

“GOING LOCAL TO SURVIVE”**Bill Taylor**

Decentralisation, or “going local” as it is sometimes known is being seen in many quarters as the answer to the seemingly faceless bureaucracy and inefficiency that so often characterises local government. This article examines the rapid rise of the going-local initiatives which have become increasingly popular in many parts of England, and looks at the implications for Scottish local government. We do this by looking at the inability of local government to deliver a sufficiently high standard of service, with adequate accountability to local people, and importantly the steps which have been taken by some authorities to correct this. We also touch – albeit very briefly – on the potential of decentralisation as a vehicle for social and political change. Finally, we examine a case study; Edinburgh District Council’s detailed strategy for going local.

What’s wrong with local government? Most politicians of all parties would agree that there is a problem. They would accept that local authorities tend to be too remote and inflexible, a bureaucracy which provides services to the public which are often less than satisfactory. Politicians whilst agreeing that a problem exists, do of course, fundamentally disagree when it comes to problem-solving. Broadly speaking their responses can be categorised as follows:

Cut it?

This school of thought believes that the “frontiers of the state” – including the local state – should be rolled back. Privatisation of many local authority services would provide the freedom for ratepayers to spend their money as they like. The rationale implied here thus stresses not only ideological commitment, but also an economic one, in that inefficient local authority services should be supplanted by the private sector operating within a free market according to the natural laws of profit. (This view, is of course, generally accepted as current Government policy).

Improve it?

This school is personified by some “traditional” Labour Councils. They accept the need to improve services, but argue that this can best be achieved within the traditional town hall framework. All that is required is increased resources and some careful political management. This school sees nothing

wrong with centralised services so long as they are properly run.

Decentralise it?

Recently, many people have come to realise that the problems bureaucracy and inefficiency in local government cannot be overcomed either by embarking on an ideological crusade on behalf of local government against cuts and privatisation, nor however, do they believe that more resources are all that is needed. Proponents of decentralisation argue that radical restructuring of local government is required.

“What is needed.....is an entirely new approach to local government. An approach that puts the public first. The world has to be turned upside down. They have set about a radical new vision for local government, it’s called Going Local”.⁽¹⁾

Decentralisation of local authority services along with a measure of devolvement of power to local people, is becoming increasingly fashionable. It appears to be building up a tidal wave of popularity which at times looks like sweeping all before it.

However, before charting its progress, it is important to define what we mean by decentralisation. The challenge to traditional Labour machinery in politics has been well documented throughout the 1980’s. The seeds of such a challenge, however, dates back to the 1960’s with the proliferation of radical movements – feminism, black consciousness, student radicalism and peace movements. Their critique on perceived Labour paternalism had a significant influence on the ideas of the ‘new urban left’ of the 1980’s

“Their criticisms of state services, their demands for greater personal and popular control over key political and social decisions, and their emphasis in their own organisations on finding non-hierarchical and participative ways of working have provided a major stimulus to new ways of thinking. It is no accident that many of the officers and councillors who have worked towards new forms of service delivery and new ways of working have been, and in many cases remain involved in these political movements”.⁽²⁾

Labour’s traditional approach since 1945 has been very much a centralist one, where nationally led initiatives and national legislation have been the lynch-pins of Labour Party policy making. The new left have challenged this centralist faith, by proposing a new concept of policy – local socialism. Undoubtedly the starting point for the Labour Councils who have attempted to ‘go local’ is a critique of existing structures and practices. The Labour Coordinating Committee captured the mood of this critique when they suggested that “all too often Labour Councils have been indistinguishable from Tory ones remote bureaucracies run by an elit

incapable of responding to democratic demands".⁽³⁾ Local Government – including those authorities under Labour control – are thus being seen as paternalistic and bureaucratic in the way they make decisions and deliver services.

Towards a New Type of Local Government

In the field of local government, new left Labour authorities have been in the fore-front of recent initiatives which have never been far from the headlines – “overspending”, ethnic/womens/gay groups, municipal enterprise. One of the principle vehicles for local socialism has been the decentralisation of local authority services and the devolution of power to local groups.

Beuret and Stoker⁽⁴⁾ suggest that broadly speaking, decentralisation strategies initiated by Labour Councils involve five main objectives:

To develop a more personal service through the creation of Neighbourhood Offices.

To create a corporate approach to problem-solving; that is, to deal with people's problems in one office and as they occur and not to refer them elsewhere, or 'fob them off' to other 'specialist' departments.

To encourage community development, through involvement and participation.

To increase accountability to local people – the devolution of decision-making.

To increase the efficiency of the Council and thus create a more effective service for public consumption.

(It should be noted that all of the above objectives have not been achieved by *any* of the Councils who have embarked on decentralisation).

On top of the problems caused by the bureaucratic nature of local government, the last 10 years have meant a period of severe financial constraint coupled with more direct central government control through legislation.

The historical bureaucracy, coupled with the recent severe cash crisis, helped create a climate where local government's reputation is not altogether a good one. The criticisms of Councils and their services include: unresponsiveness; unnecessary bureaucracy; inefficiency; slowness; remoteness; inaccessibility; too much red tape; hostility and rudeness.

Whilst not all of these criticisms are valid for every local authority in the country, it must be recognised that they are not without foundation.

If local government is to meet these challenges successfully, radical changes are required. In order to make radical changes, it is however, necessary firstly to identify the problem areas. We should also note that local government is not quite as bad as it is often painted, and indeed has made many achievements and has much to be proud of.

Much of this, however, is achieved, despite, rather than because of, certain key features in local government.

What then are the problem areas for local government? Firstly, it is a bureaucracy with rigid departmental structures. By bureaucracy we mean large, centralised organisations, which deliver a wide variety of services to a very large number of consumers. As a rule, Council departments identify and manage their particular responsibilities and operations in a fairly distinct manner. These distinctions are inevitable and serve many useful purposes. What frequently renders them problematic is the chronic inability to work across these boundaries when required.

For the customer, these boundaries are often meaningless. When an individual has a problem which requires assistance, the nature of that problem does not always fall into the neat departmental categories which have been devised. As a consequence, Council's do not find it easy to provide an interdepartmental or corporate response. Indeed, there are even specialisms within departments, with in some cases little or no interaction between them.

This means that when members of the public have a problem they must tackle the following obstacles:

Decide which agency deals with their problem – not always obvious.

Decide which department deals with their problem – again not always not obvious.

If phoning, they must know the right section/person to ask for and if they do not, they could find themselves making a frustrating and expensive series of phone calls.

If calling in person, they firstly must find out where the relevant department is situated, then work out how to get there, and then make the journey.

If their problem involves several departments then the above procedure may have to be repeated with wearying frequency. To illustrate

the point, consider the problem council tenants may face trying to get something done about the unacceptable state of some waste ground near their estate. Whom should they contact? The Housing Department? Parks and Recreation? Planning? Environmental Health? In other words the route to a solution, through the departmental jungle, is not always obvious and elderly or infirm people, for example, will find these problems particularly acute.

Nor do these structures lend themselves to a flexible, sensitive and rapid response to clients' needs. Rather, Councils tend to be rigid in what is offered and cumbersome in the way that the service is delivered. Another unwelcome characteristic of local government is that there tends to be a certain obscurity about it and about the work that is undertaken. Ask anyone in the street what local government is or what the Council does and often people will be unable to give a meaningful answer. The truth of the matter is that they deliver a great many services to a large number of people but somehow manage to remain anonymous in so doing.

Given the above, it is hardly surprising that local government is frequently accused of being impersonal. Very often, by the nature of the services provided, people are required to seek help at those moments in their lives when what they least need is to be faced by an impersonal, bureaucratic structure which sometimes defies penetration.

Why then do Councils appear impersonal?

Most Council offices are centrally based with city wide catchment areas and so must operate on a large scale.

Premises are, in the main, large and daunting.

Given the large number of staff engaged in public contact work, continuity of contact with the same member of staff throughout cannot be guaranteed.

All these features of its operation can combine to give the distinct impression of an endless roundabout.

Going Local Putting the Problems Right

Some commentators would not disagree with the above diagnosis. They would however, argue that traditional organisation and management techniques are all that is required. Put simply, a rationalisation programme for local authorities which examines the structures, procedures and management practices would suffice. If successful, these changes would undoubtedly improve efficiency and managerial accountability. They would do nothing, however, to bring the local authority physically closer to

the people nor involve them in the decision-making process.

In theory it could be argued that it is possible to marry local decision making with a centralised structure. In practice, such a merger is unlikely to work, since it fails to provide local people with a convincing framework for participation. Decentralisation, on the other hand, if successfully implemented and properly managed, can resolve bureaucracy-related difficulties whilst involving the community in decisions affecting their local services. It does this by bringing local authorities physically closer to the people they serve, by improving service delivery and by increasing accountability.

Proponents of decentralisation⁽⁵⁾ argue that the objectives for improved service delivery via decentralisation should include:

Improving the accessibility of Council services. This can be achieved by physically locating local offices – service delivery points – in the very heart of local communities.

Breaking down the barriers *between* departments. Corporate delivery of services will eliminate the tendency for the public to be shunted around from one department to another.

Breaking down the barriers *within* departments. The development of generic forms of working (ie. staff building up skills to cover a wide range of work) would make it much easier for staff to deal with consumers' problems without having to pass them on to another section of the department.

A major objective is that staff in local offices have the power to deal directly with consumers' needs without constantly having to refer back to headquarters. This will be achieved by the devolution of decision making. In addition, this means a flatter, less hierarchical management structure and clear lines of accountability. The benefits will be less red tape and less delay.

Promoting the equal opportunities of local government and anti-discrimination policies both as an employer and a service provider.

Adding a local element to decision making. Decentralisation aims to push as much of the decision making process as possible down to a local level through the use of forums and committees made up of local representatives and District Council elected members.

We mentioned earlier that decentralisation does not aim to abolish the structure of local government but to transform it into a system which will both improve the accessibility of services and increase the speed of service

delivery once need has been identified. To achieve this, three principles of traditional practice have to be modified:

centralised decision-making;

narrow operating lines;

the centralist model.

Centralised Decision Making

Decentralisation aims to modify the traditional practices of central decision-making. Amendment of the traditional Committee structures allows an element of local control to be introduced to local authority Committee systems. In addition, decentralisation should encourage the maximum possible delegation of decision-making and responsibility to local office staff.

Narrow Operating Lines

Decentralisation aims to reverse the tradition in local government of rigid job specialisms which are not always necessary. Setting up a system of generic working will greatly enhance this process, as does the physical location and concentration of staff from different departments within each local office. This offers greater flexibility and better communications between specialisms, which in turn, can only improve the ability to respond to the needs of local people.

The Centralist Model

Decentralisation seeks to change a system which traditionally provides council services throughout a city with little regard to tailoring services to suit the needs of local people either as individuals or as a group with specific needs. Under decentralisation it is recognised that the style and method of service delivery between local authorities and local communities may well differ, the intention being to match services much more flexibly to local needs. Decentralisation can greatly assist in this by having small teams based locally, dealing with the needs of a specific community.

Decentralisation – The Political Dimension

At this juncture, it is perhaps opportune to focus, albeit very briefly, on decentralisation as a potential for creating a vehicle for social and political change. Whilst there is little evidence to support this thesis, it is worthwhile mentioning it for two reasons. Firstly, it is a theory which has been at the centre of much academic discussion within the field of urban sociology. Secondly, Scottish politics is currently in a vacuum, with a huge

anti-Conservative majority, yet with little possibility in the foreseeable future of a Scottish Assembly or the solving of Scotland's social and economic malaise. With this in mind, there may be those who would seek to apply the decentralist local authority model to broader political objectives.

Colin Fudge argues that three aspects of political activity have potential at the neighbourhood level. These are:

officially sponsored local decision making;

local party political intervention;

urban social movements.

The benefits which can be derived from local authority sponsored devolved decision-making initiatives are that local people can have a greater measure of control over the services which are delivered in their area. This can cover frequency, style and quality of service delivery. Critics would, however, charge this model as being purely tokenistic, (as the song says, "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down"). We will examine this model in more detail shortly, when we review Edinburgh District Council's plans for decentralisation.

Local party intervention at the neighbourhood level has been best exemplified in the country by the Liberal Party's community, or grassroots initiatives. This strategy is ideal for the politics of opposition in that it can highlight area-specific problems, and galvanise local opinion against the local authority. This strategy can therefore be used to gain electoral support and broaden the popular base of the party. Cynics would say that this strategy smacks of opportunism, and that in any case the Liberals' performance in those areas of the country where they are in control, is no more sensitive to community needs than anyone else.

The third, and most theoretically developed thesis, is that of urban social movements. At the centre of any discussion in this field is Manuel Castells analysis of spatial forms⁽⁶⁾; by which he means neighbourhood structures within towns and cities, these being the product of given modes of production mediated by specific historical conditions in any given society. Within capitalist societies, he argues that urban units provide the capability for the production of labour power, this being utilised in turn by capitalist enterprises.

The production and reproduction of labour power is achieved through the provision of collective consumption – housing, education etc. The key question which Castell's poses is this – does this state intervention in this process have any effect on the nature of capitalism? The logic of profit maximization and capital accumulation remain unchanged, as does,

therefore, the basic contradiction between consumption and production. However, state intervention does – and this is for Castells crucial – tend to help focus people's attention on the issues of consumption and it is no longer a series of amorphous and disparate services. State intervention leads to the emergence of (in the words of Habermas) a 'visible agent', more specifically a visible political agent.

Castells however, is careful to argue against the inevitability of the politicization of consumption issues leading necessarily to the raising of class consciousness, for, very often, mechanisms can be used by the state to encourage participation and integration. The key point here is that urban contradictions need a political focus ".....everything depends on the articulation of the contradictions and practices or, to put it another way, on the dialectic between the state apparatus and the urban social movement."⁽⁷⁾ The unmasking of this contradiction can with the appropriate political leadership lead to the politicization of consumption issues which in turn can lead to the raising of class consciousness.

Many criticisms can be made of Castells' theories, including his flawed assertion that there is somehow a coherent social base within urban social movements, and that this movement can somehow be transformed into a political force. Evidence from this country and elsewhere suggests the social base for urban movements is characterised by divisions based on class, ethnicity old established residents versus newcomers, owner occupiers versus tenants, etc. These are real divisions reflecting different material interests, and these cannot be easily overcome.

However, Castells responds by positing that while urban dwellers may be divided on some issues, they will be united around some other, for example, education, health, public transport (even these seemingly 'unifying' examples however, seem somewhat problematic). For Castells the catalyst that will transform struggles around these 'unifying elements' into class struggle, is the introduction of political organisation.

One thinks here of the Leninist concept of a "gigantic leap in imagination" between economic and political consciousness, and the party's role in this process. However, unlike Lenin, Castells appears to give no indication as to how practical this is to be achieved. Further, what evidence do we have to suggest that socialist politics have a monopoly on urban social movements? It would appear that they can attract party political intervention from a variety of ideological perspectives. Whilst the Communist party has been in the forefront of 'local urban struggles' in Italy, it is, as we mentioned earlier, the Liberal Party in Britain which has immersed itself in neighbourhood or community politics. There is no reason to view urban political activity as necessarily socialist orientated.

It is worth noting, that the proponents of 'going local' as a vehicle for

political change in this country have all but disappeared. The radicals at Walsall and Hackney Councils have lost the leadership positions within their Councils. Instead the initiative for going local has been taken up by 'soft left' Labour and to a lesser extent by Liberal Councils. The rationale here is not decentralisation for the sake of the class struggle, but rather it is driven by much more pragmatic aims. Put simply, more efficient managerial techniques which are tailored to fit local demand, along with an element of community participation.

EDINBURGH – A CASE STUDY

So far, we have examined the theory and practice of decentralisation at an abstract level. We now proceed to discuss briefly the progress made in Scotland, and in particular, we focus on Edinburgh's ambitious plans for going local.

Decentralisation within local authorities has over the years taken a number of forms, the most obvious of which is the area-based social work teams operated by many Regional Councils.

Other Scottish developments have included Stirling District Council's⁽⁸⁾ scheme of local offices in selected areas, and Glasgow's Area Management schemes⁽⁹⁾. The Glasgow scheme is particularly interesting in that for the first time in Scotland, Senior Officers, (in the shape of Programme Area Teams) along with decision making Area Management Committees comprising of local people, MP's and Councillors have come together jointly to tackle local problems. Despite the impressive start to decentralisation made by Glasgow, it nevertheless is limited in many ways. The districts covered by the area teams are huge – often as large as many towns in Scotland – the service offered is not comprehensive for it is limited to Council tenants only; and the services offered to tenants are themselves restricted.

Let us now proceed to examine the comprehensive and ambitious plans outlined by Edinburgh District Council.⁽¹⁰⁾ This scheme, if it is successful, will be Scotland's first fully decentralised local authority offering a full range of services locally, along with community decision making. As such, it may serve as a model for others.

The system outlined for Edinburgh was the product of a great deal of effort by both politicians and staff. A Project Team of six Senior Officials were seconded to work full-time on the scheme for a four month period. In addition senior councillors met frequently to supervise the project on an on-going basis. It is also worth noting that the Trade Unions, staff and public were kept fully informed of progress as it was made.

The Edinburgh scheme attempts to analyse the strengths and

weaknesses of the various operational models of decentralisation. In particular, it was influenced by the schemes at Birmingham and Walsall Councils.⁽¹¹⁾ It needs to be stressed, however, that Edinburgh's scheme has been specifically geared to meet that city's needs.

The principles of decentralisation have been tested in a number of environments and in a number of different ways. Before describing the experience of decentralisation within a local authority context, it should be noted that many of the components which make up decentralisation are already being used extensively within many sectors of business, commerce and industry. For example, building societies now operate through an expanding network of local offices, whilst the idea of generic working, team building and pride in product is used extensively in a number of successful companies.

None of the above examples advocates that small is beautiful as such. Rather the intention is to create smallness *within* large organisations. This provides a basis for a principal objective of decentralisation in a local government context, that is the need to marry economies of scale with sensitivity to local needs, through the establishment of smaller units for service delivery and decision making.

The Edinburgh model argues that the best way forward is for them to develop their own approach to decentralisation, one which is unique and specifically matches consumers' needs and organisational resources. By examining experience elsewhere it soon becomes apparent that valuable lessons can be learned. However, there is no blueprint for decentralisation, no one package that can be taken off the shelf, dusted down and used.

Edinburgh's Decentralisation Strategy, is different from that of any other authority. Other authorities who have moved towards decentralisation have decided to begin by either opening up a single office in an area of deprivation (eg. Carlisle District Council) or by limiting their city wide offices to a single service (eg. Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council). Edinburgh's strategy rejects the experimental pilot area project in favour of city wide scheme. It rejects the decentralisation of the Housing Department in isolation, in favour of a system which deals with all Council departments. It proposes a scheme where staff working in local offices will deal with a wide range of enquiries and tasks. It suggests a management structure which will promote interdepartmental working and maximise staff involvement, and it advocates local people being directly involved in decision taking.

Edinburgh's strategy for decentralisation is unique. It has been designed specifically for the city and its people.

Edinburgh's Local Service Delivery

The Edinburgh Scheme proposes 30 local offices which would be established throughout the city.

The local office is the Council's link with the community. It is the vehicle through which it will provide information and advice, deliver local services, receive applications and encourage community involvement in council affairs. As the Council's open-door to the community, it is the key to the Decentralisation Strategy.

Broadly speaking, the local offices will do what the present centrally based departments do in serving the community. The difference is, by being locally based, less bureaucratic, and with devolved responsibility, it will do it better, more quickly and more responsibly.

It will provide information and advice, deliver services and receive applications for: Housing; Cleansing; Planning; Recreation; Economic Development and Estates; Technical Services and Environmental Health.

In fact it will provide any Council services required by the public. In addition, the local office will be the focus for tenant and resident participation in Council affairs through the establishment of local forums. Continued liaison between the Council and the Community will be encouraged through the provision of staff and facilities in the local office.

Although each local office will have an area for which it is responsible, the advanced telecommunications and information systems will allow the public to use any local office.

Local offices require to be in or close to the areas where Council services are in greatest demand. They need to create a friendly environment and be of a size that overcomes the impression of an uncaring bureaucracy. Balanced against this is the need to minimise overall costs, and to have sufficient workload for each unit to be run economically.

The strategy argues that the city requires around *thirty local offices*, to serve local communities. This number allows for service delivery points throughout the city and at the same time allows for managerial effectiveness. The distribution of the offices and their size reflects the anticipated demands placed upon the services to be decentralised. Accordingly, the greatest concentrations of large offices are in the local authority housing areas and of medium sized offices in the older, tenemental areas of the inner city. Those sectors of the community which are more mobile and rely less on Council services, will be served by a wider distribution of smaller offices.

The Local Office and Its Staff

Edinburgh's staffing proposals and the location and design of the offices, will make a significant impact on improved service delivery.

The external appearance of local offices will vary considerably and will largely depend upon the nature of the properties used. Shops, schools and purpose built premises are all possibilities. The common theme will be the clear display of the Council's logo and the name by which each office is known.

Internally, the office will be open plan design where possible. Where privacy is required, interview rooms will be available. Consumers will be encouraged to approach any of the Community Services Assistants, and an indication of each member of staff's role eg. housing, community services, together with their names will be clearly displayed at their work areas. Offices will have comfortable waiting areas.

Main provisions will be:

A Cashier Point – a secure room through which all transactions will be handled.

A Meeting Room – with separate access arrangements for local forum and other meetings.

A Play Area – for callers with young children.

Multi-Lingual Notice Boards and Information Display – for Council and local interest material.

Toilet Facilities – including provision for specialist needs, eg. disabled people and baby care.

Opening hours will be the subject of consultation with the Trades Unions and the local people. They will be geared to meet the needs of the consumer and include at least one late night opening per week. Staff training needs will also be catered for, eg. by later opening or early closing on certain days.

Most Local Office Assistants will have at their work stations a computer terminal giving direct access to the council's on-line information and service files. Tenants calling to report recognised repairs will have their requirements fed immediately into the "repairs file" and be given a receipt. Similarly, applicants for a house will be shown where they are on the waiting list for different types of houses in different areas and be given a printed statement to this effect.

The layout, facilities and working environment of the local office are designed to create an atmosphere of mutual confidence and trust.

The number of staff in each local office will vary with the workload generated by the area.

On entering the local office, initial contact will be with a **COMMUNITY SERVICES ASSISTANT**. His or her duties will include the following: Providing general advice on all Council services; delivering directly a limited number of basic services eg. logging a repair request; referring requests for more specialised services to the Housing Assistants or other departmental officer in the local office; referring or initiating request to departments and ensuring that such requests are satisfactorily progressed. These staff are fundamental to the success of the local office in that they are the first contact between the Council and the consumer.

Although the Community Services Assistant will endeavour to deal with as many enquiries as possible without referral, there will be a need for staff from other departments to be based in the local office on a full-time or part-time basis. Housing is a major area of service delivery and each office will have a team of **LOCAL HOUSING ASSISTANTS** whose role is to deliver a comprehensive housing service. Rather than dealing with only one housing specialism as at present, Housing Assistants will cover a much wider range.

Where a department is particularly active in a local area, then those staff immediately concerned would be based in the local office eg. Planning Officers during the preparation and consultation period of a local plan.

One of the fundamental objectives of the strategy is to involve the public in the decision-making process, initially through local forums, which will precede the opening of the local office. It will be the task of the **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANT** to service the local forum, support local groups and assist in developing interest and involvement from within the community.

Cash transactions, including rent and rates collection will be supervised by the **CASHIER**. The **ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER** supported by **CLERICAL ASSISTANTS** will deal with financial, personnel, typing/word processing and other staff support services within the office.

The internal management of the office will be the responsibility of the **LOCAL OFFICE MANAGER** and one or two **ASSISTANT**

LOCAL OFFICE MANAGERS. In the larger office, one Assistant Manager will be responsible for housing matters and the other for community services ie. non-housing matters.

This new approach to the delivery of local government services can only be achieved by adopting a generic form of working whereby staff become local government officers with the emphasis on local needs rather than specialist activities. Generic working can provide a more varied workload and a greater degree of responsibility and job satisfaction. This will require not only a re-appraisal of working methods and attitudes but also an effective management structure; a review of the remaining centralised departments; and a major programme of staff training. Staff will be encouraged to respond directly to the needs of the people within their area, to present the effective, caring and friendly face of local government.

Decision Making

An innovative and exciting aspect of Edinburgh's decentralisation proposals will be the active participation and involvement of the local community in decisions that affect them and their area. This move towards greater local accountability is at two levels – the Local Forum and the Area Committee.

Local Forum

The Local Forum will consist of the ward Councillor(s) who represent the area, together with representatives of a wide range of local groups. Open to the public, they will meet regularly in the area served by their local office. There will be one Local Forum for each local office catchment area. They will be properly constituted advisory committees of the Council. The Chair of the Committee will be a ward Councillor elected annually by the Forum.

The Local Forum will have an evolving role. Initially its purpose will be to give views on the plans for the local office. It will be consulted on the matters of location, design, opening arrangements, access, etc, prior to the opening of the office.

Once the office is operational, the Local Forum will have a crucial role in advising on local service delivery and, hopefully, developing a close working relationship with the staff of their office.

The functions of the Local Forum will continue to operate after the introduction of Area Committees, which are to be established when all the local forums and offices are established. Each Forum will elect one representative with full voting rights to sit on the Area Committee. A

number of non-voting representatives can also be appointed to attend this meeting. The Local Forum will provide an essential local element to the working of the Area Committee. They will have a continuing role in advising Councillors on local issues and ensuring through the Area Committees that the District Council's programmes and policies take into account the needs of particular localities.

The Local Forum will be serviced by staff from the local office. The Forums will ensure an effective use of resources at a local level by using the knowledge and expertise of ward Councillors, local office staff and local people.

The Area Committee

The role of the Area Committees will be to consider and determine all matters relevant to the area. This will mean that they will replace some of the Council's Sub-Committees.

The general context within which the decision making powers should be defined is outlined below:

To prepare and amend programmes for the expenditure of such budget for local projects as may be allocated to the Area Committee.

To identify local needs, and to assist in the development of central policies and programmes.

To make recommendations on the quality and level of service being delivered at the local level to the relevant committee.

To act as a sounding board for establishing local opinion on such matters as referred by the Council.

To make decisions on matters delegated to it. This will include items which are area-specific and are within centrally determined policy guidelines.

To make representations concerning the extent of Area Committee powers.

To promote Local Forums, residents' associations, tenants associations, etc.

To consult with Statutory Undertakers, community councils, police, fire, etc and other agencies, eg. bus companies, on the provision of services.

Area Committees will report directly to a Policy and Resources Sub-Committee as well as having access to main committees. This reflects politically the matrix management of the administrative structure. The Policy and Resources Sub-Committee should include the Leader of the Council and the Chairs of the main committees to ensure corporate decision-taking.

As experience is gained with the new working arrangements, Area Committees' delegated powers will be monitored and reviewed.

At the outset each Area Committee should be allocated an annual budget of £50,000. This will enable it to decide on a number of small projects in its area which it considers important. These projects could range from support for local organisations such as tenants' groups to local environmental improvements projects, a community minibus or local newsletter.

For more expensive projects there will be a central budget which will supplement Area Committee budgets. Allocations from such a fund will be determined by Policy and Resources Committee in response to bids from Area Committees. It will be possible for an Area Committee to seek an increase in its allocations on a special needs basis.

Financial responsibility for Area Committees is essential if they are to function effectively and use limited resources to the best possible advantage for their area. In addition, it will highlight at a local level the difficulties the Council faces concerning the allocation of money to projects when resources fall far short of total need.

With regard to representation, in a Scottish context, it is important to be aware of the legislation concerned with the setting up of such Committees. The relevant statute is the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, which allows amongst other things for only a ratio of community representative to three councillors on any co-opted committee. This obviously limits the voting input of local people.

Consequently it is not a simple exercise to decide upon the representation of Councillors and non-elected members on each Area Committee. However, it is suggested that the following principles have been adopted –

Each Local Forum selects a community representative to serve on its Area Committee. This representative will have full voting rights. The Forum will also appoint a number of representatives who will attend Area Committee meetings but *not* have voting rights.

Each District Ward Council will serve on the appropriate Area

Committee and have full voting rights.

Because the number of Local Forums and number of wards in each Area Committee vary, it will be necessary for four Area Committees to co-opt additional Councillors to ensure the correct proportion of elected members/community representatives.

Regional Councillors and Local MPs will be invited to sit on Area Committees. They will not have voting rights.

Area Committees will reflect the political make up of the area. This may not be the same as the District Council.

Edinburgh's Problems

Independent academic and local government observers have praised Edinburgh's proposed plans, both in terms of the boldness of the concept and as a well drafted and comprehensive strategy document. It is however clear that as with so many other authorities that have dabbled with decentralisation, that its introduction in Edinburgh will be far from plainsailing.

There would appear to be a number of hurdles to be cleared before Edinburgh could begin to decentralise its services and decision making. Agreements with the trade unions are a possible sticking point, although it has to be said that given the current relatively cordial relationships, the likelihood of trade union support is much stronger than in other authorities. Entrenched departmentalism is another possible pitfall; although the appointment of a Chief Officer based within the Chief Executive's Department with the appropriate management support, should act as a strong counterbalance to any moves away from the corporate approach. Lack of community support for the concept poses yet another potential problem; here however the initial meetings with the various community groups in the City to discuss decentralisation have met with a largely favourable response.

The above potential difficulties can be overcome, Edinburgh's real quandary revolves around two connected problematic areas; namely the political commitment of the Labour Administration and the financial crisis facing the Council.

Despite manifesto commitments, the Labour Administration initially appeared to see decentralisation as something of a luxury, rather than as a vehicle to promote their policy of 'Improving Services ...'. It has only been in the latter half of the lifetime of this Administration that plans for going local have been seriously developed. Even then it is fair to say that decentralisation has not had unanimous support. It is also worth noting the

views of the opposition groups on the Council: the Alliance group have given a full commitment to the policy, whilst the Conservatives have sought to make decentralisation unworkable by denying it the initial capital and revenue investment required.

Decentralisation on the scale contemplated by Edinburgh requires it to be a top political priority. This brings us to the final hurdle – finance. In August 1987 the Secretary of State for Scotland had a Parliamentary Order passed which forced the Council to reduce its budget for the third consecutive year. This has forced the Council to examine areas for restricted or ‘negative’ growth. Within 1987/88, this had meant budgetary reductions in a number of areas including decentralisation. Statements by the Labour group have indicated that going local is still very much on the agenda, but in a restricted form and at a slower pace.

In short, decentralisation in Edinburgh faces the problems beset by dynamic ambitious local authorities throughout the country – how to expand and enhance services in an era of severe financial restrictions. All in all, Edinburgh District Council’s decentralisation scheme makes an ideal case study – its success or otherwise will prove a useful pointer to other local authorities.

Going Local the next move

This paper has tried to outline the theory and practice of decentralisation. We have seen that its rationale is twofold – the promotion of good quality delivery of local services, along with increasing the opportunity for local people to become involved in making decisions which affects their community.

Given the centralist nature of Government policy since 1979, with its constant stripping of powers, the reduction in local authority spending, the proposed ‘Scottish Homes’ legislation, and the planned privatisation of council services, going local may provide the potential for the effective defence of local government. The ‘big brother knows best’ attitude, along with poor standards of service delivery, can be combated by effective management of resources at a local level along with the promotion of local democracy. Going local may therefore be less of an option, and more of a strategy for survival.

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This article is written in a personal capacity.

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10. This article draws extensively on Edinburgh’s *Decentralisation Strategy Document*, Edinburgh District Council, November 1986, as well as a number of personal interviews.
11. Details of the Walsall and Birmingham schemes were obtained from journal articles and personal interviews.