The joy of joining up: modes of integrating the local government modernisation agenda

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Abstract. Since 1997, local government in the United Kingdom has found itself at the sharp end of an ambitious programme of potentially far-reaching reforms known collectively as the 'local government modernisation agenda' (LGMA). These initiatives are intended to promote 'joined-up government' and holistic service delivery—two of the hallmarks of New Labour's approach to public service improvement. To date there has been very little analysis of the ways in which local authorities are approaching this task at a corporate level. The authors examine the theory and practice of joining up policymaking and service delivery in local government. They draw upon an analysis of the perspectives of key actors involved in the formulation and implementation of current local government reforms at the national level and the experiences of a sample of authorities that have been among the most active in seeking to integrate the various elements of the LGMA at local level. The evidence suggests that the superficially attractive logic of more integrated policymaking and service provision, which runs so strongly through current reforms, belies the multidimensional nature of joined-up working. The presentation of the LGMA as a coherent package of reforms therefore disguises the degree to which different forms of joining up may conflict. In particular, the push for closer vertical integration between local and central government, with ever-tighter control being exerted from the centre over priorities and performance, is seen as constraining progress towards more effective horizontal joined-up working at a local level.

Introduction

The New Labour government in the United Kingdom has identified the modernisation and improvement of public service as one of its key priorities. Its policies for achieving this have much in common with those of previous Conservative administrations. Like its predecessors, it has promoted the greater use of markets and a more mixed economy of service provision, imported private sector management practices and finance into the public sector, and installed new performance management, inspection, and audit routines (Martin, 2002). A number of commentators have, though, identified what they see as an important difference between current reforms and those which have gone before. As Rhodes (2000) argues, "there is a twist, and that twist is 'joined up government'" (page 160) (see also Bevir and Rhodes, 2000; Mawson and Hall, 2000). The importance of joined-up working was spelled out in detail in the 1999 White Paper *Modernising Government* which emphasised the need to ensure that "policy making is more joined up and strategic" (Cabinet Office, 1999). There was, it argued, a need for rapid improvements in public sector productivity. Services had to be reoriented to "meet the needs of citizens, not the convenience of service providers" (paragraph 20).

UK local authorities have, of course, been in a state of almost constant change over the last twenty years (Wolman, 2000). However, since 1997 they have found themselves at the sharp end of a particularly ambitious programme of reforms known

collectively as the 'local government modernisation agenda' (LGMA). Together with health authorities and other local service providers, they have been constantly exhorted by ministers to become both increasingly customer focused and to work more effectively in partnership with other agencies. 'Joined-up problems', they have been told, require 'joined-up solutions' and so-called 'cross-cutting issues' (community safety, sustainable development, social inclusion, and the like) cannot be allowed to fall into the fissures between traditional, functionally organised, services. Vulnerable service users (young people, the very old, those attempting to cope with traumatic life episodes) must no longer be confronted with a bewildering array of uncoordinated agencies each of which is able to provide only a small slice of the provision they require.

In spite of its warm words and good intentions, many local policymakers and practitioners claim that, far from facilitating more joined-up working, central government exacerbates the problem. Notwithstanding the efforts of successive cabinet 'enforcers' and the ever-increasing number of 'Number 10' policy units designed to coordinate government action and ensure delivery, central government departments continue to operate along sectoral lines. As the Performance and Innovation Unit (2000a, page 1) noted, deeply engrained Whitehall structures "inhibit the tackling of problems and issues which cross departmental boundaries" and the "centre is not always effective at giving clear strategic directions, and mechanisms for resolving conflicts between departments can be weak, leaving local service providers to wrestle with the consequences". As if to prove the point, since 1997 government departments have disgorged a huge number of new policy initiatives with little sign of any attempt at central coordination. Continuing to operate largely within traditional service 'silos', they have remained wedded to their own narrow objectives, performance criteria, networks of actors, and funding regimes (School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham, 1998). The resulting 'action zones', 'pilots', and 'pathfinders' have frequently operated to different timescales and been focused on different target areas. Not surprisingly, even 'on-message' local authorities, sympathetic to the government's aims, have increasingly complained of 'initiativeitis'. Meanwhile, the marketisation of key public services and the erosion of traditional local authority functions (see Smith, 2000) have increased institutional fragmentation, blurring lines of accountability as duties, powers, and resources have been spread increasingly thinly across an array of special-purpose bodies, businesses, voluntary organisations, and community groups.

In this paper we examine the theory and practice of joined-up working in local government. We explore the different dimensions of joining up which, we argue, needs to be recognised as a multidimensional collection of processes and agendas that are both more complex and more contestable than is suggested by current policy discourse. We contend that policymakers and practitioners need to find ways of moving beyond the superficially attractive logic of becoming 'holistic' or 'more integrated', and that this in turn will require an understanding of the ways in which local authorities are seeking to achieve more joined-up working and the obstacles that they are encountering. Some researchers have begun to assess these issues in specific policy sectors—such as regeneration (Mawson and Hall, 2000) and services for older people (Hayden and Benington, 2000)—but to date there has been little analysis of joined-up working at the corporate level. This is an important omission because the rhetoric of the joining-up agenda subsumes the gamut of local government activities and relies upon action at the corporate level to achieve some overarching coherence. In this paper, therefore, we seek to begin to plug this gap. We focus on the extent to which elements of the LGMA promote joined-up working and how authorities are implementing them. We draw upon a series of participative workshops with officials from central government

departments and other national agencies, and a survey of key senior corporate officers and leading elected members in a sample of local authorities that have been at the forefront of implementing current reforms.

Joined-up working in theory

The search for better policy coordination or integration is not, of course, an entirely new phenomenon. Stewart (2000, page 55) cites the work of Finer (1933) who identified a "need for an agency in the authority capable of not merely 'planning all activities for today, but of co-ordinating all the relevant factors for a considerable way into the future'". Forty years on, the Maud Committee recommended the introduction of management processes in the setting of policy objectives for local authorities, leading inter alia to policy and resources committees and a concern for 'corporate planning' which sought to cover the entire activities of the authority. The rise of corporate strategic management in the 1970s and 1980s marked a further attempt to achieve greater coordination of the activities of the large professionalised services that had dominated local government in the immediate postwar period. However, the current drive for more joined-up working is more pronounced and more profound. Its strong intuitive appeal to the current government lies in its apparent promise of more accessible, convenient, and responsive services without the need for major increases in local authority spending (Mawson and Hall, 2000). Probe beyond the rhetoric, however, and it becomes clear that joined-up working has a range of diverse meanings and manifestations which may have very different implications for the way in which the state operates.

As Hayden and Benington (2000, page 28) note, we "are still some way off a more theorized understanding of the often fluctuating and ambiguous relationships at play". However, it is useful at the outset to distinguish between a number of dimensions of integration or joined-up working. First, joined-up working may involve more integrated policy development at a *strategic* level, or better collaborative working at an *operational* level. Second, a distinction can be drawn between *intraorganisational* and *interorganisational* joining up. Third, there are important differences between *horizontal* integration between local agencies, or between departments within the same local agency, and *vertical* joining up between tiers of government. Current policy discourses tend to conflate all of these very different types of joined-up working, and often fail to recognise the tensions that can exist between them. For example, the need for more 'horizontal joining up' is a core New Labour doctrine. It enjoys fairly widespread acceptance (in theory at least) among local authorities and is seen as an important means of eliminating overlapping activities in order to render their services more efficient, effective, and responsive to citizens' requirements, and enabling councils to provide more effective 'community leadership'. In practice, though, key elements of current local government reforms may require authorities to work simultaneously towards different forms of horizontal integration. The Local Government Act 2000, for example, emphasises the need for interorganisational collaboration at a strategic level, requiring authorities to act as 'community leaders' working closely with other local agencies to develop overarching community strategies that promote the economic, social, and environmental well-being of their areas. By contrast, the duty of Best Value, enshrined in the Local Government Act 1999, stresses the importance of internal joining up at a strategic level (authorities are required by law to develop an authority-wide view and corporate strategies for tackling the key issues facing their areas) and external integration at an operational level [with the government explicitly encouraging the development of new service-delivery partnerships with neighbouring councils, the police, probation service, health authority, housing associations, the private sector, and

voluntary organisations (see, for example, DETR, 2001)]. The result is a proliferation of spatial and social foci for horizontal integration, including communities of place, identity, or interest: for example, deprived housing estates, older people, preschool children, and those with disabilities. The likely consequence is that horizontal joining up will simply reorganise, rather than diminish, the existing multiple objects of governance, as suggested by Jessop's (1997a) analysis.

Vertical integration is similarly prized by the current government. However, as Mawson and Hall have noted, "the organization of government on a *functional*, *hierarchical* basis ... presents problems for the *territorial* management of policy" (2000, page 67, emphasis in original). As with horizontal integration, current policies may run in a number of different directions. Some aspects of the LGMA encourage local authorities to become 'closer to the citizen'. The new 'duty to consult', the requirement to publish Best Value performance plans, and the proposals to introduce directly elected mayors are, for example, all designed to increase the level of public interest and participation in local policymaking. Local authority responses include the emergence of closer working between some district and parish councils and the establishment by metropolitan and county councils of new neighbourhood structures, local area forums, and citizens' panels. However, at the same time authorities are strengthening their links 'upwards' to other tiers of the increasingly multitier polity (see Marks et al, 1996). The creation of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the strengthening of the regional tier of administration in England (Mawson and Spencer, 1997) have begun to put in place what Keating (1993) identified as the previously missing 'mesolevel' government. The growing influence of the European Union in policy areas such as environmental protection, trading standards, procurement, and regeneration has directed councils' attention to the policies of the European Commission (Goldsmith, 1993; Goldsmith and Sperling, 1997; Martin and Pearce, 1999). Meanwhile, central government has tightened its grip on local services through the Best Value performance management framework, increasing inspection of local government, and a variety of new initiatives that tie resources directly to the delivery of centrally prescribed activities and outcomes. The Local Government White Paper 2001 speaks of the need to establish "A new, more mature partnership between central and local government" (DTLR, 2001, clause 7:13) and Whitehall departments and the Local Government Association have recently agreed six national priorities which both central and local government will focus upon. Meanwhile, councils in England are busily signing up to Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) with the Treasury that bind them into contracts for the delivery of key national priorities in return for increased funding, and similar moves are afoot in Scotland and Wales in the form of 'Local Outcome Agreements' in Scotland and 'Policy Agreements' in Wales.

The joining-up agenda needs, then, to be understood as irredeemably plural. It involves integration around a variety of objectives—some spatial, some social, some strategic—which can pull in different directions and are not straightforwardly compatible. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between the numerous calls for more joined-up working *in general*, linked to the pursuit of more holistic and comprehensive government, and joining up *in particular*, whereby government is seeking to persuade or coerce actors to align themselves behind the delivery of specific objectives (see Jessop, 1997a). This is key to understanding the politics of joining up for, as Degeling (1995, page 295) observes, "Calls for better policy coordination across or between sectors generally emerge as part of (and in the context of) sectoral politics ... as actors within one sector attempt to get actors in other sectors to take on aspects of their concerns". Thus, behind the persuasive, collaborative gloss of joined-up working lie tough political decisions about control, resources, organisational design, and

(potentially conflicting) policy objectives. It is important therefore not to overlook the ways in which sectors are constructed and maintained by particular forms of knowledge and expertise, well-defined policy territories, and patterns of resource allocation. As Degeling has noted in the context of health-care reform in Australia, there is a naïve but persistent belief that sectoral integration can be achieved though "good intentions, snappy commonsense thinking or some optimum design fix" (1995, page 295). However, in practice 'modes of sectoring' are so deeply embedded that these appeals "rarely get beyond exhortation, and those that make a promising start often end in the sand" (page 290). It is therefore important to have a much better understanding than currently exists of whether and, if so, how integration is being achieved in practice, and how the language of joined-up working is being mobilised to achieve political objectives (Healey, 1998). In the remainder of this paper, therefore, we explore the experience of joining up in the context of the current attempts to modernise local government in the United Kingdom.

Joined-up working in practice
The local government modernising agenda
The key elements of the LGMA were first set out in the 1998 Local Government White Paper and became law in the 1999 and 2000 Local Government Acts. They were portrayed by ministers as a package of mutually reinforcing measures, "a demanding agenda for change" that would lead to "a radical re-focusing of councils' traditional roles" by sweeping away "the old culture of paternalism and inwardness" (DETR, 1998, paragraph 5). Because of these reforms, authorities would, we were told, be more 'in touch' with local people, provide higher quality services, offer effective community leadership, be more accountable to local people, and, as a result, enjoy greater public confidence (Bovaird et al, 2001). The various initiatives that made up the LGMA address these core objectives to differing degrees. The Best Value regime, for example, focused largely on service improvement whereas the requirement for authorities to produce community strategies is intended to strengthen councils' community leadership role, and the introduction of new political management arrangements is designed to enhance accountability and transparency (DETR, 1999).

In practice, however, many local authorities do not see these initiatives as a coherent package of reforms. This is partly because they have been implemented at different times. The Best Value regime was introduced first, followed by the Beacon Council scheme. Reforms to political management structures and the requirement to develop community strategies came two years later, and changes to local government finance were held over until Labour's second term in office. It is also because authorities are responding to an array of other large-scale programmes, notably neighbourhood-renewal schemes, a range of community-based initiatives, and far-reaching changes in mainstream services such as education, social services, and housing, which have been introduced by central government with little or no reference to the LGMA. Rather than promoting joined-up working, as intended, current reforms often therefore exemplify and exacerbate the challenges involved in developing more integrated policymaking and service delivery.

In order to examine the nature of these impacts and the obstacles to joined-up working, we conducted an exploratory study drawing upon three key sources of evidence: an analysis of published and internal policy documents relating to the LGMA; a survey of policymakers in Whitehall departments and other national agencies; and semistructured interviews with senior staff and politicians in local authorities. The documentary analysis covered a range of published reports and internal documents provided to us by Whitehall departments. On this basis we identified the

key elements and objectives of the LGMA. The first of our surveys tested out our interpretation of these documents with just over 100 key actors who have been closely involved in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of the LGMA at national level. Respondents were nominated by their organisations as experts in the LGMA. They included officials from the Cabinet Office, Treasury, Scottish Executive, National Assembly for Wales, Government Regional Offices, and all of the main Whitehall departments with responsibility for overseeing the main local government services [the former Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), Department of Health (DoH), Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Home Office], as well as the key local government organisations (including the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, the Local Government Information Unit, the Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association, and the Society of IT managers) and officials from the Audit Commission, the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy, and Association of Public Service Excellence. Respondents attended half-day participative workshops at the beginning of which they completed a questionnaire that explored their views of the main elements and objectives of the LGMA; they then discussed their experiences and expectations of joined-up working with the other participants in a semistructured format facilitated by the researchers. Semistructured telephone interviews were conducted with chief executives, senior corporate policy officers, and leading elected members from thirty local authorities. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2001, and were focused on senior officers and members with corporate responsibilities because they were best placed to provide an overview of their authorities' attempts to develop joined-up working and to analyse developments at the corporate level. This relatively small group of interviewees cannot, of course, be assumed to be representative of English local government as whole. The sample was purposive and deliberately included a range of different types of authority that are at the forefront of attempts to implement current reforms, and are therefore prima facie best placed to shed light on the challenges that they present and to give advance warning of the kinds of obstacles that less proactive councils may face as they follow in the footsteps of these 'early movers'. The authorities were therefore carefully identified on the basis of an analysis of reports of the peer reviews of the Local Government Improvement Project; their participation in key demonstration initiatives, including the Best Value and Better Government for Older People pilot programmes, and the Beacon Council scheme; and the early introduction of new political management structures. The sample included two of each of the main types of authority (that is, county councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan borough councils, London boroughs, and shire district councils).

The perceived coherence of national policies
The documentary analysis suggested that, on paper at least, there is an internal coherence to the LGMA, and that there is strong potential for horizontal integration between some elements. Eleven key strands and five main objectives of the LGMA were highlighted. Several elements were clearly intended to promote service improvement. A second group of measures was designed to enhance councils' community-leadership role. A third, overlapping, group of initiatives were seen as helping to ensure that councils are in touch with local people, are accountable, and enjoy increased public confidence (table 1).

The documentary analysis also identified a wide range of policies introduced since 1997 that have a major impact on local government services but are not defined by ministers or officials as being part of the LGMA. These include regeneration

Table 1. Objectives of the local government modernisation agenda (LGMA) (source: analysis of published and unpublished central government reports and papers).

Policy instrument	Policy objective				
	service improvement	community leadership	'in touch'	local accountability	public confidence
Best Value regime	•		•		•
Beacon Council scheme	•				
E-government targets	•		•		
Local Public Service Agreements	•				
Local Strategic Partnerships	•	•			
Power to promote well-being		•			
Community strategies		•	•		
New political structures			•	•	•
New constitutions				•	•
New ethical framework				•	•
Improved voting arrangements				•	•

• indicates policy instrument likely to contribute to achievement of policy objectives.

programmes, initiatives designed to promote the coordination of local services, community-centred initiatives, programmes designed to address the needs to particular client groups, measures to encourage new investment in local services, a range of policies focused on specific sectors, and measures to improve the management and political leadership of authorities (table 2, over). Some of these programmes were overseen by the former DTLR, which is also responsible for the LGMA, but many fall within the remits of other Whitehall departments.

The survey of national actors confirmed this analysis. Civil servants and national representatives of the local government community agreed that the key constituents of the LGMA (at that time) were those listed in table 1. They also agreed that these initiatives were designed to achieve the objectives that we identified from policy documents, though they added three additional objectives: improving the overall quality of life for local people, making local services more responsive, and promoting a more mixed economy of provision. Of these, they rated improving the overall quality of life and improving the quality of services as the most important objectives, and believed that increasing the quality of life and public confidence in local government were the most difficult to achieve (table 3, over). In their view there were strong links between some elements of the LGMA that were designed to achieve similar objectives. But they also reported that there were tensions within the overall agenda and believed that the success of the LGMA will depend on the capacity of local authorities to handle these ambiguities. One DTLR official told us

"What the LGMA looks like depends on who you are—it looks coherent from DTLR but less so in local authorities or as a member of the public."

Another believed that

"The elements [of the LGMA] may pull apart as a result of the schizophrenia in central government about what it wants local government to be."

A third reported

"We need to clear the mists about central government priorities so that people know what they're trying to achieve."

Table 2. Allied central government initiatives (source: analysis of published and unpublished central government reports and papers).

Regeneration initiatives:	Single Regeneration Budget; Urban Regeneration Companies; the New Deal for Communities
Local service coordination initiatives:	Health, Education and Employment Action Zones; Healthy Living Centres; Learning Partnerships; Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders
Community-centred initiatives:	Sustainable Local Communities (Local Agenda 21 strategies); Local Area Forums; Active Community Programmes; Community Champions; and Neighbourhood Wardens
Programmes focused on specific client groups:	Better Government for Older People; Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant Action Plans; Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships; Sure Start and Sure Start Plus; Children's Fund Local Network; Connexions Service for 13+; Excellence in Cities for secondary school children; Creative Partnerships for 16+ school students; Behaviour Support Plans; Pupil Support LEA Proposal of Expenditure Plan; a new strategy for learning disability; Access to Work
Measure to encourage investment in services:	Invest to Save; the Private Finance Initiative
Key sectoral policies:	Care Trusts; Quality Protects; Area Child Protection Committee Business Plans; Health Improvement Programmes; Health Act Partnership Arrangements; the National Service Framework for Mental Health; the Development of national health inequalities targets and associated PIs for local planning; Lifelong Learning Development Plans; the National Grid for Learning—ICT Development Plans; the Way Forward for Housing: Housing Policy Statement Crime and Disorder Partnerships; Youth Justice Plans; Drugs Action Plans; Skills for Life; Opportunities for All in a World of Change; Full Local Transport Plans; Community Legal Service Partnerships; Local Cultural Strategies; Sport Strategies; and Municipal Waste Management Services
Improved management and political leadership:	Local Government Improvement Programme; IDeA Performance Support Unit, IDeA Leadership Academy

Table 3. Key objectives of the local government modernisation agenda (LGMA) (source: survey of national policymakers, 2001).

Objective	Importance [a]	Degree of difficulty [b]
Improve quality of life	24.6	2.85
Improve quality of local services	22.5	2.82
Improve local leadership	13.1	3.26
Improve responsiveness of local services	11.6	3.60
Ensure local government is in touch with people	10.3	3.04
Increase public confidence in local government	8.4	2.23
Promote a more mixed economy of provision	4.3	3.65

[a] Total of 100 points distributed among key objectives in proportion to their perceived importance.
[b] Ranked on five-point Likert scale (1 = very easy to achieve, 5 = very difficult to achieve).

Nevertheless, "The LGMA elements will work together if you want them to" and "There are enough levers in the LGMA to lead to transformational change but not if local authorities are resistant to change." Respondents noted in particular the potential contradiction between increasing regulation from the centre and calls for 'strong local leadership'. As one official put it

"The Local Public Service Agreements approach, for example, may lead to more centralisation that undermines democratically elected local government."

The local authority officers and elected members whom we interviewed held very similar views. Many perceived some elements of the LGMA to be compatible. As one senior policy officer interviewee put it, "there are links between many of them". But most were concerned about the apparent lack of linkage between the LGMA and other, primarily sectoral or area-based, initiatives introduced since 1997. They held similar views to Whitehall officials about which parts of the LGMA were most likely to reinforce each other and those which appeared contradictory. Like the Whitehall officials and representatives of other national agencies that we surveyed, most local authority offers and members saw community strategies and new political management structures (whereby responsibility for executive and scrutiny functions is split) as likely to work together to promote more joined-up working at a *strategic* level. Many also believed that community strategies would complement local regeneration initiatives and, in some cases, build upon existing partnerships. Several felt that "Best Value would have been better focused if it had been based on the priorities of the Community Plan" (chief policy officer): in effect, if the running order of the LGMA had placed community strategies to the fore. Some reported that their councils had used the requirement to separate executive and scrutiny functions to reorientate their structures and processes around cross-cutting issues (lifelong learning, older peoples' issues, regeneration, and so forth) rather than traditional services such as housing, social services, and planning, giving members of newly formed cabinets cross-cutting portfolios. This extended into corporate governing structures as a whole:

"our corporate management team have cross-cutting groups" (chief executive);

"our Strategic Management Forum which was set up up to tackle this very big issue (of joining up)" (senior policy officer);

"Our Central Policy Team is not concerned with delivery or programmes but does ensure that everything fits together ... . It can foresee clashes and deals with them" (chief executive);

"each chief officer has a portfolio of responsibilities" (chief executive).

Interviewees saw this as promoting more joined-up working:

"the whole council is organised so we don't have silos" (Best Value officer).

Some also highlighted what they saw as a good fit between the development of new scrutiny committees and the implementation of the Best Value regime:

"the scrutiny side and Best Value reviews have been very joined up, in a way which exceeded my expectations" (Best Value officer).

Thematic, client-based or geographically based initiatives were seen as important sites for joining up at an *operational* level in specific domains: for example, integrating services in particular neighbourhoods, estates, or wards, or bringing them together for particular social groups. Community strategies were regarded as one device for pulling these initiatives together. Service improvement was, however, seen by many authorities as semidetached from the rest of the LGMA:

"just one way of trying to keep a handle on what's happening via monitoring" (Best Value officer).

For most interviewees, the Best Value regime and LPSAs were narrowly focused delivery mechanisms, though one council had used a Best Value review to develop a

joined-up approach to young people's services that had subsequently been incorporated into an LPSA, and the deputy leader of another noted that "Best Value reviews are getting broader now". Most respondents conceded that if it was working properly, Best Value could lead to more joined-up working, but foresaw major barriers to achieving this—both in terms of existing institutional structures and the micropolitics of what integration would mean to the various actors involved. Most were unconvinced about the value of Best Value performance plans in promoting joined-up working.

The interviews revealed that nearly all officers and members saw their authorities as following central government's lead, rather than setting their own local agendas. This was seen as the product of years of centralised prescription of UK local government:

"We have learnt to follow government objectives sometimes rather than our own. You know what's going to be smiled upon and therefore funded and you tend to pursue what's on the government's agenda" (chief executive).

However, unlike many of the policies pursued by previous Conservative governments, current initiatives were widely seen as broadly congruent with their own authorities' local priorities. The Best Value regime was consistently cited as having been the most important national initiative, followed (in rank order) by the introduction of new political management structures, community planning, and central government

Table 4. Perceived importance of national initiatives (source: survey of local authorities, 2001).

Initiative	Interviewees citing initiative as 'very important' to their authorities (%) [a]	Importance of initiatives to authorities' own objectives [b]
Best Value regime	63	3.5
New political management structures	48	3.4
Community strategies/leadership	33	3.3
Regeneration funding	26	3.3
E-government	15	3.3
New Deal for Communities/social exclusion	15	3.3
Sure Start	11	3.2
Improved service delivery/customer contact	11	3.2
Performance-management initiative	7	2.9
Local Public Service Agreement pilots	7	2.9
Democratic renewal	7	2.7
Education Action Zones	7	2.6
Flood protection/climate change	7	2.5
Community safety	4	2.0
Power to promote well-being	4	1.9
Beacon Council scheme	4	3.5
Health/social service partnership	4	3.4
Stock transfer	4	3.3
Rural transport initiative	4	3.3
Development control	4	3.3
Early years learning	4	3.3

[a] Initiatives cited by interviewees as "the most important the authority has been involved in over last 3–4 years" (unprompted).
[b] Significance of initiatives for "achieving your authority's own objectives". Mean ratings on four-point Lickert scale (1 = 'not at all significant'; 4 = 'very significant').

funded regeneration programmes (the Single Regeneration Budget, neighbourhood renewal, and New Deal for Communities (see table 4).

Barriers to joined-up working
Interviewees identified a range of obstacles to joined-up working (see table 5). The most frequently cited problems were all external to the authority. Most elected members and corporate policy officers highlighted the volume of new initiatives which authorities had been required to implement as the most significant problem. Chief executives saw the multiplicity of performance indicators and programme objectives as particularly important problems. Internal political differences and levels of awareness of initiatives were not seen as major causes for concern, although some raised doubts about the political embeddedness of the LGMA:
    "I would worry if there was a change of council" (lead member on Best Value).
    Many interviewees highlighted problems in linking the LGMA to mainstream policies in social services and education (such as those shown in table 2 above). Problems also arose in dealing with the expectations of external partners, engaging lower tier staff, working to the different timescales associated with different initiatives, and problems sharing budgeting with partners. Some saw the 'bureaucratic burdens' associated with external audit and inspection as an impediment to joined-up working. Most fundamentally, perhaps, councils experienced tensions between different strands of the LGMA:
    "There are inconsistencies because councils should be community leaders but there is also a move from central government to put power in a range of bodies, not just the council" (head of policy).
The government's enthusiasm for transferring powers, responsibility, and funding to other agencies cut across its espoused desire to develop the capacity of councils to take a leadership role in facilitating horizontal external integration.
    Many of the Whitehall officials we surveyed also saw some of these issues as presenting difficulties. As noted above, most believed there to be tensions within the

Table 5. Barriers to joined-up working (source: survey of local authorities, 2001).

Nature of barrier	Difficulty of overcoming barrier [a]			
	all	members	chief executives	Best Value officers
Coping with the volume of new initiatives	2.8	3.0	2.3	2.8
Working with performance indicators that do not encourage joined up activities	2.4	2.1	2.8	2.4
Identifying the linkages between initiatives	2.2	2.1	2.6	1.7
Reconciling the different objectives of the various initiatives	2.2	2.6	2.5	1.9
Coping with the speed of change	2.1	2.4	2.3	1.7
Lack of awareness of initiatives	2.0	1.9	1.4	2.4
Conflicting individual interests	1.8	1.6	1.9	1.7
Political differences (within/between parties)	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.6

[a] Mean ratings on three-point Lickert scale (1 = 'not a problem', 2 = 'minor problem', 3 = 'major problem').

LGMA. Several commented on the need for Whitehall to be more joined up. One, for example, argued that

"We can't just look at the DTLR silo. To be worthwhile the LGMA has to look across government."

Several expressed concerns about the capacity of local government to cope with the pace of change. One believed that

"It is possible that overload of initiatives could mean that local government lacks sufficient capacity to implement programmes."

Another stated that it was important for central government to consider whether

"The effort required to implement a change agenda on this scale detracts from other local authority activities."

Local authority officers' and members' views of their councils' capacity to overcome these obstacles varied. Some were 'upbeat'; others were fatalistic, apparently believing that there was little they could do to solve the problems that they faced. One officer suggested that existing performance management regimes did not encourage joined-up working, but "we just have to live with them". In general, the problems that interviewees saw as most likely to undermine joined-up working had also proved the most difficult to address (see figure 1). The speed of change, the differences between performance management regimes, and the problems of reconciling different objectives had, we were told, been especially difficult to cope with. Indeed, it seemed to undermine the capacity for strategic thinking:

"the volume of work is so great there's no time to focus on the wider picture" (corporate policy officer).
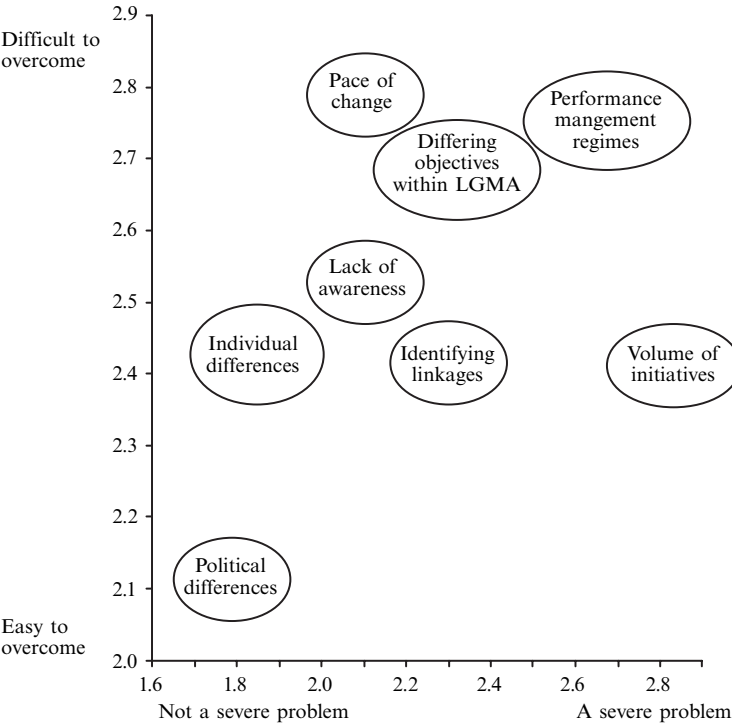

Figure 1. Overcoming obstacles to joined-up working—mean ratings on three-point Lickert scales.

One elected member believed that the transition to a cabinet structure would assist implementation of other elements of the LGMA because the present arrangements made it difficult to get a "clear picture of what is happening ... there is not enough time to dedicate to finding out."

Approaches to joining up

One of the most intriguing findings was that different interviewees within the same authority frequently characterised their council's approach to joining up in different ways. In one example, the chief executive viewed the council's approach to joining up as "issue led", whereas the head of policy emphasised communicative initiatives—including monthly council magazines, the intranet, team-briefing systems, and management events. For some, joined up working connoted the development of communication networks, more 'joining up in general'—such as "community planning and e-government ... making services seamless" (elected member)—whereas the other interviewees from the same authority viewed it in terms of driving forward particular objectives. The tendency of some interviewees to cite the whole breadth of formal, strategic, and communicative initiatives as having some impact on achieving cohesion, without a clear hierarchy, reveals something of the novelty and multifaceted nature of the issue, as well as the endemic difficulties in evaluating joined-up working. Interviewees tended to ascribe particular importance to the mechanisms with which they were most involved. Thus Best Value officers usually saw the Best Value regime as having a pivotal role in joining up. One claimed, for example, that "Best Value will drive cultural change". For another,

> "It gets to the heart of what we should be about, which is performance management; and if we get that right all the other initiatives will flow from that" (Best Value officer).

Chief executives, by contrast, stressed the importance of corporate strategies backed by their strong personal relationships with external partners. Elected members were much more likely to emphasise the role of the political structures and processes. One councillor, for example, claimed that joined-up working was achieved because of the way in which "all initiatives start at cabinet": this was "where cross-cutting working was happening most". Another ascribed greatest agency to elected members through the cabinet: "we have ... made different departments work together".

The strong grip which 'rational' strategic planning already exerted over formal processes in some authorities has clearly been tightened by the introduction of the Best Value regime and community planning. Interviewees cited community strategies, vision statements, Best Value performance plans, as well as business and service plans as important devices for schematic coordination of activities:

> "business planning has to fit into the corporate plan so we don't have silos" (head of policy).

Community plans were a particular source of hope in this regard (table 6, over).

However, despite the importance of tangible plans and strategies in maintaining social networks and aligning actors (Murdoch, 1999), interviewees frequently framed the daily lived experience of joining up as a purely social process, achieved through informal communication and interactions. It required delicate attention to social politics:

> "time to create comfort between the senior people in the organisation involves some formal, some informal approaches ... [it's] a lot about confidence building to create the right atmosphere" (chief executive).

Table 6. Effectiveness of mechanisms for joining up (source: survey of local authorities, 2001).

Mechanism	Effectiveness in achieving joined-up working[a]
Strategies and plans	3.3
Individual officers	3.3
Internal staff communications systems	3.1
Senior management team and corporate project teams	2.8
Informal mechanisms	2.9
Ad hoc liaison	2.9
Best Value processes	2.9
Members and member structures	2.6

[a] Mean rating on four-point Lickert scale (1 = 'Not at all effective', 4 = 'Very effective').

Ultimately, success or failure was rationalised frequently in terms of having 'the right people':

> "It's hugely down to individuals. For example our Head of Housing Service is excellent. It there's a new initiative, she is aware of it and implements it and passes on her knowledge about it to others it impacts on, like Social Services ... . Other managers ... continue to operate in silos" (member).

Plans and strategies were, therefore, often viewed as secondary to the "real driving force" of personal contacts (chief executive) and "social guidelines" of shared working (Best Value officer). For one Best Value officer, the "goodwill and knowledge" of individual directors "matter more than anything else". Nevertheless, several interviewees recognised the vulnerability of devolving responsibility for joined-up working to individual officers: as one member put it, "some are better than others at corporate stuff"; for another, the impact of officers on joined-up working "varies by individuals".

Many interviewees highlighted the role of strong leaders—a feature that might seem to jar with the consensual tones of holistic governance but is consistent with previous research which has highlighted the importance of key reticulists (that is, engaged and powerful individuals with common interests on specific issues), capable of constructing cross-organisation coalitions (Degeling, 1995; Hayden and Benington, 2000), and also with central government's view that "Thriving communities and strong democratic leadership go hand in hand" (DTLR, 2001, clause 2:1). In some of the councils we studied coordination is seen as "cascading from the top down" (chief executive). One policy officer, for example, reported that coping with the volume of new initiatives "could have been a real problem had we not had strong leadership"— usually by chief executives and sometimes by leading elected members. Scrutiny members and more junior policy officers and review teams were seen as having relatively limited impact on joined-up working (see table 6). Even within the cabinet, "individual cabinet members rather than the cabinet as whole" (corporate policy officer) were usually seen as the driving force for joined-up working. In some cases the role of these reticulists was recognised in formalised strategies, for example in the appointment of 'champions' with responsibility for joined-up working. In other councils they operated alongside or in spite of formal structures and processes.

However, it is the multiple strategies for joining up perceived *within* the corporate structures of councils that emerge most strongly from the data. In a London borough where the chief executive and lead Best Value officer emphasised the importance of the council's recently introduced vision statement, long-term objectives, and performance management framework, the cabinet member we interviewed believed that it was in

fact the personalities and individuals that really determined the effectiveness of attempts to achieve joined-up working.

Most authorities reported the greatest success in achieving joining up at the operational level—usually around substantive issues such as regeneration, community safety, social inclusion, and health inequalities. One chief executive went so far as to suggest that frontline staff were more joined up in their orientation than were senior managers. In one case, the posts of director of social services and chief executive of the health authority had been merged. However, most interviewees reported important differences between their authorities and other local agencies—in terms of their accountability structures, spatial focus, and the statutory frameworks within which they were operating—which impeded partnership. Many officers felt that they "often do not get the right people represented at the table" (chief executive). For the majority of respondents, joint working with the private and voluntary sectors was seen as even more problematic: the private sector being seen as having little time for strategies, and the voluntary sector being perceived to be interested largely in single issues which meant they "find it difficult to be joined up" (chief executive). By such rationalisation, the capacity for joined-up working is conceived as a quality that some organisations possess and others lack, and one which is used to negotiate participation in partnerships.

Joint working between tiers of government was also widely seen as problematic. Several interviewees were concerned about tensions between district and county councils, but the overriding issues related to the structure and ethos of central government departments and the way in which these subtend a multiplicity of "dominant strategic lines" (Jessop, 1997b, page 13, cited by Cowell and Murdoch, 1999) on local governance practices, framing the scope for joining them up. As a consequence, it can be "the different partnerships and groups that can't think beyond the box" (Best Value officer).

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge the limited nature of the surveys upon which this paper is based. Further research, perhaps involving a larger number of authorities, would be needed for a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of alternative approaches to joining up. However, our study does provide important insights into the ways in which national policymakers, key local politicians, and senior local authority officers view the impact of the LGMA and other current reforms on the capacity to achieve joined-up working at local level. Moreover, the complexity of the replies received indicates a degree of success in going beyond an oversimplistic public discourse of joined-up working. What emerges is a variety of different interpretations of what joining up involves and how best to achieve it. Some authorities have wrestled with joined-up working *in general*, trying to impose some coherence on the LGMA at a strategic level. Others have focused primarily on joining up *in particular*, through operational partnerships tackling specific substantive issues. Some have well developed formal and informal mechanisms for joining up elements of the modernising agenda, and have enjoyed some success in working with other local agencies on a range of cross-cutting issues. Others are encountering major problems and seem to be making little progress in joining up elements of the LGMA—let alone wider policies. It is clear, then, that the common managerial language promulgated by central government belies the range of responses and interpretations of the LGMA at local level which are "conditioned by past practices and local traditions and influenced by political attitudes" (Stewart, 2000, page 174).

Notwithstanding these local variations, almost all of the local authority officers and politicians whom we interviewed reported that their councils relied on key individuals to establish and orchestrate the networks that were integral to the achievement of more

joined-up working. They spoke of the importance of what they described as strong leadership in motivating staff to think and act in a more integrated fashion: in the words of one officer, "persuading people at all levels to let go and work as a team by making it clear that there is something in it for them". Most believed that some key elements of the LGMA, notably the introduction of community strategies, were likely to enhance the prospects for joined-up working, providing the 'top strategy' (head of policy). However, few authorities perceived any underlying integrative logic within the LGMA as a whole. Indeed, many perceived local attempts at joining up to be working against the grain of mainstream national policies, and some pointed to what they regarded as inherent tensions within the LGMA itself. The solution, they argued, lay in better coordination of the activities of central government departments, the introduction of more flexibility into the Best Value regime, and the integration of performance-management frameworks and inspection regimes. Many also argued that the pace of reform and the sheer volume of new initiatives were impediments to joined-up working, and some suggested that central government needed to take more responsibility for making the linkages between policies:

"if we have any new initiatives from government it should be made clear how they link to existing ones" (chief executive).

At present,

"we get so overwhelmed by work so these [central government initiatives] often don't get joined up because everyone is working to comply with their own bit of legislation and doesn't have time" (Best Value officer);

"... a service will tend to lean towards addressing PIs [performance indicators] rather than wider objectives" ... but ... "if you try to do everything you will do nothing well" (chief executive).

Many of the local authority officers and politicians we interviewed argued that central government's reluctance to trust local authorities resulted in a considerable amount of time and resources being wasted on internal and external performance and compliance monitoring, often focused on very specific and 'un-joined up' service areas. They advocated a reduction in the number of separate plans that authorities are required to submit to central government. One chief executive argued that

"You must get government departments to back off and accept that local government is better at joining up than they are. They interfere too much and it gets in the way."

An elected member from another council called for less "interference from central government, fewer prescriptive PIs, and more consultation"—in effect a recipe for enhancing horizontal integration.

Our survey of and discussions with Whitehall officials revealed a remarkable measure of agreement with these local authority perspectives. There was a strong consensus both at national and at local level about what the LGMA consists of and what the main objectives are. Whitehall officials identified the same elements of the LGMA as likely to be compatible with each other, and acknowledged the same pressure points and ambiguities in the overall agenda. Like our interviewees in local authorities, Whitehall officials and other key policy actors at the national level identified the danger of initiative overload and the problems posed by the current lack of joined-up working between central government departments. National and local policy also shared similar assumptions about the inherent desirability of joining up, and used the same vocabulary—repeatedly referring, for example, to the importance of 'joined-up working', the danger of 'service silos', and the need for 'more effective local leadership'.

It would clearly be simplistic to attribute the difficulties that authorities reported in joining up solely to policy schizophrenia at national level. The notion that holistic

local government is thwarted only by incoherent central government interventions is plainly nonsense, as is demonstrated by previous attempts to encourage more corporate, strategic approaches in local government, which have frequently challenged strong interests oriented around functionally organised services. The financial and human resources, and political cultures conducive to collaboration between services, have often been in short supply. Professional norms, deeply ingrained in the psyche of many providers, can help to reproduce national–local service demarcations, and many authorities have been opposed in principle to working more closely with other councils and the private sector. Many local authority services are therefore vulnerable to accusations of being unduly producer-led, and resistant to the economic advantages of joint commissioning which are frequently overridden by institutional inertia. Equally, though, it is clear that local authorities will not be able to crack what Degeling (1995) calls the prevailing 'modes of sectoring' without significant reforms at national level.

Obstacles to joining up at local level have undoubtedly been reinforced by the structures and cultures of central government. In England the largest local authority services (education, social services, and housing) report to different ministers and different sets of officials who operate from within rigidly compartmentalised Whitehall departments. They are therefore subject to separate legislation, statutory guidance, performance management regimes, and inspectorates, and maintain quite distinct professional networks, service standards, and accounting procedures. There have been few, if any, rewards for civil servants who contribute to the achievements of corporate goals or to the objectives of departments other than their own. There are exceptions: notably, current attempts to develop joint approaches to issues such as social inclusion, juvenile justice, and crime and disorder. However, the outcome-focused targets and performance measures agreed with the Treasury as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review process reinforce the tendency for departments to require narrow, service-based outcomes of the local agencies whose operations they oversee. The 2001 Local Government White Paper acknowledged these difficulties, announcing central government's intention to "adopt a more co-ordinated and proportionate approach to the demands we make of authorities" and promise that it will "Significantly reduce the number of plans and strategies that councils are required [by different government departments] to produce", and "scale back on area-based initiatives and give greater scope to rationalise partnerships" (DTLR, 2001, sections 1.14 and 1.15). However, there are doubts about the power of one ministry (in this case, the DTLR) to desectoralise operations by persuading other politically prominent service-based departments (such as DoH and DfES) to jettison their plans, partnerships, and performance measures.

Current regulatory frameworks reflect this tendency and themselves reinforce service-based modes of sectoring (Clarke et al, 1999) and the institutional, cultural, and professional/knowledge-based barriers between service sectors. Local government is currently subject to six separate inspection regimes, and the recently established Inspectorates Forum is a weak instrument which is unlikely to lead to any meaningful change of approach on the part of the two most powerful and longest established inspectorates: the Office for Standards in Education and the Social Service Inspectorate. Moreover, although the Audit Commission Inspection Service has repeatedly said that it wishes to encourage authorities to develop cross-cutting approaches (see, for example, Audit Commission, 2000), its own approach to inspection has focused largely on traditional functional services. It is therefore very difficult to see how the current regimes can do anything other than perpetuate existing sectoral divides, and local authorities that do seek to reconfigure their activities in ways that promote joined-up working are likely to find themselves continually cutting across the organisational logic

of Whitehall and the inspectorates (Byatt and Lyons, 2001; Davis et al, 2001). As one of the local chief executives we interviewed reported, "national targets get in the way of requirements for local planning".

In the long term a stronger regional tier in England may pave the way for better coordination of at least some policies, along the lines of that now being developed by the Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly Government (formerly known as the National Assembly for Wales). However, in the short term prospects do not look good. To date Whitehall has proved singularly reluctant to trust mainstream programmes to the Government Regional Offices established in 1994 (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000b).

Although a narrative of 'integration through assessment' is therefore well established and widely shared [notably as a mechanism for promoting sustainable development (see Wilson, 1998)], there is very little understanding of how this can be achieved in practice, and there are continuing doubts about the level of political will to securing it. Indeed, the potential bases for challenging sectoral forms of governance identified by Degeling (1995)—in particular, local politicians, nongovernmental organisations, and the public—tend to be either excluded from participation and/or unwilling to partici-pate. In any case, such actors would face difficulties in negotiating cross-cutting consultative and participatory networks

> "there's a conflict there: Best Value has quite specific consultation requirements, with the Community Plan we're looking to do more creative and innovative stuff" (Best Value officer).

As a result, key decisions about local public service provision are likely to continue to be strongly influenced by managerial frames of reference driven by centrally and sectorally defined priorities (Martin and Davis, 2001).

Conclusions: the limits to joining up

Our analysis demonstrates that both central and local government recognise that attempts to achieve joined-up working at local level have encountered significant difficulties in shifting the predominantly sectoral modes of governance. Some of the difficulties associated with joining up the LGMA are attributable to inertia at local level, but they also stem from the inherent tensions within the reform agenda itself and the current operation of central government departments which continue to be orga-nised on sectoral lines, leaving councils to pick up the pieces of national policies at local level. This problem has already been noted *within* a number of sectoral policy-making areas, as discussed in the introduction, but appears even more acute when the analysis is broadened to consider the whole range of current initiatives to which local authorities have to respond.

Central government has begun tentatively to reform some of its own practices in the light of the sorts of critiques we heard from authorities including, for example, the creation of new interdepartmental coordination mechanisms for zone-based initiatives [the New Commitment for Regeneration pilot programme, discussed by Mawson and Hall (2000)] and the streamlining of centrally imposed statutory plans and performance measurement routines (as signalled in the 2001 Local Government White Paper). However, the evidence from our interviews suggests not an embedding of the logic of joined-up working in cross-cutting mechanisms, but its *diffusion*, with the result that councils are likely to continue to face a proliferation of initiatives emanating from different parts of the state, each of which individually is claimed to embody joined-up thinking in its cross-cutting objectives and desired collaborative mode of operation. As one chief executive summarised the situation, "we have multiple interventions but no overall strategy".

The prospects for a form of vertical integration are good. Current reforms, notably the Best Value regime and LPSAs, are binding local authority services ever more tightly to national priorities, targets, and performance indicators, and central government has granted itself extensive powers to intervene forcibly where local authorities are not delivering the improvements it seeks. Meanwhile, many councils are taking the need for horizontal integration more seriously than ever before, seeking to organise themselves around cross-cutting issues such as lifelong learning, community safety and regeneration, or issues affecting particular communities. However, the danger is that, because Whitehall departments and central government ministerial portfolios have not undergone a similar transformation, these two trajectories of change will increasingly be at odds with each other. In effect, increasing calls for vertical integration between central ministries and local delivery agencies will militate against horizontal integration. There is, then, a tension at the heart of New Labour's policies. The enthusiasm for desectorising local government makes sense for a government that prizes joined-up working and customer-oriented public services, but this is constrained by its deep-seated distrust in local authorities' ability to deliver.

Bound up with this familiar tension between national and local political control are more fundamental challenges which are too easily obscured by the easy consensual rhetoric of joining up. First, there are enduring questions about the legitimate scope for spatial and social variations in the operation of the welfare state, and the future of democratically elected local government in the United Kingdom. It is by no means certain that greater local flexibility, entailing closer horizontal integration in local arenas, is acceptable if it leads to policy outcomes or service levels that deviate significantly from standard minimum requirements. Second, it is not clear that a loosening of vertical integration automatically facilitates local horizontal integration, as was well understood by some interviewees:

"new leadership initiatives are needed by the hierarchy to insist that something is done by those further down the organisation, even if they don't like it" (elected member).

In some instances, actors seeking local horizontal integration (such as participation by other organisations in community strategies) may welcome central pressure to achieve their desired form of coordination:

"partnerships can be more parochial than councillors ... the steer has to come from government to make these bodies join up" (elected member).

Third, the research suggests that calls for joined-up working need to be seen as intimately bound up with broader struggles over the modes and objects of governance, rather than the "search for some bias-free universalism" (Degeling, 1995, page 300) from which everyone benefits. Discourses of integration may be contained by, or challenge, modes of sectoring and it is important to understand the motivations of the actors that are driving joined-up working and the forms of power they can command. In particular, the rhetoric of joining up in the United Kingdom is closely associated with attempts to exert greater managerial control over professional and service-provider interests. However, as Degeling (1995, page 300) observed, simply calling for intersectoral working does not mean that different interest groups suddenly begin to share the same objectives and ways of working or to relinquish their normal constituencies or lines of influence. It seems implausible, therefore, that "with a little institutional re-jigging, previously conflicting objectives somehow become mutually interdependent" (Owens and Cowell, 2002, page 114). In effect, the language of joined-up working, as of the Third Way in general (Fairclough, 2000), risks disguising the limits to achieving joined-up government in a society with multiple, changing and conflicting objectives. Consequently, although the evidence of our interviews suggests

that some local authorities are coping better than others, it casts doubt on the capacity of current policies to reconcile the inherent tensions between the different, and deeply politicised, forms of joining up that are being promoted.

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