**Austerity, ‘Spaces of Power’ and Community Leadership**

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**Abstract**

Since the early 1990s, academics and practitioners have championed a role for local government ‘not just to deliver certain services well but to steer a community to meet the full range of its needs’ (Stoker, 2011). This paper revisits the concept of ‘community leadership’ in the context of austerity, exploring its continued significance for English councils and their partner organisations in 2015.

Using Newman’s concept of ‘spaces of power’ (2012), and Sullivan’s (2007) interpretations of community leadership, the paper shows that legislative and financial changes since 2010 have tended to promote ‘enabling’ approaches to community leadership, but that the ‘spaces of power’ for leadership focussed on articulating local ‘citizen voice’ have contracted.

Drawing on case study evidence from a local authority and its partners in an urban unitary area, the paper goes on to provide examples of voluntary sector and faith-based organisations moving into this ‘space of power’, assuming some of the ‘convening’ functions previously performed by the council. In some cases these functions have been accompanied by new funding opportunities and fresh scope for activity, as well as increased influence with statutory bodies and other local partners.

However the case study also finds that there are challenges for third sector partners in taking on such responsibilities, including establishing legitimacy, building and maintaining trust, and managing complex power relations. Although spaces of power were being created – or left behind – as the local authority withdrew from a ‘community voice’ role, they were not easy or uncontested spaces to fill.

The paper concludes with reflections on the prospects for community leadership by local authorities, with regard to the shifting boundaries between state and civil society and questions of local democratic legitimacy and engagement in a context of sub-regional devolution.

**Introduction**

The ‘emergency budget’ of June 2010 (HM Treasury, 2010) initiated a series of public spending cuts described as the ‘worst funding settlement in living memory’ for English local authorities (BBC News, 2010; Hastings, Bailey, Gannon, Besemer, & Bramley, 2015). The National Audit Office has calculated that government funding to councils reduced by 37% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2015-16, (2014 p.16) whilst the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability suggests that spending per capita dropped by 17.2% in cash terms or 32% when adjusted for inflation (Municipal Journal 2015). At a local level the distribution of cuts has resulted in greater proportional reductions for those localities most dependent on central grant funding, particularly urban areas with higher levels of deprivation (Hastings, Bramley, Bailey, & Watkins, 2012; The Audit Commission, 2013).

To date, academic studies have focussed mainly on the effect of cuts on local spending, services and populations (see for example Crawford & Phillips, 2012; Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015; Hastings, Bailey, Bramley, Gannon, & Watkins, 2015; Kennett, Jones, Meegan, & Croft, 2015). In contrast, relatively little attention has been given to the effects of austerity on the wider governance responsibilities of local authorities. This is an important area for consideration, as from the 1990s onwards academics and policy-makers championed ‘community leadership’ as a key role for local authorities working within an increasingly fragmented landscape of service delivery, arguing that the function of councils was ‘not just to deliver certain services well but to steer a community to meet the full range of its needs’ (Stoker, 2011 p.17).

The ‘modernisation agenda’ pursued by the 1997-2010 Labour government encouraged local authorities to embrace community leadership (DETR, 1998 para 8.1). This policy aim was sustained through successive initiatives including the Local Government Act 2000, funding for ‘local strategic partnerships’ (LSPs), and from 2007 onwards ‘local area agreements’, which positioned councils as leading negotiators with Whitehall departments on behalf of their locality (DCLG, 2011b p.23). Although there were tight limits on the autonomy available to local authorities during this period, many local authority officers and members enthusiastically welcomed community leadership as an opportunity to go beyond the provision of statutory services, and facilitate a response to social, economic and environmental problems, which had previously been beyond the scope of their tightly constrained powers (Leach & Roberts, 2011 p.113/114 Sullivan, 2007 p.156).

However from 2010 onwards, the incoming Coalition government abolished most of the architecture created around this local co-ordination role. Regulators, performance management regimes, local area agreements, regional government offices, requirements for local strategic partnerships, capacity building bodies and funding for partnerships were all cut in years after the 2010 emergency budget. The purpose of this paper is to examine what effect this may be having on the local exercise of community leadership, and the wider significance for councils, their partner agencies and communities as they look towards a further five years of austerity, as well as new opportunities such as increased sub-regional devolution. If austerity policies have affected councils’ capacity to exercise community leadership, this could also call into question a fundamental aspect of English local government’s future role and function.

To consider these issues in more detail, this paper will revisit the meaning of community leadership, starting with Helen Sullivan’s four interpretations of the role (Sullivan, 2007) and considering some of the ways in which these interpretations were given effect and adapted over time. It goes on to utilise Janet Newman’s concept of ‘spaces of power’ (Newman, 2012) to explore how changes to national legislation and funding since 2010 have both expanded and closed down opportunities for local authorities to develop the four different variants.

Drawing on a case study of a local authority and its partners in an urban unitary area, the paper provides contemporary evidence on how such ‘spaces of power’ are influencing community leadership at a local level, noting that although elite-level ‘enabling’ leadership continues to be a core function, the study suggests a withdrawal from local authority engagement in the articulation of ‘citizen voice’. In turn voluntary sector and faith-based organisations appear to be moving into this space, but the case study suggests that although such roles bring additional influence, they are also costly and contested.

**What do we mean by community leadership?**

The term ‘community leadership’ has deep historical roots; Sullivan (2007) describes how the concept dates back to the municipal entrepreneurship of the 19th Century, when councils first took on responsibilities for providing sewerage, water and other utilities. The concept was revived in the 1990s both as a response to the fragmentation of local services in the wake of market-led public service reforms, and a potential vehicle for democratic renewal and ‘modernisation’ of public services (Stoker, 2011). Sullivan (2007) argued that community leadership could be interpreted in four ways; as a symbol of change; as an expression of local authorities’ ‘enabling’ role; as the articulation of community voice; and as an ‘expedient device’.

Considering these variants in turn, the ‘symbolic’ interpretation of community leadership related to its importance as a narrative about the modernisation of local government, which connected ‘a past golden age of local government with a ‘modern’ future’ (Sullivan, 2007 p.148). Sullivan argued that such symbolism helped to construct a ‘new symbolic order’ legitimising the role and status of local authorities as leaders of local governance. The ongoing importance of symbolism to partnership work is developed further in Sullivan et al. (2013) which identifies ‘cultural performance’ as a key driver for ongoing collaboration in a context of austerity, ‘encouraging and securing conformance to a set of traditions and values or promoting subversion of those same traditions and values in pursuit of others’ (p.125).

Community leadership as ‘enabling’ recognised the active and material expression of the leadership role, whereby the local authority acted as a ‘lynchpin of governance activity’ (p.151). This concept could also be likened to the idea of local government as a ‘network co-ordinator’ managing diverse relationships and recognising multiple accountabilities (Stoker, 2011 p.17). It was initially given practical force through the (somewhat limited) ‘wellbeing’ powers, granted to local government in the Local Government Act 2000 to promote social, economic and environmental wellbeing, and later formed the basis of a vision of local government as a ‘convenor’ and ‘place shaper’ for local services expressed in the Lyons Report and the *Strong and Prosperous Communities* white paper (DCLG, 2006; Lyons, 2007). However, Madden (2010) argues that ‘place shaping’ specified a more powerful leadership role for the local authority, emphasising greater ‘certainty, stability and a unifying narrative that promotes consensus on local priorities’ and concentrating power in existing structures rather than re-distributing it (Madden, 2010 p.189).

In a contrasting interpretation Sullivan (2007) highlights that community leadership could also be seen as ‘community voice’, eliciting and acting upon community aspirations. This responded to contemporary anxiety in the 1990s about a need for democratic renewal;

‘Local government itself is based on the principle of representative democracy, yet democracy tends to be passive. Citizens have little opportunity to engage apart from periodic visits to the ballot box. Worse, for many, there is a sense of alienation and apathy. New relationships with citizens and communities are needed’ (Clarke & Stewart, 1999 p.2).

As a response to this perceived deficit, Clarke and Stewart argued for a form of governance which would ensure that resources in the community were used to the good of the locality. This was a devolving vision of community leadership, within which ‘the local authority’s role in community governance is only justified if it is close to and empowers the communities.. and the citizens which constitute them’ (ibid. p.2).

Finally Sullivan (2007) notes that community leadership could also be viewed as an ‘expedient device’ to divert attention from the hard power lost to local government as a result of market-led reforms. This interpretation was echoed four years later by Stoker;

‘I worry that we.. may have sold local government ‘a pup’, that is the idea of local governance and the role of the community governor. I have doubts about the sustainability of local government at all if all that it has to offer is the role of community network co-ordinator’ (Stoker, 2011 p.16).

Although these interpretations of community leadership were very different, they were not mutually exclusive, and could co-exist in a single place at any given time. It is also important to acknowledge that not all stakeholders engaged in local governance accepted local government’s community leadership role and both Sullivan (2007) and central government evaluations (DCLG, 2011b) noted tensions in the engagement of elected members and some strategic partners. Nonetheless, despite these contested aspects of the term, it is clear that ideas about ‘community leadership’ and ‘place shaping’ formed an important part of local government’s identity and legitimacy prior to 2010, and indeed the concept remains in common currency throughout the sector today (see for instance McMahon, 2015). Awareness of different interpretations of the role provide us with additional lenses through which we can examine how community leadership has been manifest in the past, and how it may be developing into the future.

**Community leadership and spaces of power**

To understand how opportunities to practice these different interpretations of community leadership have changed through time, we now turn to Newman’s concept of ‘spaces of power’ (2012). This idea derives from Newman’s research with female political activists, charting how they identified and exploited ‘spaces of power generated through contradictions in the ruling relations of their time’ (ibid p.3) to enact social and political change. Although Newman’s work derives from the study of individual struggles, the concept of ‘spaces of power’ is more widely applicable. In the context of English local government, for instance, the idea effectively describes the search by elected members and officers for opportunities to express local political vision (particularly when the council is politically opposed to the government) in an environment where actions are tightly constrained by spending cuts and legislation.

For Newman ‘spaces of power’ do not necessarily provide an optimistic discourse of agency in place of neo-liberal triumph but ‘readings of change that allow for continued points of conflict, disruption and antagonism’ (p.169) with spaces ‘wrought from fissures and fracture in dominant ruling relations’ (p.174). Spaces of power were also frequently spaces of strain and discomfort but ‘also produced new forms of organizing and ways of performing politics that are not easily erased, even in the current climate of cuts and austerity’ (ibid. p.4).

Applying this idea to the exercise of community leadership, a review of recent changes to national policies demonstrates that this is a policy domain in which ‘spaces of power’ have both emerged and closed down during the Coalition government’s administrative term. Table 6.1 (below) lists the key policy changes made by the coalition against the different modes of community leadership (with place-shaping included alongside civic leadership, as the same supporting and restricting factors are present for both). From this brief overview it appears that spaces of power relating to local authorities’ ‘enabling’ roles in community leadership have continued to open over the last five years, whereas spaces in relation to a ‘community voice’ role have become more restrictive.

Starting with the enabling role, it can be argued that the removal of funding and statutory impetus for local strategic partnerships and local area agreements has cut resources (and potentially motivation) for this interpretation of community leadership. Conversely, new spaces have emerged in which local authorities can lead this type of multi-agency collaboration. For instance the removal of area-based audit and inspection has provided partnerships with greater space to achieve locally defined (as opposed to central government) objectives. The power of general competence gives local authorities a wide remit to initiate all kinds of activity in the interests of their local area[[1]](#footnote-1). ‘whole place’ community budget pilots[[2]](#footnote-2) provided the Coalition with a vehicle for the pooling of multiple funding streams, and prefigured both the pilot devolution of major areas of public spending (as in Greater Manchester) as well as continued lobbying by groups such as ‘core’ and ‘key’ cities for wider devolved powers (Core Cities, 2013). At a sub-regional level some local authorities have also helped to shape local economic partnerships (LEPS) and combined authorities, increasing their influence over economic development (although this may also be perceived as a performative role- see below).

**Table 6.1 Community Leadership and Spaces of Power**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Mode of community leadership** | **Factors supporting this role for local authorities** | **Factors restricting this role for local authorities** |
| Community leadership as ‘Enabling’ / place shaping | * Removal of audit and inspection * Power of general competence * Whole place community budget pilots (2012) * Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPS) * Combined authorities * Lobbying for additional powers (e.g. ‘core’ and ‘key’ cities) * Devolution of major areas of spending (e.g. Greater Manchester) | * Removal of funding and requirements for local strategic partnerships and local area agreements |
| Community leadership as ‘community voice’ | * ‘Our Place’ Programme (neighbourhood level community budgets) | * Reduction in sources of funding for VCS infrastructure bodies and regeneration partnerships * Big society ‘zero sum’ approach * ‘Community rights’ to challenge, bid, reclaim land, plan and build * Local government publicity controls |
| Community leadership as a symbolic and performative act | * Local authority oversight for public health * Councillor engagement on LEPs | * Rationalisation of statutory partnerships |
| Community leadership as an expedient device | * Council tax referendum limit * Academy and free schools policy * SoS interventions * Continued central oversight for key programmes e.g. troubled families programme | * Power of general competence |

In contrast, local authorities’ capacity to act as ‘community voice’ has been restricted during the past five years. This is partly an issue of funding; cuts have impacted heavily on funding available for voluntary and community sector infrastructure, reducing capacity for third-sector advocates to work with statutory agencies. However, it is also an issue of philosophy; the rhetoric surrounding the initiation of the ‘Big Society’ was clear that it stood in a ‘zero-sum concept of the relationship between civil society and the state, whereby more ‘society’ involvement equates to less ‘state’ activity’ (Cameron, 2010; Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012 p.32). Correspondingly the Coalition draws upon a very different concept of ‘community’ within the Localism Act (DCLG, 2011a), which provides power to communities acting in opposition to existing public service institutions, rather than working alongside them.

For instance, there exists the ‘community right’ to challenge services; the ‘community right’ to bid for assets; and ‘community rights’ to plan and build, in opposition to local authority jurisdiction. These ‘rights’ suggest that local authorities cannot be relied upon to articulate and express community voice, indeed the act constitutes local authorities as an obstacle which community rights can overcome. Furthermore, recent legal restrictions on local authorities’ publicity make it increasingly difficult for councils to disseminate information to local residents. The spaces of power within which local authorities can exercise ‘community voice’, appear to be increasingly restricted.

It is also possible to identify instances where policies enacted by the Coalition government support the practice of community leadership as a symbolic and performative act, and community leadership as an expedient device. In relation to the former, the rationalisation of statutory partnerships after the 2010 comprehensive spending review may have reduced purely ‘symbolic’ partnership activity. However the engagement of elected members to provide a veneer of democratic legitimacy on (otherwise minimally accountable) bodies such as LEPs, and the unequal power allocation within public health, where local authority influence has been granted over a relatively small proportion of the public health budget, (compared to the multiple billions transferred to Clinical Commissioning Groups) (Heath, 2014 p.8) contains more than a suggestion of community leadership as performance.

Meanwhile in regard to the idea of community leadership as an ‘expedient device’, although the power of general competence suggests that the Coalition’s ‘localist’ agenda may not have been conceived in total cynicism, there are numerous limits on that power. These include restrictions on local tax-raising, the move to academies and free schools outside local authority controls; detailed interventions by the Department for Communities and Local Government’s Secretary of State in areas as diverse as job-roles, flag-flying and publicity, (Golding, 2010; Pickles, 2010; Werran, 2013) and continued direction over performance in core policy initiatives;[[3]](#footnote-3) only serving to highlight that Whitehall retains key marionette strings.

The concept of ‘spaces of power’ therefore provides a framework which helps us to understand how policy changes at a national level may have impacted upon the types of community leadership practiced at local level. The next section of this analysis will now look in more detail at how actors practiced community leadership in an urban unitary area, and at which spaces of power were emerging or closing as austerity-related policies took effect.

**Background to the Case study**

The following observations draw on doctoral research undertaken into responses to austerity. The research methodology used an embedded case study approach to understand how austerity was being experienced in relation to local governance across a single urban unitary local authority area. Data collection included participant observation, document review, collaborative workshops and 34 interviews, with findings triangulated and analysed from a constructivist perspective. This paper focusses first on the approach to community leadership within the local authority and then goes on to highlight emerging roles played in community leadership by two voluntary sector organisations engaged in advice and homelessness services.

The locality featured in this study was severely impacted by the recession and subsequent spending cuts, due to a high reliance on the service sector and public sector employment. It also had a legacy of poverty and deprivation, being amongst the top 20 most deprived local authority areas in the country. Nonetheless resident satisfaction with the area and local authority services was consistent with the national average and rising, and the local authority was noted for strong performance on transport, energy and regeneration. The council had been governed by a solid Labour majority since the 1980s, with a reputation for strong political leadership and stability.

In its partnership work, the council had a longstanding tradition of civic leadership, and had maintained its local strategic partnership (albeit on minimal level of funding) despite radical budget reductions since 2010. It had been amongst the first wave of councils agreeing City Deals with the Coalition government and was vocal about a longer term ambition to be free of government grant (Interview, 2014d). Although some officers commented that it came relatively late to the economic development agenda (Interview, 2014b, 2014d), the authority was also active in contributing to the local enterprise partnership; and in the creation of a combined authority.

**The local authority and community leadership**

Local elected members were bullish about the continuing opportunities for an ‘enabling’ civic leadership role and the council’s unique responsibilities in drawing other agencies together. One executive member pointed to areas where the council’s influence had increased, including to the health and wellbeing board, local enterprise partnership, urban and regional development, and transport. ‘People look to the council to take a lead. We’re the only accountable body’ (Interview, 2014f). Another commented:

‘we still own a load of land, we’ve still got planning powers, investment portfolio, we still run transport... The other thing is there is no one else to do it…. There is nobody else. We are elected, we have a certain legitimacy’ (Interview, 2014g).

This confidence in the council’s ability to perform civic leadership extended into a sense of local autonomy amongst many officers, who felt that the council was able to advance its own priorities, even in the face of considerable financial pressures. One director pointed to the power which came from being a relatively large authority which had retained a wide variety of in-house services and many local political and economic levers:

‘I don’t fully subscribe to the graph of doom. I get why people say that. Our spending power is a billion pounds, that presents a huge amount of opportunity. Some of that money washes through the council, but if you look at the spending cuts in the context of our gross budget rather than our net budget you’ve got a slightly different lens’

This in turn meant that the council could be assertive in its policy choices: ‘we’re really not bothered what anyone thinks of us, we’re really not bothered what government says, because we’re (name of locality)…. And you know, that’s it’ (Interview, 2014d).

For others, the ‘spaces of power’ for this type of enabling leadership existed in the technical ‘grey area’ between national policy and local implementation. This space was particularly important where the council was acting in political opposition to national policy. A middle manager emphasised that ‘its not just about implementing… its about finding a (name of locality) response …and some of it is about ‘how far can we push it?’ (Interview, 2014j). A senior colleague put it more strongly:

‘we do what we want to do anyway. People think local government has these edicts they have to work to, but if they are not locally appropriate you can find a way around them. It’s a huge misconception, we have more power than people believe’ (Interview, 2014c)

The council’s political stability was seen by some members and officers as a core strength in this regard, allowing the council to pursue place-shaping objectives over many years. One member cited a local tax initiative and changes to school holidays as examples of bold – and unpopular – political decisions which might not have been possible in a more volatile political setting ‘it is easier for us to see it through’ (Interview, 2014f). Officers also appreciated the benefits of this stability, including the ‘bravery’ in taking strong political decisions and clarity of direction (Interview, 2014b, 2014d) although senior managers also emphasised that the flip-side of such stability could lead to a lack of challenge and debate (Interview, 2014b, 2014e).

However there was some acceptance amongst members and officers that the ‘enabling’ leadership role was changing as the council’s financial power reduced. For one officer this created an ‘empty toolbox’ as service delivery capabilities were eroded (Interview, 2014i). Others were more optimistic, emphasising the role of influence (Interview, 2014f, 2014o). A director agreed that the degree of power was reducing but influence was growing. ‘We underestimate influence that council can have. A little bit of power and a lot of influence is where we are heading’ (Interview, 2014a). For another director there was a need to fundamentally re-think the way that the authority approached its leadership role, in the context of increasingly fragmented services:

‘we need to move towards having a greater focus on commissioning, enabling and the role of the business sector and voluntary sector. We need to be less about direct delivery - and I don’t mean this in any political ideology sense, its just reality - and thinking more about early intervention so that we change - lessen - future demand. We need to take more of a role in place shaping, getting people to behave differently as a group, a collective, we need to be the oil or glue to make things happen, accepting that our role has changed… to one more of influence, nurturing, cojoling, persuasion and helping, and buddying up to people, rather than grabbing the democratic mandate’ (Interview, 2014b).

In summary, it was clear that the council had found some spaces of power in which to exercise an ‘enabling’ leadership function, building on historic assets and service strengths, as well as strong and consistent political leadership. However, some key actors also considered that the nature of the power available to the council was changing, from a focus on leading-by-acting, to leading by cohering and convening alliances – perhaps a shift towards more symbolic community leadership. There was also a paradox here, in that the resources, time and funding available for providing ‘oil in the machine’ to support the creation and maintenance of partnerships had radically reduced (Interview, 2014h). In this context, a number of interviewees noted how the council had increased its openness to the potential contributions of other sectors, including businesses and faith organisations (Interview, 2014f, 2014i, 2014n, 2014p).

By contrast, the leadership role associated with ‘community voice’ appeared to be in retreat at the time of the research. Service offerings targeted at community level, including youth work, play work, and community development had been extensively remodelled or withdrawn. At the same time funding ceased for neighbourhood partnerships, originally created to provide community input into regeneration programmes, and local voluntary sector infrastructure was remodelled and rationalised. One senior partner expressed concern that in some areas the council’s intelligence about local communities was being eroded;

‘I’m a bit worried that I think we have lost some of the underground intelligence that we used to have. I think that we used to pick up quite a lot from a set of voluntary organisations and local area partnerships and neighbourhood workers and things, so we could get a sense of what was going on in a particular area. I’m not sure we can do that, I’m not sure the relationships are quite the same now…’ (Interview, 2014o)

Another partner described how when fears of race disturbances had occurred in response to an extremist murder in London, it had been faith communities, rather than the council which had convened an urgent response to contribute to calming the situation (Interview, 2014n).

In replacement the council was beginning to focus on a more facilitative role, whereby residents were encouraged to assume civic responsibilities and support each other. This was apparent in council-wide schemes, from a council-initiated social enterprise whereby residents were encouraged to share skills and offer mutual support with simple tasks, to an area-wide campaign to assist in litter collection. It was also observed at ward level, where examples were given of volunteers staffing community centres (Workshop, 2014a, 2014b), and local faith groups organising food banks (Interview, 2014j).

Integral to this change was a common narrative that communities needed to contribute more. A staff member spoke of how communities were increasingly expected ‘to sort themselves out’ (Interview, 2014i). Another mentioned the need to tackle ‘dependency culture’ (Interview, 2014a) whilst a senior member talked of the ‘unrealistic expectations’ of some communities (Interview, 2014f). Several interviewees did not view this as a negative shift, indeed faith representatives, in particular, highlighted that the post-1945 welfare state had ‘squeezed out’ community initiative, and saw the re-opening of opportunities for community involvement as a timely re-balancing (Interview, 2014n, 2014u; Workshop, 2014b).

Another aspect to this narrative was a hope that the voluntary and faith sectors would ‘step up’ to meet emerging gaps in provision (Interview, 2014s), recognising that ‘people with a mission have a moral imperative’ (Interview, 2014o). A senior member envisaged the Council’s future role more as a backstop against the failure of community-led activity, rather than convenor or initiator: ‘I do think increasingly councils are likely to oversee and are almost the fallback… taking a broker or policing role for when things fall apart, or when you have internicene warfare’ (Interview, 2014g).

However, interviewees also expressed concern about withdrawal of the state and recognition that the ‘Big Society’ would not work in many localities. Workshops with frontline staff provided examples of areas where councillors and staff were struggling to gain community engagement. One workshop commented that people didn’t take initiative to help themselves.

‘They look to people, look to council, look to different organisations…they are not a community so much any more… They go to work and go back into their boxes’ (Workshop, 2014b).

A director also acknowledged that ‘Some communities will do it for themselves. Others need encouragement or incentive’ (Interview, 2014b).

In the absence of community initiative at a local level, professionals sometimes attempted to fill the gap, with diminishing resources. Sometimes this resulted in a subtle change of emphasis. For instance, one senior manager observed that under a new regime of partnership between the police and council, there was greater influence on community protection than community development, and emphasis had moved towards sanctions rather than education (Interview, 2014e).

To conclude, whilst the ‘enabling’ community leadership role appeared intact, albeit moving towards a more symbolic, influencing role, there were concerns about the Council’s ongoing ability to understand, elicit and give expression to a ‘community voice’, due in part to contracting resources and opportunities for this type of leadership. Nonetheless, as the council withdrew from some of these spaces, other partners appeared to be compensating. The next section of this paper will explore this further through two examples of voluntary sector partners connected to the Council.

The first focuses on a small Christian organisation, ‘Mobilising Faith’. It was established in 2012 as a ‘joint venture’ company between the Anglican diocese in the case study locality, and a national Christian charity, and created with an aspiration of connecting church (and other faith) communities to local projects addressing poverty. Its launch coincided with increased interest from the statutory sector in the locality in working with faith partners (Interview, 2014f, 2014h), and intentional action by local faith networks to become more engaged in civic life (Interview, 2014u). The board was highly experienced in working with statutory agencies, being initially chaired by a former local authority chief executive, and including several trustees who worked at a very senior level in local councils. The venture had an initial budget of around £40, 000 and initially employed just one part time development worker with a remit focussed mainly on facilitating churches and other partners to take action, rather than direct delivery of services.

The second looks at ‘Housing for All’, a large regional housing association based in the Midlands, employing around 600 people and with an income in 2013/14 of nearly £28 million. It described its mission as ‘helping homeless people, preventing homelessness, and promoting opportunities for vulnerable and excluded people to change the direction of their lives’. Although now a secular charity, Housing for All maintains links to its faith-based roots, with an annual service in the local cathedral and many church-based funding activities. A senior manager emphasised the importance of values to the organisation, particularly in providing clients with ‘second, third and fourth chances’ (Interview, 2014q).

Although these organisations were very different in size, both had faith roots, both had good connections to statutory partners and both had the opportunity to draw on resources not available to the statutory sector. Interestingly, both organisations were also trying to fill perceived gaps in community leadership but found that - in common with other spaces of power - this was often an uncomfortable space.

**‘Mobilising Faith’**

Mobilising Faith had three core objectives, including creating additional capacity for welfare rights and debt advice in local communities; extending the provision of winter night shelters by local churches; and facilitating volunteers from congregations to offer time and skills to local projects, such as night shelters, food banks, welfare rights and money advice**.**

As a ‘new’ entrant to the local voluntary sector scene, the board paid considerable attention to how Mobilising Faith was positioned in relation to existing voluntary sector bodies. For instance, at the organisation’s launch in 2013 the Chair emphasised the distinctiveness of Mobilising Faith’s offer, to allay potential fears from other advice organisations that it would become a new competitor for funding. Conversations also took place at an early stage to co-ordinate with other Christian umbrella groups, and build relationships with other voluntary and community sector partners. Mobilising Faith aimed to follow an ‘asset based’ community development model which meant focussing on opportunities rather than need, sometimes building on pre-existing projects and at other times allowing other partners to take a lead. Despite the emphasis on the complementary role of the organisation, both the board and the development worker maintained an acute sensitivity in dealing with areas of potential overlap and conflict, for instance it was noted in the minutes of one meeting that the development worker would need to ‘be aware of politics and personalities’ and bear in mind need for ‘tact’ (Baker, 2013).

During the first two years of operation, the organisation put in place a number of building blocks which enabled it to start delivering against its core objectives. Achievements included adapting and developing training courses on ‘basic budgeting’ and ‘signposting’ for people in need, designed to be picked up and rolled out by local churches through a ‘train the trainer’ model. It also helped to organise several one-off events, for instance working with the council to promote emergency hardship funding and with local voluntary groups on different ways to access funding. The charity sourced volunteers for advanced debt advice training delivered by another provider and developed a website which included a tool for local voluntary sector projects to use in advertising for volunteers. They also acted as the lynchpin for the fundraising and organisation of a winter night shelter, and supported the establishment of a local debt advice organisation.

However the organisation also encountered a number of challenges. First, it had to establish its credibility with local partners. It was helped in this regard by the expertise and local profile of board members. However, there was some resistance from non-faith based partners to cede a role to faith organisations. One partner commented that ‘being connected to the wider church network is sometimes viewed with hesitation’ whilst an interviewee admitted that church connections could ‘work both ways..sometimes you take on other people’s baggage’ (Interview, 2014l). Several organisations were also keen to emphasise the need for professional, rather than amateur engagement with issues such as advice and housing, because ‘so much can’t be done by volunteers’ (Interview, 2014q, 2014r, 2014t).

As a small organisation Mobilising Faith also sometimes found itself caught in the political machinations of larger partners. Preparations for a winter night shelter were disrupted in 2013 when a collaborating provider unexpectedly withdrew co-ordination and funding. These issues were resolved, but demanded considerable time and relationship building from the development workers and board members, as well as more direct hands-on delivery than had originally been envisaged in the organisation’s ‘facilitative, brokering and capacity building’ role (Interview, 2014l).

There were also challenges in matching churches with resources with areas of need. In practice the churches engaging most readily with Mobilising Faith’s training courses tended to be large predominantly middle-class congregations which were not necessarily geographically connected to areas of deprivation, particularly deprived estates. In contrast, churches in poorer areas were often unable to engage with such initiatives, due to being ‘under-resourced, exhausted and overwhelmed’ (Interview, 2014k). Whilst the larger and better resourced churches were often keen to engage in direct delivery, it was more difficult to encourage them to connect with smaller churches to capitalise on existing community links.

As an infrastructure organisation, Mobilising Faith also found it difficult to evidence its contribution in terms of outcomes, as these often involved intervening partners. This connected to their sensitivity to other organisations’ contribution and territory ‘we have to be so careful, we can’t take credit’ (Interview, 2014h).

In summary this case provides an interesting example of the Church (in its widest sense) seeking to address perceived gaps arising from austerity policies by creating ‘convening’ infrastructure to harness and focus the social capital present in churches and their congregations. However, in moving into this public policy space, it was having to work hard to establish its contribution, competence and credibility; overcoming prejudice against faith-based organisations; negotiating routes around the power machinations of larger partners; and finding solutions to inter-denominational supply and demand barriers. It showed that even with core funding, national support, and well-connected local expertise, defending a ‘space of power’ to perform a community leadership role was not an easy or straightforward undertaking.

**‘Housing for All’**

Prior to 2010, much of Housing for All’s activity was based around providing contracted services to local authorities under the national ‘Supporting People’ programme. When the Coalition’s Comprehensive Spending Review brought heavy funding reductions, Housing for All responded by restructuring its business, and expanding into new geographical areas. They also targeted social and philanthropic investment, with a focus on consolidating new commercial partnerships, notably with a local building society.

Aside from its commercial and community collaborations, Housing for All made considerable progress in establishing itself as a powerful influence in local partnership working. It re-built a fractured relationship with the council, concentrating on new opportunities and partnership imperatives arising from public health funding. In 2013 the Chief Executive was elected to the local strategic partnership, acting as a representative for the local voluntary sector. The organisation also led a multi-million pound bid to the Big Lottery Fund, which aimed to ‘revolutionise’ support to the most vulnerable and challenging clients and people with multiple and complex needs, through “system change” in the way people were supported. Employees commented that, for the first time, they had an opportunity to influence and change statutory systems, rather than working around them.

However, Housing for All’s power as a partnership player sometimes brought it into conflict with other, smaller voluntary sector organisations. Several interviewees expressed misgivings during the course of the research about Housing for All’s success in winning contracts, and the potential impact on local diversity of provision. Concerns were acknowledged by managers at Housing for All, but they were also keen to emphasise their role in preserving diversity:

‘Despite how it may feel to some of the smaller organisations who may well see us as a threat, actually I think we have helped to keep afloat organisations…. There is a limit to what we can do to help those organisations, but I think we have been of some assistance to them’ (Interview, 2014q).

The interviews also highlighted the difficulty for Housing for All in taking an organisational lead on constructing voluntary sector consortia, to bid for public sector contracts. As cuts began, smaller partners were more vulnerable to losing core items of business, which could quickly affect their sustainability. In addition, where performance issues affected only one partner in a consortium, the lead organisation faced the choice of propping-up under-performing organisations or excluding them. In conclusion the manager commented that partnerships have become ‘a bit more brutal’:

‘We can’t afford to be nice to people in the same way that we could….its difficult, its all part of the management of shrinking resources, clearly that does impact on the relationships between organisations and the ability to co-operate’ (Interview, 2014q)

On the other hand, the same individual felt that partnership working at a strategic level had helped to ameliorate the impact of spending cuts. Health in particular was seen as a crucial area for future expansion. A staff member also emphasised the importance of partnership to efficiencies, ‘the needs of service users should be at the top, partnership working is crucial… if there is less money about, you can afford less waste, you need to be as efficient as you can’ (Interview, 2014m).

In summary, Housing for All’s story provides an example of a large voluntary sector organisation exploring new ‘spaces of power’ in collaboration and partnership as it sought solutions to reductions in public spending. In common with local authorities it had developed new ways of structuring services and income, including a more commercial approach and the pursuit of new and varied funding sources. However, although the move into a role where it acted as a partnership ‘convenor’ provided opportunities in gaining contracts and funding, as well as potential influence over statutory partners, new responsibilities also brought a degree of conflict and contestation, especially with smaller voluntary sector partners. In the context of ever decreasing budgets, hard-headed business practice and supportive partnership development could not easily co-exist.

**Analysis**

The case studies reinforce a number of interesting points in relation to the development of community leadership in our locality between 2010 and 2015. First they highlight that community leadership remained a core aspect of local leadership, although the local authority appeared to be moving from an active enabling role towards a more symbolic influencing function. It was also withdrawing from the direct connections with communities that facilitated ‘community voice’.

At the same time, voluntary and faith-based organisations were starting to move into perceived gaps – or spaces of power - created by the withdrawal of council funding, and a greater openness on the part of the council to contributions from diverse partners. These included the maintenance of certain aspects of service provision, but also co-ordinative community leadership activity, drawing together people and organisations in pursuit of joint action. In this sense the third sector was indeed beginning to ‘step-up’ to fill emerging gaps, prompting one partner to claim ‘the ‘Big Society’ has worked’ (Interview, 2014n).

However the roles performed by the partners in our case study were arguably further iterations of Sullivan’s ‘enabling’ leadership, (albeit performed at a level closer to specific communities) rather than a means of conveying ‘citizen voice’ to policy makers. Some of their work (such as the lottery funded initiative) was likely to impact on the policy of statutory organisations, but the majority was focussed on service delivery rather than communications and advocacy. Whilst other organisations existed to express citizen voice (such as a local branch of the London Citizens movement, and various community interest organisations) they did not necessarily represent or replace the geographical community-based connections which the council appeared to be losing.

Although both Mobilising Faith and Housing for All were very different in size and capacity, they also met with challenges in assuming ‘community leadership’ responsibilities. For Mobilising Faith these were the challenges of a pioneer organisation; establishing a space in which to act, demonstrating credibility (especially with non-faith partners), overcoming barriers to engagement and deciding how best to match capacity to action. These findings highlight that even in the voluntary sector (which is often presented as more flexible than statutory service providers) it took time and energy to build fresh responses to the emerging issues of austerity. Meanwhile, Housing for All’s challenges were those of a more mature organisation. Their financial power meant that they didn’t have to build credibility, but they did need to pay careful attention to the effect of their power relations on others, and had challenges in maintaining trust in a context of cuts, and influencing other statutory partners in areas of strategy which had formerly been beyond their remit.

Both organisations could also access resources unavailable to the council or its statutory partners such as volunteers, philanthropy, and lottery funding, although these were also less stable and flexible than state funding. Accordingly the functions they helped to provide had a high degree of precarity, involved some complex power relationships and depended on continuous negotiation, which proved time-consuming and costly for the organisations involved. Overall the case study evidence demonstrates that although spaces of power were being created – or left behind – as the local authority withdrew from a ‘community-voice’ leadership role, these were not easy or uncontested areas to fill.

**Conclusions**

This paper has explored theory and evidence on community leadership using Sullivan’s four interpretations of the term and Janet Newman’s concepts of ‘spaces of power’. It found strong evidence and opportunity for a continued ‘enabling’ civic leadership role for councils, although new ‘spaces of power’ were predominantly focussed on sub-regional initiatives including local enterprise partnerships and combined authorities. As resources continue to reduce through a further five years of financial austerity, with attendant concerns about a continued deterioration in the ability of the local authority to exercise “hard” power, (Stoker, 2011) the case study uncovered suggestions that future civic leadership may be increasingly focussed on symbolic leadership and influence rather than direct action.

At the same time there appears to be a reduction in the ‘spaces of power’ for local authorities to perform the ‘community voice’ interpretation of community leadership. Although in some cases voluntary sector and faith-based organisations are adopting community leadership roles, these tend to be focussed on a form of ‘enabling’ activity which, though closer to specific communities of interest, is unlikely to provide a direct replacement for the diverse connections that previously enabled the articulation of ‘community voice’. However, the effects of austerity are localised and contingent, and it is currently unclear whether these results are unique to this locality. Additional research would be helpful in understanding whether the identified constraints on the ability to exercise ‘community voice’ are manifested in similar ways across different localities.

In respect to Sullivan’s typology, the research also raises suggestions that interpretations of ‘community leadership’ may be changing, with more emphasis on an elite leadership of broader sub-regional spaces and less focus on communities. ‘Backbench’ councillors potentially have a core role in bridging the divide, and making a link between neighbourhood level and wider place-based leadership, but the centralisation of powers in political executives, combined with the pressures under austerity for radical top-down savings initiatives does not facilitate that connection. The government’s current proposals for imposing elected mayors on combined authorities with cabinets formed through representative (rather than direct) democracy will only serve to exacerbate any disconnection between civic elites and the communities they serve.

This also begs an important question, that if community leadership was originally conceived as a contribution towards democratic renewal, at what point will this issue be revisited? Recent studies have identified the increasing residualisation of council services, as they become increasingly focussed on an ever-smaller segment of the population (Hastings et al., 2013). Yet whilst service delivery in England is undergoing radical transformation, political structures lag unreformed. If community leadership was originally conceived as part of the answer to problems of trust and legitimacy in mature democracy, then any disconnection of councils and their communities renders this challenge more acute.

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1. The power of general competence was provided as part of the 2011 Localism Act, essentially granting Local Authorities the same powers as individuals. For criticism see Jones and Stewart (2012) who highlight the subtle semantic difference between the original proposals for a ‘general power of competence’, and a more tentative ‘power of general competence’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Community budgets were launched by the LGA as a successor to the ‘Total Place’ initiative in 2011. Four areas, Essex; London Tri-borough Partnership, Greater Manchester and West Cheshire were chosen as pilots. The government subsequently rolled out the scheme through the Public Services Transformation Network from 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example the Coalition’s flagship ‘troubled families’ programme required local authorities to report against more than 50 separate pieces of data about each family they worked with (Ecorys, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)