

**DISRUPTION COSTS AND LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION:  
MANAGING PROBLEMS, POLICIES AND  
PRIORITIES**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994 suspends temporarily the debate concerning the case for and against the reorganisation of local government in Scotland from what may be characterised as a two-tier structure into a unitary system. The drive to institutional reorganisation forms part of the restructuring of local government initiated under Mrs Thatcher and which has been consistently maintained by Mr Major through increased scope for compulsory competitive tendering of local authority services, tighter financial stringency and administrative changes to key functions such as community care and education (Young 1994). Underpinning the proposed institutional changes is an attempt to 'reinvent' government from a conventional bureaucracy into an entrepreneurial organisational form (Osborne and Gaebler 1993).

The process of institutional reorganisation, however, will involve a number of disruption costs as established services, responsibilities, policies and programmes are changed to conform with the new unitary administrative arrangements. This article addresses the nature of the disruption costs likely to be associated with the reorganisation of local government in Scotland with the intention of minimising their impact on local communities. It proposes

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learning from historical experience in Scotland and highlights the role played by regional reports in the last reform of local government in the mid 1970s. The article advocates the adoption of a similar instrument - the council report - to facilitate the imminent form of reorganisation.

## **DISRUPTION COSTS OF REORGANISATION**

Local government reorganisation in Scotland will involve the creation of thirty two unitary authorities or Councils. The new bodies will have responsibility for a number of defined responsibilities such as structure planning, local planning and development control, social services and economic development. The case for change rests on the alleged gains to be derived from a streamlined, single-tier market-oriented enabling system of local governance (Lang 1994). Wider questions have been raised, however, in the context of the constitutional agenda (Alexander 1992; Alexander and Ou 1994), the financial aspects of reorganisation (Midwinter 1992), the nature and outcomes of the consultation procedures involved (McCrone, Paterson and Brown 1993), the options available for reform (Dawson 1993) and the implications for established functions of local government including the provision of water and sewerage infrastructural services (Black 1994) and economic development initiatives (Hayton 1992). In short, questions have been raised concerning the alleged inefficiencies of the existing arrangements and the alleged benefits to be gained from a unitary structure.

In practical terms, however, the process of institutional reorganisation will involve also a number of disruption costs as established services, responsibilities, policies and programmes are changed to conform with the new unitary administrative arrangements. These costs will contribute to a greater sense of uncertainty for the new authorities and those served by them. It is suggested that the full brunt of the disruption effects will be experienced in the shadow period from April 1995 to April 1996 but it is likely to continue into the early operational period of the Councils. The potential disruption costs may be considered as follows.

First, disruption costs will arise from the conflation of responsibilities between the two previous levels of local administration into a single organisation. Problems may arise as certain responsibilities, such as social work, are redistributed to authorities that previously had little hands-on experience with a given function. There is an associated aspect regarding the general enabling role of the new Councils - that is, a role in which Councils

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are no longer the main providers of services, but are instead required to enter into contracts with other providers. This involves a radical change in the conventional approach of local authorities and many Councils may encounter difficulties in the new role expected of them. Further, disruption costs will arise from the associated demarcation of responsibility for specific services between central and local government. In particular, the centralisation of water and sewerage responsibilities removes from local authority control a considerable lever of influence over the management of their local economies and the strategic allocation and regulation of land and property development. The process of centralised services will continue with the forthcoming transfer of environmental health responsibilities to the proposed Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (Lloyd and Ross 1994).

Second, disruption costs will arise from the effect of reorganisation on established policies and programmes. In the context of statutory land use planning, for example, this possible effect has been recognised particularly in the context of the relationship between existing structure and local plans (Begg 1990). Indeed, in this context Goodstadt (1994) and Jarman (1994) have suggested that the existing, clear and proven system of Scottish planning practice will be replaced by uncertainty, complexity and an erosion of a strategic planning perspective for land use and development. There will be associated disruption costs arising from the adaptation of existing policy to changed circumstances, as will be the case with the need to create (where appropriate) joint boards to facilitate effective policy implementation over 'natural' regions or planning areas with implications for the scale of decision making and the costs involved. Concern has been expressed as to the historical experience of such arrangements elsewhere, and informed opinion would suggest a pessimistic view of the likely outcome of voluntary joint arrangements (Kerley and Ou 1993). It is interesting to note that the advocates of entrepreneurial government are critical of forms of voluntary joint working between authorities in the context of service provision and land use planning for strategic purposes (Osborne and Gaebler 1993).

Finally, disruption costs will be associated with the definition of new networks and relationships at local authority levels of administration. On the one hand, the new Councils will have to forge new operational boundaries with the established and forthcoming centralised agencies operating in Scotland (eg, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Homes and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency) and the new water and sewerage bodies. On the other hand, the new Councils will have to adapt to the plethora of decentralised bodies which will

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be involved in local governance such as the voluntary sector which also provide potential mechanisms for the delivery of local services. Voluntary organisations are currently involved in local authority initiatives, and with reorganisation this role will assume even greater importance. The Scottish Office has stated that voluntary organisations

play an important part in the delivery of services. However, the mechanisms for agreeing service delivery are changing: more services are being contracted out to voluntary organisations for them to provide on behalf of statutory bodies. This is in line with the Government's policy on creating a mixed economy of service provision and presents voluntary organisations with new challenges and opportunities.  
(Scottish Office 1994, p.11).

The various changes associated with local government reorganisation have the potential to impose considerable disruption costs on individuals, organisations, agencies and communities. It is clear that the disruption costs require careful handling so as to minimise their effects and the likely associated uncertainty. This is particularly the case given the intention to devolve the delivery of services to organisations in the private and voluntary sectors. It is this feature that distinguishes the ongoing process of reorganisation. Local government will become enablers rather than deliverers thereby introducing a new management and co-ordinating function for the new Councils. In the remainder of this article, we consider one possible means minimising the costs of institutional change by drawing on the earlier experience of regional reports in Scotland.

### **PAST EXPERIENCE: REGIONAL REPORTS AND REORGANISATION**

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 introduced the last major form of local government reorganisation in Scotland with the creation of what is generally considered a two-tier institutional structure. The creation of regional councils and district councils established a division of responsibility between strategic functions such as water and sewerage, roads and transport and structure planning and the more local functions of housing, development control and licensing. There were variations on these arrangements. The unitary authorities (Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles) and the general planning authorities (Highland, Borders and Dumfries and Galloway), for example, reflected a sympathy for the specific demographic and economic

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circumstances of their localities and a better match to appropriate functions. It is important to note that the creation of the two-tier system was a major shake-up of the previous fragmented and divided system.

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 introduced also the concept of regional reports although its origins may be traced to the deliberations of the Wheatley Commission on local government reform in Scotland, the Paterson Committee on the management of local government and the Select Committee of Scottish Affairs of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The theme of strategic planning and management runs through the inquiries. Thus, in its deliberations on the appropriate form of Scottish local government reorganisation the Wheatley Commission introduced a debate concerning the need for a strategic dimension to policy formulation and implementation in Scotland. This stressed the need for the right authority to be created to carry out the strategic functions appropriate to the characteristics of scale, accessibility, demographic trends and economic circumstances of different localities in Scotland. The emphasis on strategic overview of key issues and the perceived necessity of the co-ordination of policy may be traced through the thinking on the Commission. In a related way, the Patterson Committee on the management of local government advocated a strategic approach to the management of the new authorities along corporate principles. This was expressed in terms of a corporate effort to effect a strategic approach within the administrative procedures and organisation of the new authorities themselves in attempting to secure consistency in policy formulation and implementation.

In a parallel debate, the Select Committee on Land Resource Use in Scotland studied the (then) anticipated social, economic and environmental consequences for the management of the land resource base in Scotland. In particular, it concentrated on the pressures likely to confront the land use planning system as the 1970s unfolded. The Select Committee argued the case for a stronger institutional framework to provide an integrated public policy response to the management of change. It advocated the introduction of a national strategic planning mechanism which would facilitate the integration of economic development and physical planning as the basis for development planning and land allocation policies - in effect a national structure plan. This came at a time, however, when the concept of structure planning was relatively new and to some extent an untested proposition in planning practice. The idea, however, of establishing such an indicative planning agenda was, not surprisingly perhaps, a highly politically sensitive issue. In its observations on the Select Committee report, the government

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acknowledged the need for an overview of strategic guidance on selected land use planning issues. This is an important point in the intellectual rationale for strategic intervention in potentially conflicting policy arenas. The government rejected, however, the idea of an all-embracing national structure plan as impractical and proposed an alternative device - the concept of National Planning Guidelines to fill the gap between statements of planning policy and planning advice which subsequently performed an important strategic role in land use planning practice in Scotland (Lloyd 1994).

Against this intellectual background the purpose of the regional reports was clear. The early 1970s was a period of considerable upheaval in the circumstances surrounding Scottish local government. On the one hand, the reorganised structure of local government was being put into place - the new Scottish regional and district authorities coming into office in May 1975 following the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. On the other hand, the arrangements for development plans which provided a key instrument for managing local economic and physical change were in the process of being changed. Following a debate about the future of the then existing development plan system which set out the community interest in land use and development, a two-tier system of structure plans and local plans was in the process of being established following the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1969. The division of development plans into structure plans and local plans was intended to reflect the increasing complexities of land use regulation and allocation. Structure plans were intended to address the strategic issues associated with land use, land release policies and the allocation of infrastructure. Local plans were to deal with more detailed site-specific planning issues (Cullingworth and Nadim 1994). The division into structure and local plans had already been put in place in England and Wales prior to local government reform and this had led to a number of operational mismatches. As a consequence, in SDD Circular 52/71 the Secretary of State for Scotland stated that he did not intend formally introducing structure plans in Scotland until the new framework of local authorities was established.

However, Circular 52/71 requested local planning authorities to undertake a wide ranging review of existing development plans in relation to current and foreseeable problems and to consider what changes, if any, were required. Thus, the groundwork for the regional reports to be prepared subsequently by the new authorities was laid well in advance. In the north east of Scotland, for example, the pre-reorganisation local authorities combined to form the North East of Scotland Joint Planning Advisory Committee (NESJPAC) in

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the early 1970s to consider the strategic issues which confronted all the constituent areas of the region. Significantly, NESJPAC elected to prepare a regional plan for the area proposing a planning and development agenda within which future policies could nest (North East of Scotland Joint Planning Advisory Committee 1974). Indeed, this document provided the foundations of the subsequent Grampian regional report. In addition to these preparatory moves, informal advice on the nature of regional reports was also furnished by the Scottish Office in order to pave the way for local government reform (McDonald 1977).

In practice the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 empowered the new regional authorities to prepare regional reports for their areas. Regional reports were intended to be policy documents that addressed two principal tasks: to facilitate the initial impetus to local government reform in Scotland and to provide the policy context to the subsequent preparation of structure plans (by regional authorities) and local plans (by district authorities). Regional reports were therefore intended to provide a structure and a process for strategic planning at a time of unprecedented change in Scottish local government. The legislation did not set out the objectives to the regional reports. However, Circular 4/75 directed the strategic authorities (ie, the regional councils) to prepare and submit to the Secretary of State for Scotland a regional report by May 1976. The intention was to allow the new strategic planning to review their development plan priorities whilst, at the same time, providing the Secretary of State with the earliest and best practicable information on planning problems and policies throughout Scotland. The development plan priorities identified in the regional reports would set the agenda for the subsequent preparation of structure plans by the regional councils and local plans by the district councils. The structure plans were critical to this process because these documents would be the first practical expression of the priorities laid down in the regional reports and would link specific development programmes to the allocation of other infrastructural services which were fundamental to the management of the new regions.

In more practical terms, Circular 4/75 stated that the regional reports were to concentrate on policy decisions and should:

- reflect the corporate approach of the regional council to its economic, social, environmental and land use problems and policies and should indicate their land use implications;

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- be concerned with the region as a whole; it should identify areas where positive planning action is required and it should be a basis for assessing land, manpower and investment requirements;
- assess resources and competing priorities emphasising the links with the financial plans also prepared by the local authorities;
- be based upon consultation with other public sector bodies and with private industrial interests.

These requirements offer an important insight into the role expected of regional reports which is then of relevance to present day circumstances. The regional report was viewed as a vehicle for ensuring the effective strategic management of the new authorities in terms of providing a framework for policies, resources and the relationships between the different agencies involved in the management of local and regional change (Robinson 1977). It suggests that regional reports had an internal and an external function. The reports facilitated integration of policy making within the authorities and presented a common agenda to the outside world. Subsequently, Circular 51/75 established the important fact that there was to be no formal procedure for the preparation of the regional reports, other than that the concerned planning authorities (districts) be consulted and that the reports when completed should be published. The regional reports were to cover the whole jurisdiction of the region and to identify areas where the regional authority considered that significant planning action was need in the near future. Further, the regional reports were to indicate what form of planning action was considered necessary in those areas and to indicate the extent to which this was to involve a variation in existing investment patterns.

By May 1976, the required 12 regional reports had been submitted to the Secretary of State for Scotland. This in itself was no mean feat. The new strategic planning bodies were themselves involved in a process of adjustment to local government reform, adapting to new managerial and administrative procedures, adopting new functions and responsibilities and confronting a rapidly changing financial position. The regional report provided a means and an end to the management of change by accommodating the disruption costs involved in the institutional restructuring.

Research showed that the regional reports shared a set of common characteristics (Howat and Wilkinson 1977). First, the majority of the reports were engaged with issues of unemployment and social deprivation. The

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Strathclyde regional report, for example, stressed the problems of unemployment and inner-city deprivation which dominated its regional and metropolitan policy agenda and which established the criteria for the setting of investment and other priorities in the region (Strathclyde Regional Council 1976). The notable exception to this was the relatively bullish Grampian regional report which was primarily devoted to facilitating and accommodating the strategic development problems associated with oil-driven economic growth (Grampian Regional Council 1976). Second, the regional reports were primarily economic in character concerned with proposing development strategies based on the promotion of industry. This applied to areas of relative economic decline and buoyancy. Third, the regional reports identified the lack of finance as the most important constraint on the proposed policy and action agendas being proposed by the new authorities.

It is important to recognise, however, that notwithstanding the role played by planning officers in the preparation of regional reports, the measure was a policy-planning instrument and not a land-use planning measure per se, although the measure was of direct relevance to the subsequent structure plans (Howat and Wilkinson 1977). The regional report was of wider significance for the integrated or corporate provision of policies and programmes of all the departments in the new regional authorities.

### **COUNCIL REPORTS FOR REORGANISATION?**

It was evident that the new regional authorities had made effective use of the breathing space afforded them by the requirement to prepare a regional report. In particular, the report was deployed as a means of pulling together the various functions and elements of the new authorities in terms of identifying and agreeing on the problems facing the individual localities, the range and importance of the inherited policies and commitments, the range and nature of the strategic functions of the bodies, the priorities to be afforded strategies and policies, an assessment of the financial resources likely to be made available for policy implementation.

Contemporary research evidence showed, however, the extent to which the individual regional authorities had adopted different approaches to the preparation of the documents, demonstrating the flexibility of the instrument in facilitating distinctive regional or locality based characteristics to be reflected in the agendas being established (Howat 1976). Nonetheless, the

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regional reports facilitated a relatively swift policy response from the new regional planning authorities. In particular, the preparation of the regional reports enabled the identification and quantification of the problems faced by the individual authorities thereby capturing the specific pressures faced by each. Regional reports also facilitated the improvement of relations between central and local government at a particularly critical time of change, and encouraged the adoption of a corporate policy process within the new authorities (McLoughlin 1978). The latter point is perhaps the most crucial because the regional report idea encouraged the new authorities to think in a holistic manner and present that corporate face to the outside world.

That account is not to suggest, however, that the regional report experiment was entirely free of problems. It was suggested, for example, that criticisms were made by the regional authorities of the Scottish Office as to the relative lack of guidance over financial arrangements and poor administration of the process (McLoughlin 1979). Other criticisms of regional reports included the relatively unclear role of district councils, the lack of public participation when compared to the structure and local planning procedures, the relative lack of elected-member involvement in the preparation process and the practicality of the report as a final product. Grampian Regional Council was concerned, for example, that the measure was in danger of becoming little more than a statement of general intent with little or no practical application (Grampian Regional Council 1976). The evidence suggested, however, that regional reports contributed significantly to the subsequent formulation of policy by local authorities (Institute of Operational Research 1978).

It is important also to acknowledge that at the completion of the regional report exercise the Secretary of State for Scotland had before him a set of 12 reports which summarised the planning problems, policies, priorities and intentions of all the regional planning authorities in Scotland. The Secretary of State appropriately, given the non-statutory nature of the regional reports, responded to the individual documents in a positive way. Interestingly, the generally corporate approach of the reports was acknowledged (Howat and Wilkinson 1977). It is tempting to suggest that the strategic intelligence provided by the regional reports provided a valuable template or data base and policy agenda for the Secretary of State for Scotland in coming to terms with the requirements of subsequent decision making and resource allocation within Scotland.

Perhaps in light of the balance of these arguments for and against the concept of the regional reports, the future of the instrument was undecided at the end

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of the the first round. To clarify the situation, the Scottish Office commissioned a study by the Institute of Operational Research to provide guidance on the form and content of subsequent rounds of regional reports. This concluded that

the most important contribution that a regional report can make ... is to provide, periodically, a public statement of a consciously selected set of strategic concerns which are seen by the council as sufficiently important to serve as a guide to the directions in which they should be channelling their collective energies, in reviewing their various policies and their stances in relation to other agencies including central government (Institute of Operational Research 1978, p.16).

It is this lesson that might most usefully be marshalled for the forthcoming reorganisation of local government. Although the specific circumstances have changed, the pressures prevailing at the present time could usefully be managed by a similar form of document.

It would not be appropriate to invoke the concept of a regional report for the current reorganisation for one simple reason. The ongoing process of administrative change is essentially about the de-regionalisation of local government in Scotland. The existing regional authorities will effectively disappear to be replaced by the new councils. Although it is not a very exciting term, it is suggested that a 'council report' be put into place to fulfill similar functions to the regional report but in a modified way that captures contemporary institutional and ideological circumstances. Council reports would seek to define the activities of the new councils and flag to the outside world their intentions and priorities. This offers opportunities for protecting a certain degree of openness in the operations of the Councils particularly with respect to their dealing with the delivery agents. Local government is increasingly shaped by wider influences which will further constrain its activities (Ham and Hill 1993). In order to preserve the traditional function of local government, the council report can act as a local manifesto for areas and communities. Council reports could make a contribution to the management of local authorities in a number of ways.

First, council reports could facilitate co-ordination within the organisations and promote consistency in policy formulation and implementation. There is a role for such an instrument even amongst those who advocate radical and sweeping changes in government. Osborne and Gaebler (1993), for example, have stressed the need to reinvent government with an emphasis on

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'anticipatory government'. This employs 'the process of examining an organisation's or community's current situation and future trajectory, setting goals, developing a strategy to achieve those goals and measuring the results' (Osborne and Gaebler 1993, p.232). In particular, council reports could enable Councils to adapt to the constraints on service provision to which they are exposed. This would facilitate more efficient resource allocation by authorities particularly with respect to promoting investment through improved co-ordination with the economic development agencies - Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Locate in Scotland.

Second, council reports could contribute to greater public openness and accountability. In this context, the concept of strategic planning is invoked which by 'creating consensus around a vision of the future, an organisation or community builds a sense of where it is going among all its members' (Osborne and Gaebler 1993, p.234). Council reports may be one means of providing strategic planning, around a consensus, and facilitate the politicising of the policy agenda in local governance.

Finally, the council report could stimulate wider debate about strategic issues between public and private interests. The new approach to urban local governance and management via a 'networking' approach is based on attempts to co-ordinate the complex social and economic activities in which local authorities are engaged (Stoker and Young 1993). Networking, which enables a 'pooling of resources', inevitably will require frameworks to establish an agenda for the multifarious organisations involved. This could be the role of the council report in making explicit the priorities of local government in relation to their defined localities and the communities of interest for which they have responsibility. More importantly, perhaps, there are the roles and activities that the new councils will be expected to engage in, particularly in the context of the myriad of other organisations and voluntary sector bodies which will increasingly assume the delivery functions of local services. The council report could prove to be a mechanism for facilitating monitoring and review of local authorities.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Regional reports were a distinctive feature of local government reorganisation in Scotland in the 1970s. A revised version - the council report - would facilitate the process of reorganisation particularly by minimising the likely disruption costs involved, maintaining a strategic planning perspective

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and publicising priorities for localities which can be taken as agendas for action by those concerned with the changing face of local government, including residents, communities, voluntary organisations, development agencies and other quangoes.

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