

SOLACE Statement on the Role of the Chief Executive

SOLACE believes wholeheartedly in a strong democratic state and the devolvement of power to the local level. Our past research¹ has clearly demonstrated that successful councils require both strong political leadership and strong managerial leadership: "Good government, at all levels, is where the best of politics and management combine to be greater than the sum of the parts".

In recent years, local government has been going through significant change, in the main driven by the financial crisis and severe economic down turn. There is an increasing trend for reducing headcount through the sharing of Chief Executives and Senior Management Teams between two Councils, particularly amongst District Councils. A handful have managed this successfully. An increasing number have talked about and considered such a change but for differing reasons have not been able to develop a partnership that works for both Councils; given the complexities and sensitivities which surround such a change this is not a surprising outcome.

An alternative that appears to be growing in popularity is for Councils to consider the removal of the Chief Executive's post and the sharing of the role and functions amongst the remaining Chief Officers. This is believed to have gained in traction since the proposals for the Localism Bill to empower Mayors to assume the role of the Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service, fuelled by persistent briefings by senior government figures questioning the role, value and remuneration of Chief Executives. It is, however, not a new concept having been tried by Councils of various sizes over the years – all of which have eventually reverted back to a position of one Chief Officer taking overall responsibility – whether or not role is still called the Chief Executive - supported by a (usually smaller) Senior Management Team.

The decisions on how to structure the Council's staff base is rightly a decision for the locally elected officials. As a professional body, SOLACE is concerned that such decisions are not taken lightly and that the desire to 'balance the books' does not override the need to maintain good corporate governance.

SOLACE believes that the role of the Chief Executive is special and unique. It is, however, not well understood by those who have not been a Chief Executive or have not worked closely with one. Whilst there is no easy formula for defining the role – what works in one council, or with one Leader, may not be as effective in another – the following points should be taken into consideration when reviewing the number and seniority of members of the Council's Senior Management Team:

¹ Leadership United: Managing in a political environment, December 2005 (available in the Special Reports section of the SOLACE website: <http://www.solace.org.uk/library.asp>)

Managerial Leadership

While Chief Executives are required to perform traditional policy, administrative and managerial functions involving high levels of analytical skills, their role also requires the ability to achieve the trust and confidence of those they lead and with whom they work. These qualities include the capacity to think creatively, to empathise with others, and an awareness of self and one's impact on others. The Chief Executive's role is also to co-ordinate, instruct, support, cajole and guide to bring the best out of a team of chief officers who may be passionate, competitive individualists.

Skills, knowledge and expertise

Most of the challenges of being a Chief Executive of a local authority arise from working in a complex political environment and in providing leadership at the interface between management and politics. Their role is more complex than that of a senior civil servant who serves only the ruling Administration and not, as in the case of a local authority Chief Executive, the Opposition too.

The Chief Executive brings the necessary skills, knowledge and expertise to provide the managerial leadership for the Council. Not everyone has these attributes and not all who do are able to apply them effectively in a political environment.

Overview, balance & coherence

Politics is about being convinced and often about beliefs. But public services also benefit from rational, well informed analysis. Councils can employ lots of experts, but a Chief Executive can provide overview, balance and coherence.

Leaders will observe that all of their Cabinet colleagues have partial, particular responsibilities. This will likely also be true of officers. But someone needs to care about the whole organisation, the whole Council. And this is the job of the Leader and the Chief Executive.

In law all Council Members have equal rights (with some having extra responsibilities). Someone needs to reach out to the disaffected, the difficult and the demanding. It is the Chief Executive who ensures that all Council Members are listened to and dealt with impartially.

Chief Political Advisor

Whilst the Leader may be right all the time, this cannot be taken for granted. On these rare times, maybe their colleagues will speak up; or maybe other more junior staff. But part of what a Chief Executive is paid for is to be brave and to speak the truth to power.

Central to understanding political leadership is understanding the process by which political leaders achieve the position they hold and how they build and maintain their authority and legitimacy within their leading group or coalition. Most Leaders will face annual re-elections and challenges to their leadership can be common. Given the close working relationship between the Chief Executive and the Leader, it is essential that the Chief Executive is aware of, and is



sensitive to, the motivations and interests of possible challenges. While it is not the Chief Executive's job to intervene in the workings of the group, the Leader will rightly expect the Chief Executive to understand the context in which the Leader operates and to advise accordingly.

A special relationship

The role of the Chief Executive and Leader are closely linked but are not wholly discrete –they are overlapping and complementary which brings its own set of tensions. One of the key roles of the Leader and Chief Executive should be to construct trust at a point of tension and potential conflict between the different worlds of political logic and managerial logic. It is important that there is mutual understanding of each others' roles, and this relies on good communications. A Leader must be able to impart to their Chief Executive their understanding of the group and of the wider political context and imperatives without such communications being seen as disloyal. The Chief Executive needs in a similar way, without eroding the loyalty owed to colleague officers, to be able to discuss with a Leader their managerial capacity or incapacity to deliver on a particular agenda. This is not just about interpersonal skills but about mutual grasp of each other's worlds.

A wise Chief Executive commits to their Leader unconditionally, and understands this as including roles of confidant, mentor, partisan, speech writer and PR consultant. When it works, the relationship between Leader and Chief Executive is an exceptional thing.

It is a brave Leader who embarks on their political journey without the services of a Chief Executive or someone clearly tasked with fulfilling the role of the Chief Executive.

[Ends]



Addendum

SOLACE (the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) is the representative body for senior, strategic managers in UK Local Authorities and the wider public sector. The Society promotes public service excellence and provides professional development for its Members. Our objectives are three-fold:

- To provide excellent opportunities for our members to learn from the best, to share next practice and to network with each other and with leaders from other areas of public life.
- To contribute to and to influence the debate about the future of public services and to make sure that policy is informed by the experience and expertise of our members.
- To manage the Society effectively to ensure it remains relevant, effective and valuable to its Members and Partners.

SOLACE is not a trade union and does not negotiate pay and terms of conditions for Chief Executives or Chief Officers – that role belongs to ALACE, an entirely separate organisation.