1 Local Government in Context

The origins of modern local government

The rise of local government is closely tied to the process of industrialisation which gathered momentum in Britain from the middle of the eighteenth century. The movement of population from rural to urban areas was accompanied by severe problems of overcrowding, law and order, and ill-health. The immediate response to this was the creation of a series of ad hoc, single-purpose bodies which included poor law boards, turnpike trusts and boards of improvement commissioners. The powers of the improvement commissioners varied but often included responsibility for paving, cleansing, the lighting of streets and the provision of watchmen. These ad hoc responses were viewed by many as inadequate in administrative terms. Moreover, the ad hoc bodies operated alongside a system of local government institutions effectively controlled by Tory squires and traditional landowning interests. The prosperous entrepreneurs that increasingly dominated the expanding towns and cities resented their lack of control over the full range of civic affairs. In response to these pressures the 1835 act created elected municipal councils and gave to them a range of powers and property.

The creation of these municipal boroughs or corporations in many towns and cities is widely viewed as the beginning of our modern system of local government. The municipal boroughs shared key characteristics of modern local authorities in that they were responsible for a range of functions and directly elected. The functions of these municipal boroughs were, of course, very different to those of modern local authorities and the franchise was limited to male rate-payers of more than three years’ residence. Crucially, however, the principle of local self-government had been established.
The middle years of the nineteenth century witnessed a continued concern with the consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation. Various legislative measures gave additional or new responsibility for public health, highways, housing, poor relief and education to the institutions of local government. The municipal boroughs took some of the powers, as did the long-established and unelected county and parish agencies in rural areas. There was also a substantial proliferation of ad hoc bodies. The result was a very complex local government system with a range of agencies, all, perhaps, able to raise a rate and with overlapping boundaries.

The extension of the franchise to agricultural workers was followed in 1888 by the creation of all-purpose and directly elected county councils. For towns and cities with populations greater than 50,000 the 1888 Act also established elected county borough councils, independent of the county councils and based on the existing municipal boroughs. London was given its own directly elected county council. In 1894 and 1899 further reforms established a range of directly elected multi-purpose authorities below the county councils. In urban areas the prime responsibility for local government remained with the all-purpose county boroughs. These various reforms established the basic structure of local authorities that lasted until well past the Second World War.

The structure of local government may have been relatively stable in the early decades of the twentieth century but there was considerable change and development in the functions undertaken by local authorities. The concern with public health, highways and lighting, and law and order remained. Some responsibilities were transferred from existing ad hoc bodies. For example, in 1902 school boards were abolished and in their place local authorities took on the provision of education and set up separate committees to oversee the service. As new responsibilities were taken on by the state, so many of these were placed in the hands of local authorities. These included town planning responsibilities, the building of low-cost housing and the provision of a range of welfare services. In addition local authorities took on the development of public utilities such as gas, electricity, water and, in the case of Hull, a telephone system. Local authorities also had some responsibility for poor relief and were instrumental in the management and provision of hospital and other health services. Between