

WHAT DO COUNCIL CHIEFS DO? THE 'CHIEF EXECUTIVE' ROLE IN SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses strategic management in Scottish local government and in particular the role of the chief officer at departmental and corporate levels. It is based on a study of Chief Executives and Directors of Social Work in regional councils. The study was also informed by the comparisons and contrasts found in the literature on the 'chief executive' role. The discussion is of interest and topicality for two reasons - its presentation of insights on the top managers of Scottish councils, and how their role may be affected by imminent and major structural, functional and managerial change.

THE 'CHIEF EXECUTIVE' ROLE

The study which is the basis of this article focused on a neglected part of the public sector - the role of chief officers in Scottish local government. Within councils, 'chiefness' exists at two levels, the corporate and the departmental. The former relates to the management of the local authority as a whole, the latter to management within the departments which make up the authority. The highest ranking officer at each level is usually titled 'Chief Executive' and 'Director' respectively.

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The purpose of the study was to consider the background, experiences, responsibilities and outlook of the most senior of council officers with a view to relating these factors to strategic management at each level. Interviews with the Chief Executives of 6 of Scotland's 12 regional councils were undertaken. Similarly 6 of Scotland's 12 Directors of Social Work, as 'chief executives' of one of the largest regional service departments, were also interviewed. The significance of the study's focus on regional councils, and of the timing of the fieldwork undertaken in July-September 1992, is discussed later.

Local authorities, like other bodies in the public sector, are presently encouraged to behave more like their private sector counterparts. This important development, dating throughout the UK from the early 1980s, is also discussed in the final part of this article, but first it is necessary briefly to consider the similarities and dissimilarities of the 'chief executive role' in each sector. This is now considered from two perspectives - that offered by the relevant literature, and the perceptions of council chiefs.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT: COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

As might be expected, academic and other commentators have identified certain similarities between the 'chief executive' role in the private and public sectors. Three prime tasks in particular are usually identified - strategic planning, management control and operational control. Of these, strategic planning may be considered the most important, and can be seen as comprising in turn the three elements of analysis, choice and implementation (Johnson & Scholes 1989).

In terms of broad strategic task or responsibility, some observers, notably Mintzberg, have been careful to distinguish the content and characteristics of managerial work - its rationale and circumstances respectively (Mintzberg 1973). Building on earlier commentaries, he elaborates ten 'roles' of chief executives. These will not all be carried out simultaneously, and are likely to demonstrate sequential and disjointed pursuit of organisational goals. Chief executive work patterns are characterised by high fragmentation of time and attention (*ibid*).

Other commentaries appear to relate more to the private sector. Andrews suggests that strategic managers perform a range of key tasks, in particular determining the objectives of the enterprise; developing strategies to achieve

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these; identifying the range and scope of the enterprise; and identifying the rewards it offers to its 'stakeholders' (Andrews 1980).

These latter tasks already suggest there are also some salient differences between the roles of private sector and public sector chief officers. In the former, the dominant emphasis is on management. As would be expected, there is a particular emphasis on the 'competitive stance' of the enterprise (Porter 1985; Peters & Waterman 1982).

Meanwhile, accompanying these preoccupations of role and function, it is possible to identify a range of management techniques which are available to the private sector chief executive. These range, even within the private sector itself, from the well known (eg business plans) to the less so (eg product portfolio matrices). It is not suggested that chief executives would necessarily themselves use these techniques: rather these are tools whose potential and use they may more frequently direct. In this context, the interest is less in these techniques themselves than in the concept of management offered in the literature including the 'business press' where this is seen in terms of realisation of organisational goals through selection and application of techniques.

By contrast, within the public sector, the emphasis traditionally has been on administration, and, in particular, satisfying statutory and regulatory requirements. Interestingly, there is considerably less elaboration in the literature on the role of the public sector 'chief executive' than on his or her private sector counterpart. Instead there is debate as to the 'fit' of private sector models to public organisations (eg Gunn 1988; Flynn 1990; Midwinter 1990; Chandler 1991). Perhaps even more noticeably, few public sector chief executives have recorded their own experiences of and views on these matters, a practice commonplace in the private sector. In local government, Sabin's account is a rare exception (Sabin 1990).

A major explanation for this appears to be the relative underdevelopment of strategic management in both conceptual and practical terms not only in local government but throughout the public sector (eg Metcalfe & Richards 1990; Bryson 1988; Stewart 1988). Indeed, this appears in turn to explain the borrowing and adaptation by local authority managers and commentators of thinking developed originally in the private sector (*ibid*) - and even its axioms, for example 'close to the customer' (Peters & Waterman 1982) and 'public service orientation' (for this borrowing, see Stewart & Clarke 1987).

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The preoccupations in each sector often differ in important respects; broadly, the private sector has 'managerial' concerns (eg measurable outputs; market strategy; responsiveness to the business environment; etc) while the public sector tends to display 'public administration' concerns (eg the committee process; financial regularity; meeting statutory obligations; avoidance of unauthorised action; etc). It is suggested below that among the pressures chief officers increasingly face is that of simultaneously responding to both sets of concerns.

COUNCIL CHIEFS AND PRIVATE SECTOR MANAGEMENT

All but one of the Chief Executives had work experience outwith local government, and half had worked in the private sector. By contrast, only one Director reported private sector experience. At the same time, work experience alone tends to understate respondents' knowledge of the private sector and management within it. Chief Executives have extensive experience in relation to their routine responsibilities: for example most drew attention to their personal involvement in economic development. Meanwhile the Directors, increasingly expected to liaise with and consult private providers in relation to community care services in particular, were able to report greater contact with commercial bodies and familiarity with private sector management approaches than might be imagined by those unfamiliar with this local government service.

Directors agreed that 'general management' - which may be defined as general and transferable managerial skills, whose value is not dependent on the nature of the business of the organisation - was possible in the private sector. However, in their own case they were required to provide management based on professional knowledge. Moreover in Scotland (but not in England), Directors of Social Work are required by regulation of the Secretary of State to possess an appropriate professional qualification.

They acknowledged similarities in the nature of the managerial task within each sector, such as objectives setting, 'living within budgets', and 'people management'. Several suggested local government managers possibly had more sensitive or better developed skills in staff management.

However they felt the differences were greater still - in particular, political accountability, legal frameworks, and the orientation of local government to more complex imperatives than a 'market'. Consistent with this, several also felt they generally enjoyed less managerial autonomy than their private

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sector counterparts. Three spontaneously identified a trend - one which was not welcomed - of local government becoming more like the private sector.

Chief Executives provided a similar descriptive picture, identifying the same points of similarity and difference, also according greater emphasis to the latter. The problems of accountability and of quantifying outputs were more frequently mentioned by them as preoccupations. Two further private/public sector contrasts were identified - the different motivations of staff in each, and the necessarily more analytical approach of managers in public services. In relation to the latter, it was suggested that the political environment of local government meant that strategic management necessitated Chief Executives' considering a longer term view than their private sector counterparts, particularly where this meant 'scanning the environment' to ensure that new issues were identified as early as possible. It was also considered that the council environment was likely to be more complex than that facing a company, local government reorganisation being a good illustration of both points.

Chiefs also provided information about their familiarity with, and use of, management theories or techniques whose origin or main development has been in the private sector. Six broad aspects of private sector strategic management theory and the techniques associated with these were considered: defined roles and tasks for top managers; strategy theory; statements of enterprise objectives; 'SWOT analysis' (see below); strategic choice; and implementation theory. (Space precludes fuller description of these.)

The experiences reported were very mixed. Several techniques were already in use in a form and for purposes which did not differ significantly from their private sector origins (eg 'mission' or 'vision' statements of organisational objectives). Some had a particular application in local government (eg the use of budgetary planning at corporate level, or service planning at departmental level, as examples of applying strategy theory by use of business planning methods) yet it was by no means certain to what extent, if at all, these derived from private sector practice. Meanwhile others were in their infancy in terms of application in local government, where external consultants had been engaged (eg applying SWOT - 'strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats' - analysis to the council 'environment' to identify strategic options). Like applied strategy theory, strategic choice theory appeared to have its own character in local government, because of the democratic basis of council policymaking and the interface between elected

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members and officers. Finally, implementation theory appears to be a point of similarity through shared negative experience: the literature (eg Johnson & Scholes 1989) suggests this is particularly underdeveloped among private sector managerial techniques, a view shared by local government managers of their own organisations.

WHO COUNCIL CHIEFS ARE AND HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

Most, but not all, of the people interviewed were university educated, with Directors having social science or general degrees while Chief Executives had law, arts or social science degrees. Meanwhile professional qualifications were still more numerous. Possession of multiple qualifications was widespread in both groups, while only one of the council managers (a Chief Executive) had no professional qualification.

Nevertheless, in perhaps the most surprising finding of the study, only one of these most senior of local authority managers - a Director - possessed a formal management qualification. Most respondents suggested that while they had made efforts to secure additional in-post management training, this was pursued with both differing vigour and differing self-reported success. The patchiness of 'structured management training', a phrase commonly used by chiefs, appeared to be a matter of at least moderate concern to most. At the same time, none felt the absence of this was a serious limitation in their present post. Self-training appeared to be the principal strategy to cope with this, most frequently based on reading, including private reading.

Chief Executives had wider experience of employment outwith local government, and those who had enjoyed this felt that it made a definite if perhaps modest contribution to their management understanding. This experience need not have arisen within the private sector: while two Chief Executives offered illustration from their experiences in manufacturing industry, another felt his armed forces experience had been particularly beneficial. The experience of Directors meanwhile was largely (in 4 out of 6 cases) confined not just to local government but to their professional activity of Social Work.

However, more noticeable was the considerable local government 'industry experience' of all Chief Executives and Directors:

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- virtually all had begun work in local government before re-organisation in 1974/1975;
 - most had over 20 years local government experience;
 - a majority of Directors reported having been employed not only in local government but in Social Work throughout their working life;
 - half had been a Chief Executive or Director for at least 7 years.
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Table 1
Self-Reported Key Responsibilities of Directors

<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Number of Directors identifying this</i>
Leadership	2
Accountability to council	3
Accountability to public	1
Strategic direction (incl. values)	3
Professional: standards of dept./adviser to council	2
General/overall manager	1
Management of budget/resources	3
Staff appointments	1
Actions of staff	2
Representing staff/'carrying anxiety'	2
Liaison: internal and external	1
National development of Social Work	2

The concept of 'industry experience' is important because of its relationship with that of 'general management' as defined earlier. In the private sector, debate has suggested that the management styles of chief executives from

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these two backgrounds will have different impact on their organisations (eg Webber 1987). This should not be confused with situations where the company or corporation is dominated by the personality of its top manager. Nor is this a matter of entrepreneurship. Rather the issue is whether a skilled and trained manager can run any organisation or whether knowledge of its 'industry' is also necessary. The recent growth in general management in the public sector - notably in the National Health Service but not as yet in local government - gives this debate, apparently confined to the private sector, a relevance in the context of the present discussion.

The different backgrounds of the two groups of managers appear to relate, at least in part, to the difference, described earlier, between general management and management of a 'profession-based' service. Directors are required to have a professional base, but Chief Executives face no equivalent requirement since there is none. Chief Executives therefore appear to be the more 'general' managers. Yet each group had substantial experience in the 'industry' of local government and all managers appeared to regard it as their settled career.

Chiefs were also asked to identify what they regarded as their unique and prime responsibilities. Respondents were asked to identify 3, or at most 4, prime responsibilities. These are reported below for Directors (Table 1) and Chief Executives (Table 2). Responses have been grouped around common themes to a minor extent only, and the actual words of the managers have been used as far as possible. No hierarchy of priority or importance is suggested in either table.

Table 1 shows a broad range of perceived prime responsibilities, with none identified by more than three Directors. Nevertheless the chief responsibilities identified can be characterised as those relating to managerial accountability, professional advice, and resource management in its widest sense.

Table 2 suggests that Chief Executives envisage their role as one of strategic co-ordination of policy and resources, which finds particular expression in 'management of the interface' between members and officers.

In concluding this brief account of chiefs' work, it should be acknowledged that, throughout local government, while 'Chief Executives' and 'Directors' to a considerable degree work in separate operational spheres, nevertheless they have a hierarchical relationship and interact routinely in the context of

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corporate management of the authority. In the era following the 1939-45 war, the ineffectiveness and factionalism of 'departmentalism' had unduly weakened the capacity of local authorities to act in a corporate manner.

Table 2
Self-Reported Key Responsibilities of Chief Executives

<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Number of Chief Executives identifying this</i>
Strategic direction/co-ordination	3
'Bridge' between members and officers	4
Matching organisation's capability to strategy/policy implementation	3
Final accountability	2
Head of paid service/general manager	3
Leadership of staff	1
Resource/performance management	3
Chief policy manager	1
Interface with public	1

In its report in 1973 to the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Working Group on Scottish local government convened by Paterson made recommendations to overcome these deficiencies and build corporate working into the management structure and practices of the new authorities to be created following the reorganisation of councils in 1975 (Paterson 1973). The proposed creation of a 'Chief Executive' post in each authority to replace more traditional posts such as that of 'town clerk', itself in part a conscious borrowing from private sector practice, was a central recommendation.

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Another important Paterson recommendation was the creation of a 'senior management team' or equivalent, comprising heads of key council departments, through which the Chief Executives would make this new corporate management practice effective. After a decade and a half, practice is believed presently to vary across Scotland in its fidelity to the Paterson model, and the present study provided some confirmation of this. The interest here however is that the senior management team is a forum in which the two groups of chiefs interact.

Differing views of this were evident within and particularly between the two groups. Chief Executive views ranged from a belief that the approach suggested by the 1973 Paterson report still had much to offer, to a belief that it had not been successful anywhere. Directors meanwhile appeared to have less of a stake in corporate management, some reporting limited involvement, as distinct from membership, of the senior management team, particularly beyond their own professional specialism, while several participated at least periodically in matters unrelated to their own departmental interest.

Directors, of course, are corporate managers at departmental level, and also have their own management team, usually termed a 'Directorate'. Their accounts suggested that, like Chief Executives, some act in a 'convener' and some in an 'interventionist' role in this forum. Also like Chief Executives, they acknowledged the need to permit 'specialist' managers to contribute to corporate decision-making.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHIEFS OF CHANGES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In June 1991, the Government published consultation proposals which suggested that Scottish local government be re-organised on a system of unitary councils (Scottish Office 1991). As noted, the fieldwork for the study was undertaken over the period June-September 1992, and at this time more detailed Government proposals were imminent. Because of the recent Government emphasis on the desirability of small councils, these second more detailed proposals were widely expected to have greater significance for regional authorities, with the likelihood of the outright dismantling of at least some of the largest. It might be noted in passing that it is impossible to imagine any private sector counterpart for such externally required changes in structure and possibly role and function, suggesting that public sector chiefs face not only profound but also unique managerial challenges.

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Re-organisation was, and is, only the most prominent change facing councils. Other preoccupations of one or both groups of managers at the time of the study included introduction of the Council Tax; full implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act, 1990, the major innovation in Social Work since the creation of Social Work Departments themselves in 1969; and the Local Government Act, 1992, requiring collection and publication by local authorities for the first time of data on their own performance. Meanwhile the management role of council chiefs was itself about to be put under the scrutiny of a working group as part of its wider review of the 'internal management' of local authorities convened by the Scottish Office. Proposals relevant to the present discussion, published in its report in March 1993, include giving more corporate management responsibility to Chief Executives and the possible removal of the statutory requirement for councils to establish a social work committee and to appoint a director of social work (Scottish Office 1993a).

Chiefs were therefore invited to consider the effects of opportunities and threats in the local government environment - that is, forces outwith local authorities - on their own roles. There was unanimity that the local authority environment was already exceptionally turbulent in the early 1990s; that this turbulence would intensify during the mid-1990s; and that a major effect of this would be that they and their councils would increasingly be responding to an externally-driven agenda.

Chief Executives expected that local government would increasingly become 'local administration', possibly accompanied by a reduction in the Chief Executive role itself; yet despite this there would remain a need for a 'Chief Executive' whether or not by that title. Several Directors meanwhile felt that it would be increasingly difficult to reconcile their existing 'managerial' and 'professional' roles. The change they expected as most likely - one not welcomed - was that of having an increasing role as purchaser rather than provider of services.

In October 1992, immediately following completion of the present study, the Government published more detailed consultative proposals, principally relating to four different 'sizes' for an all-Scotland unitary structure for local government (Scottish Office 1992). It finally opted in its White Paper of July 1993 for a 28-authority unitary structure (Scottish Office 1993b).

These proposals may have striking immediate but different effects on Chief Executives and Directors. Presently there are 65 chief officers (mainly titled

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'Chief Executives') at corporate level in Scotland's regions, districts and islands. This number will be more than halved to 28 if the Government's present proposals are implemented. However, by the same token, the number of Directors of Social Work - and indeed directors of other present regional services such as Education, Roads and Trading Standards - will more than double from 12 to 28. The number of Directors of services at district level - such as Housing, Environmental Services, and Leisure and Recreation - will be affected in the same way as the number of Chief Executives. Meanwhile, partly offsetting both of these developments, will be changes in authorities' size in terms for example of territory, population served, and resources managed.

It is interesting, in the light of the study, to reflect on the meaning of 'management'. The study revealed an apparent irony here. Local authority managers have increasingly been exhorted to behave differently. From some quarters this has been a plea to behave less 'administratively'. This is associated with the analyses often provided by academic and related commentators, often positive in tone towards council managers, most notably by John Stewart (eg Stewart & Clarke 1987; Stewart 1988). Meanwhile a more vigorous case has been put by Government for managers to become more 'business-like'; that is, like private business managers. More important, a number of legislative and other initiatives by Government have had their intended effect of changing local authorities themselves in ways which make them more closely resemble private sector organisations in behaviour and structure - for example compulsory competitive tendering, separation of 'purchaser' and 'provider' roles, and business planning - while top managers are themselves also subject to further quasi-market disciplines such as performance-related pay.

It is therefore somewhat ironic that a substantial minority of both Chief Executives and Directors suggested that one of the prime effects they expected as a result of further planned or expected change to local government by central government was that, far from increasing their managerial capacities, this would in fact lead to an increase in local administration.

This paradox might be explained by the differing concepts held of 'management'. For the Government, this term is wide-ranging but has a particular emphasis on resource, and particularly financial, management. For local authority chiefs, in this context it appears to refer to local autonomy (in relation to central government influence or control) on issues of policy and

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particularly managerial implementation of this. Curbs on local autonomy reduce the power of council managers to manage, and reduce their role to a more 'administrative' one in which they begin to act more as the agent of Government and its policies rather than managers of locally determined patterns and levels of services (eg Black 1993).

In the light of this turbulence, and its effects in making management in the council context both more difficult and less attractive, chiefs were invited to discuss their views on the management of change, and to offer their assessments of the prospects for recruitment and retention of chiefs. The management of change, or 'transformational' management, has been a major focus of management thought in the private sector - indeed, possibly its central concern - throughout the past decade (eg Kanter 1983). The customary objective of this concern is the need for enterprises to be responsive to their environment, to be achieved through their capacity to change their own culture. Chief Executives are ascribed a particularly powerful, often dominant, role in these processes in terms of both initiation and sustaining of such transformations.

Few council chiefs alluded to this debate, although other comments suggested they were familiar with the concern underpinning it. Some Chief Executives and Directors alike expressed difficulties in relation to the term 'vision'. Although all felt it important that the organisation had a sense of strategic direction, most emphasised that they were not the sole originators or custodians of this, preferring instead to see this shared - for example with elected members, other senior managers, or with staff generally. Again, several managers, particularly Chief Executives, emphasised the necessity of not only responding to 'today's concerns', but also taking the longer term view.

Finally, on recruitment and retention, Directors felt there was no present difficulty in attracting suitable candidates. However, several felt that increasing pressures, of which the relatively high turnover of Directors of Social Services in England was symptomatic, might foretell difficulties not yet experienced in Scottish Social Work to the same extent. Chief Executives' views were more varied, focussing more on deficiencies of appointment processes, a diminishing of the attractiveness of public service, and possible increasing recruitment of former private sector managers with 'business delivery' skills.

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SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

There were too many conclusions arising from the study to report, but some of the more important of these can be set out here.

Certain similarities between the sectors are evident in relation to the chief executive role: there are 'core' strategic responsibilities which are shared by all chief officers; 'industry knowledge' appears important if not vital in each; and all organisations have an increasing operational 'surface' exposed to public scrutiny, necessitating increasing demonstration of organisational or departmental accountability by their 'chief executives'.

There are sharp contrasts also: strategic choice by managers ('what business are we in?') is constrained in local government, noticeably by political control and its financial and legislative framework; the local government chief officer has less executive autonomy; outputs are more difficult to trace; and a narrower range of management techniques is employed in practice.

The literature review suggests that commentary on local government is as weak in describing and analysing managerial processes as it is robust in dealing with those of politics or policy. The reverse appears to be true of private sector analysis.

Although management techniques appear better developed in the private sector, the value of these for management in local government is not self-evident. In important respects the latter is a more complex environment, and the techniques of the former may not be appropriate. At the same time, some have relevance, particularly when they have been adapted, and can provide managers with valuable tools to understand better the working of their own organisations. Meanwhile, the rapid changes in their environment suggests a further reason for public managers to consider such adaptations.

Respondents were unable, at the time of the study, to forecast other than in general terms how Government proposals would alter management in local government, but most expected the demands of accountability to increase. This might be typified as an increase in 'managerial' accountability without any reduction in more traditional 'public administration' accountability. Subsequent developments provide some confirmation of this.

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