efficient ward organisation. In answer to other questions both these people stressed the role of the party in developing informal opinion, by regretted that this was not happening. It was evident from the response of some other councillors that there was some cynicism about the party at ward level. In all three of the former Teeside Boroughs, we were told anecdotes about the way that attendance was artificially boosted for the critical adoption meeting to ensure that the "right" candidates were adopted. One committee chairman explained how much he regretted not having a strong ward party to account to; he gave the impression that this kind of reporting back to his own electorate was discouraged by the leadership of his own group.

Officers at Public Meetings

Officers were asked about their attendance at public meetings. They all said that they did attend, and the median frequency was four times a year. They were held least frequently in Langbaugh, where the officers said they were less frequent than they had been under previous administrations. Public meetings were more frequent in Middlesbrough where several chief officers said that they went to public meetings about once a month on average. In Cleveland County they seemed to be even more frequent, with several chief officers averaging a meeting a fortnight with one claiming to go to one such meeting every week.

Groups and Organisations

We asked respondents whether they had letters, telephone calls or personal calls on behalf of groups or organisations with regard to particular aspects of council work, and if so how frequently. Two district councillors said they never did. Of the remainder, roughly 4 out of 10 chief officers and chairmen said that they did so frequently and 4 out of 10 sometimes with 1 in 7 saying that it happened very rarely.

In the officers' case this could reflect the way that they run their officers; perhaps not all of them see the mail or receive other approaches that are made to their departments by outside groups. In the members' case, however, the fact that less than half the leaders and chairmen received frequent approaches from outside groups suggests that they are not a major source of information about public feeling. Rather more labour than conservative and rather more county than district members received frequent communications from these groups, but even so the proportion is less than 6 out of 10.

How much notice do members and officers take of the comments they receive from external groups and organisations?

Three quarters say that on occasion at least they have received information from outside groups which help them form an

opinion. Councillors were more prepared to admit being influenced this way than officers but there was no real difference between the parties. Few conservatives are approached so frequently but when people do make contact they are as likely to be influenced as their labour colleagues. More than 9 out of 10 councillors said that they paid regard to what groups and organisations told them compared with less than 7 out of the 10 officers. Middlesbrough members and officers were most inclined to say that they got frequent contact from groups, and to say that they were influenced by them, but even in Langbaugh the proportion was over half. Langbaugh Council was said to have a policy of not dealing with external pressure groups. One prominent member explained that in his view such organisations only existed to serve the political ambitions of those who led them.

Encouraged by the fact that so many councillors and officers listened to outside organisations, we went on to ask if there was "any organisation or group whose opinions you generally take into account when you are forming your own opinion on a council matter". 4 out of 10 respondents said there was. The proportion was highest in Stockton and lowest in Hartlepool with the County Council falling halfway between the two. Councillors were more inclined to mention such a group than officers, and labour councillors much more likely to do so than conservatives. When we followed up the question by asking them to identify the groups, nearly all the labour members mentioned the labour party on the council itself or the district party. Conservative members were marginally more inclined to mention business organisations, market traders, ICI, and both parties mentioned residents' groups and client groups including parent bodies and pressure groups like Friends of the Earth and Transport 2000. Officers typically mentioned the leadership of the majority party, business organisations, their own professional organisations and departments of central government in much the same way.

It seems then that most of the officers and councillors who say they pay attention to the concerns of other groups are listening not to the general public in the county or district they serve but to a very special fragment of that public brought to-

gether in the central mechanism of their political parties or even elected to the council itself. There are councillors who are listening to what client pressure groups and environmental lobbyists have to say, but equally there are those who listen to the national pressure groups and, worse still, to central government. So just how concerned are they with the opinions of the people who live in their area?

Concern with Public Opinion

We put to our sample the proposition that all organisations whether they are commercial firms or nationalised industries or charitable organisations have to pay some attention to what sections of the public think. We asked them "would you say this was more true of local government, less true or of equal importance?" Three quarters of our respondents said it was more important; almost 9 out of 10 officers said it was more important whilst only 7 out of 10 councillors felt it was. Labour councillors were less inclined to feel it was more important than were conservative members. Only 1 respondent, a conservative county councillor, felt that it was less true that local authorities had to pay some attention to what sections of the public felt. All but 2 respondents said they personally tried to keep informed with what sections of the public think about local government services; 1 labour councillor from Hartlepool said it depended on how near the elections were and 1 SDP councillor (in Langbaugh) said he wasn't really able to keep himself informed. He had only stood as a councillor in order to get the party off the ground and had no real network of informants in the Borough.

All those who said that they did try to keep informed with what sections of the public think about local government services were asked about the main ways they got to know about attitudes of members of the public in the county or the district as a whole. The most replies concerned the mass communications media. Fifty eight percent mentioned the local paper, eleven

per cent mentioned local radio and eight per cent said "news media generally". A couple of respondents mentioned the national papers and another pair mentioned national or regional TV. This is ironic in view of the extent to which regional TV stations were criticised by most respondents later in the interview, because they were said to give very little coverage to the Cleveland area. It is difficult to see how national media can shed much light on how local people are feeling about local issues. But the efficacy of even the local mass media as a means for keeping councillors and officers informed about local opinion must be called into question. Except at election times, when the local papers sometimes carry out their own opinion polls, they have no means of discovering what the mass of the people really think. Considering all the news media together they probably employ fewer reporters than there are county and district councillors. Nevertheless, just under a quarter of our sample subsequently named the local press as the main way they kept informed.

The next most frequently mentioned method of keeping informed was casual contact with ordinary people. Forty seven per cent mentioned this with one prominent councillor claiming that so many people discussed local government business with him in local pubs and clubs that he had to change his drinking habits frequently to get some peace. Roughly half of the councillors lived in the ward they represented, the proportion rising to four out of five in the case of conservative councillors. The proportion was lower in the districts and higher in the county, a fact which may well be explained by the larger size electoral divisions in the county council. Nearly one in five labour councillors said that though they didn't live in the ward they represented they did live very close. Even when this is allowed for, however, well over a third of the labour councillors did not live in or near the ward they represented.

Many councillors told anecdotes about the frequency with which they were contacted in the street or as they went about their daily business by constituents wishing to raise council business with them. There is no doubt about the reality of this

experience. But even if a councillor is intercepted five times a day there is a limit to the number of constituents he/she can see or whose opinions he/she can hear.

Several councillors mentioned specifically the people they came across at work as a valuable way of keeping in contact with what people thought. One labour councillor made the point that workmates and colleagues could be detached in a way that constituents or clients could not.

Other councillors (thirteen percent) said that they specifically approached people in the community to sound them out about their attitudes to council affairs. One female councillor said, "I hold a small afternoon tea, sometimes with bingo, at my home almost every week for people to come in and talk; that's how I find out what they feel".

Next most frequently mentioned as a source of information about the way the public felt were the surveys by Cleveland Research and Intelligence Unit. A random sample of the Cleveland population has been interviewed about their attitudes to council services and their experiments in every year since 1975. There have also been many smaller surveys of particular client groups or people living in particular areas. A quarter of our respondents mentioned these surveys. Up to this point in the interview the surveys had not been the subject of any questions, so any reference to them by councillors and officers was quite spontaneous.

A third of the officers and a quarter of the labour councillors mentioned the surveys compared with only one conservative councillor and none of the other parties. They are clearly more important to officers than to members, and some officers in Middlesbrough and Langbaugh mentioned them as the most important source of information available to them about what people feel. The surveys were mentioned most frequently by the Cleveland officers and members, and in Langbaugh, but not at this stage by anyone in Stockton Borough has commissioned a number of studies of particular housing estates.

Officers in Langbaugh and Middlesbrough also referred to surveys undertaken by staff of those authorities.

Community development projects were mentioned by officers in Middlesbrough as being a source of information but no one claimed that they were the most important source of information that they had.

Letters, both to individual councillors, to the commercial newspapers, and to the council newspapers were mentioned by officers and by both the major parties.

By contrast public meetings were mentioned only by officers and labour and SDP councillors, not by conservatives, although the conservatives did acknowledge that they received representation from citizen groups of some kind. Neither public meetings nor the representation of pressure groups was mentioned as important in Hartlepool, but Hartlepool was the only authority in which reference was made to the parish councils.

We have already seen that many members attach a great deal of importance to their political organisations. These organisations were also mentioned as a source of insight into how the public felt in the context of this open-ended question. Only labour members mentioned their ward organisations in this context, but councillors from both the major parties mentioned their own party "group" on the council and their party branch, and many references were made to the value of electoral canvassing. One female councillor felt that electoral canvassing was so important that it ought to be compulsory every year!

Members of Langbaugh and Cleveland Councils were much more inclined to mention the party in this context than members of the other councils. Perhaps the party organisation is more salient to the way policy is formed in Langbaugh and Cleveland.

Several officers from each authority except Langbaugh, mentioned their own elected members as a valuable source of information about public opinion. One Hartlepool chief officer said "they're local people and they genuinely reflect the feelings of certain sections of the public in the town". This is a very loyal reflection of the constitutional position. But it might be worrying if officers saw members as the most important source of insight into what the public feels, for this would imply a dangerous internal feedback. Fortunately, none of them saw

members as the most important source of contact. In view of the importance that elected members attach to the casual contact they have with their constituents, it is ironic that only one officer out of all those we talked to mentioned his own casual contacts as an important source of information about how the public feels. Several mentioned in answer to other questions that they tried to ensure that members of the public did not get through to them personally - they only acted as a "longstop". It is important to stress that not every chief officer or chief executive saw his role in that way. One or two laid heavy emphasis on their accessibility and hoped that the public felt that they could approach them. Nevertheless, and in contrast to the elected members, several mentioned that they did not talk to their friends and neighbours about council affairs. Some of them associated this distancing of their domestic lives from their working lives with the concept of a "proper, professional approach". Nevertheless, we formed the impression that several were embarrassed to admit to casual contacts that they were local government officers.

Some chief officers in each authority mentioned the feedback they get via their own staff, about the way the public feel. This is of course a potentially valuable source of information, though it also runs the danger of bias and over-selectivity. None of the elected members mentioned the workforce as an important source of insight into how the public feels, although one did say that councillors were inclined to underestimate the extent of contact which chief officers had with the public!

Whose Responsibility is it Anyhow?

Whereas just over half our respondents believed that keeping in touch with what sections of the public think about council services was something both officers and members should share responsibility for, a much greater proportion of officers than councillors felt that way. There was little difference between the main parties in their replies. None of the county

members or officers thought that keeping in touch with public feelings was purely a matter for councillors, but a county chairman did say that most officers lacked the mechanism for finding out what people felt. "The Research and Intelligence Surveys are an exception", he said, "it should really be the responsibility of members, but in the case of (my service) it is the officers who are more in touch with the real situation. He felt that the members preoccupation with ideological issues was obscuring their perception of what the public felt.

All those respondents who felt that officers did have some responsibility for keeping the council informed about public opinion, were asked, "how can officers best contribute to the process of keeping members informed?"

They answered this in two different ways, and two answers were recorded so that the total add up to more than one hundred percent. About two thirds of respondents answered in terms of the method by which the officer's insights could be conveyed to the council. Of these most (28% of all respondents) suggested some fairly formal method like a written or verbal report to the relevant committee. Almost as many suggested that the officers have an informal word with the leading members of both parties, including for example the relevant chairman and opposition spokesman. About a quarter of labour members suggested that officers confine their formal contribution to the majority group leader or chairman. Labour was in power in all five authorities at the time of the survey.

Just under half of the respondents also replied in terms of the technique the officer should use to elicit the information to supply the council. Notwithstanding the fact that the answers to earlier questions, discussed above, show that few officers described as important independent ways of keeping themselves informed, one said, "there is no formal way - we just know". The most frequently mentioned method in all the councils and both the main parties and by officers as well was picking up information from front-line staff. The fact that this method was hardly mentioned in reply to the open-ended question earlier raises some doubt as to how much important members would attach

to reports derived in this way. A few members and officers suggested special exercises in public participation, such as those recently conducted over school closures, but one stressed that this had to be done with members, not behind their backs. Only a few respondents, all from Cleveland County Council, spontaneously mentioned the use of the Research and Intelligence Surveys in this context.

Three councillors answered this question by stressing that councillors must keep themselves informed and must make sure that their officers do the same.

The Citizens' Surveys

In view of the fact that Cleveland is one of the very few authorities who have regularly maintained a series of citizen surveys over the years since local government reorganisation, it was inevitable that all respondents should be asked if they had come across surveys of citizens' and users' attitudes by the Cleveland Research and Intelligence Unit. One conservative councillor from Stockton, two labour councillors, one from Hartlepool and the other from Middlesbrough said they had not come across such studies. Remember that the interviews were confined to the leading members of the authority and that all three of the districts named had commissioned surveys from the Research and Intelligence Unit over the past few years. Nevertheless, all the remaining councillors said they had heard of these surveys so they were asked "did you find them helpful?" Three quarters of all respondents said they had found them helpful, fifteen percent that they had not, and one labour councillor from Langbaugh described them as "interesting". Labour members more frequently claimed to have found the surveys helpful than conservative or other councillors, but it was officers who, with one exception, all described the surveys as helpful.

Respondents who knew about the surveys were then asked whether they had had any effect on the policymaking processes

of their authority. Just under half said they had, just under half said they had not, and a small proportion of the district councillors both of them members of the alliance were undecided. Presumably they found themselves so excluded from the decision-making processes of the authority that they were uncertain what did influence the decisions that were made!

When asked to identify the effects they said the surveys had on the policy in their council, ten per cent of respondents named a particular service for which special questions had been incorporated into the annual social monitoring survey, or a special survey had been conducted. For example, two labour councillors and one conservative councillor pointed to a special survey to attitudes to infill housing, while a conservative councillor from Cleveland County Council referred to the usual role the surveys had played in gauging the acceptability of certain structure plan policies. A further ten percent cited studies of particular client groups which had had an impact on policy. Two labour councillors referred to a study on the unemployed and another to a study of social deprivation, while a fourth mentioned a study of the elderly. An officer remarked on the contribution which a special survey of the Asian population has made.

Several members, both conservative and labour referred to the contribution the surveys had made to understanding the changing situation that people found themselves in, and helping to identify their needs, while both officers and members referred to "useful background information". But how did all this contribute to decision making? Respondents seemed to point to two different contributions which surveys made.

One was to provide a foundation of knowledge about what people believed so that, if necessary, the councils can work to change those beliefs. One labour member of the county council said, "it highlights public ignorance of council affairs and services".

In this way the surveys point to areas where the council should be trying to explain more about the council to the public. Another labour member put it thus: "surveys help us to know what

the public thinks, and it is useful to know. But sometimes we have to fly in the face of public criticism. So then the surveys help us to work out how best to present our policies. It really is a question of presentation".

A Stockton conservative councillor mentioned the priority surveys in much the same light. "The results influenced the debate, and we wrote our election address accordingly". In all these cases the surveys aided the communication process particularly by shaping what the councillors emphasized in their relations with the public.

But the survey method can also contribute to the policy debate itself. One officer responsible for refuse collection recalled how the bad showing of his borough's service in the comparative satisfaction survey led to a major revision of the service. He claimed it was now the most popular of the four borough refuse services. Similar comments came from another borough. Some of the examples given were less dramatic. A Middlesbrough councillor pointed to the fact that the surveys often identified issues which worried residents but which would otherwise be overlooked. A chief executive said "it helps to facilitate questioning". This point was amplified by an elected member: "I find it useful when I can quote from it in debate. It doesn't really shift the debate but it helps the case". A similar point was made by an officer who gave an example of the information being used to back up his case for more resources.

The two officers from separate authorities who claimed that a survey had been the single, most decisive factor in a major shift in policy were the exception. But then local government politics are seldom so simple. Inertia is substantial in many large and complex organisations and it takes a number of different, general pull, push and precipitating factors acting on different people to secure change. Therefore it is not surprising that though just under half of our respondents argued that surveys had had an effect on council policy, they could not always be specific. A Cleveland chief officer drew an analogy with water dripping on a stone. Another said, "it is difficult to find a black and white effect, but the surveys have gradually heightened members' awareness over the years".

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BADANIE POTRZEB I OPINII MIESZKAŃCÓW
DLA POTRZEB LOKALNYCH WŁADZ

Brytyjskie władze lokalne posiadają znaczne uprawnienia, co pozwala im reagować w sposób elastyczny na zmieniające się potrzeby społeczności lokalnych. Skuteczność tego reagowania uzależniona jest w bardzo dużym stopniu od posiadania odpowiednich informacji. W moim następnym opracowaniu wspomniiałem, że mimo wprowadzenia skutecznych mechanizmów integracji przez niektóre władze lokalne w Wielkiej Brytanii, mechanizmy te działały kosztem zmniejszonej wrażliwości władz na potrzeby i postulaty zgłaszane przez mieszkańców.

Moim zdaniem władze lokalne, którym zależy na realizowaniu postulatów mieszkańców, winny rozwinąć takie struktury i systemy, jakie pozwalałyby im na uzyskiwanie odpowiednich informacji o potrzebach, życzeniach i preferencjach mieszkańców, oraz odpowiadać przed mieszkańcami za ich realizację i za swoje działania.

W artykule dokonano analizy opublikowanych badań dotyczących rozwiązań przyjętych przez różne władze lokalne. Okazuje się, że niejednokrotnie władze lokalne realizują tylko koncep-

oje małej części lokalnej społeczności, a w swoich programach w sposób wyraźny kierują się interesami jakiejś jednej klasy. Inne władze lokalne przywiązują zbyt dużą wagę do życzeń i wytycznych władz centralnych w porównaniu z życzeniami i opiniami miejscowej ludności. Można by podać także przykłady działania władz lokalnych opartego na wewnętrznym przepływie informacji, przy czym wybrani drogą głosowania członkowie tych władz polegają w znacznej mierze na informacji dostarczonej przez lokalną administrację i odwrotnie.

Z kolei poddano analizie unikalny system badania potrzeb i opinii mieszkańców jaki istniał w hrabstwie Cleveland przez ponad 10 lat, aby stwierdzić czy takie rozwiązanie stanowi trzecią przesłankę dla integracji planowania i zarządzania w działalności władz lokalnych reagujących w sposób odpowiedni na miejscowe potrzeby.