Introduction

The 2000 Local Government Act introduced an executive system of local government which parallels that of central government. Policy and the budget have to be agreed by full council (just as legislation has to be passed by Parliament). The executive (whether led by a mayor or council leader) then has the authority to take executive decisions within this policy/budgetary framework.

There are two potential major impacts of this move to local executive government for councillor/officer relationships. First, the 2000 Act, on the face of it, provides the opportunity for councillors who are members of the executive to increase the scope of their decision responsibilities beyond the norm which prevailed under the old committee system (which was premised on the ‘members set policy/officers implement it’ distinction, although with many variations of interpretation). Secondly, it has placed considerable strain on the principle of the ‘unified officer structure’ in which officers, at all levels, are required to serve ‘the whole council’ as well as ‘the administration’.

One or two chief executives amongst those interviewed felt strongly that it was now more difficult for a chief executive to serve the whole council than it was prior to the 2000 Local Government Act.

I do my best to play this role – for example through the opposition briefing meetings – but in reality I spend most of my time serving the leadership group. I’ve become more like a civil servant.

S. Leach, Managing in a Political World
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This chief executive went on to speculate that in time, chief executives and other directors will be political appointments, as in the United States, resigning if the party in power changes.

Although there were echoes of this view in the interviews with other chief executives, it was significant how few of them referred to the challenge of serving the whole council, under the executive system, as a problem. As noted in Chapter 4, several chief executives emphasised the importance of keeping opposition groups informed, using mechanisms such as joint leaders meetings, opposition leader briefings or the readiness (on request) to attend meetings of opposition group as well as the dominant party. But that was as far as it went. It was as though little had actually changed, following the introduction of cabinet government. If more authorities had taken the opportunity to ‘claw back’ areas of decision-making previously delegated to officers and allocate them to portfolio-holders (including leaders), then more problems would be likely to have been perceived by chief executives. But (with very few exceptions) this has not happened. In practice, the transition from the pre-2000 Act system – with the Policy and Resource Committee the focus of decision-making – to local executive government has been more cosmetic than seismic. True Policy and Resources Committees had to be ‘balanced’ with proportional representation from other parties. But in reality, the real business was done in preparatory meetings between chief officers and majority group members of the Policy and Resources Committee (typically comprising most or all of the committee chairs). This practice has continued under the executive system, with the equivalent to the Policy and Resources Committee being the public meeting of the Cabinet (required by law) at which the decisions reached at the private cabinet meeting the previous week are in effect ratified, sometimes with the facility for opposition members to ask questions. In effect, little has changed beyond a superficial reshuffling of titles and forums.

What has changed, in many although by no means all authorities, is the extent to which the relationship between chief executive and leader has increased in importance. This change has been partly influenced by the government’s growing belief in the value of ‘strong’ leadership, and the way they have sought to embed this value in legislative terms – particularly the provisions of the 2007 Act which formally allocate various powers to leaders (selection of cabinet