



By Mo Baines

A few days ago, I was chatting with local government colleagues about our shared experiences. We bemoaned the trends that come and go, with little analysis as to whether we are simply repeating mistakes – from centralised services being devolved down to neighbourhood level, only to be reconfigured back to the centre under the guise of efficiency.

So, too, do we see the trends between generalists and specialists in public management. There is always a clear divide with technical knowledge and expertise favoured in some roles, but occasionally this limits career pathways to specific areas of expertise. Generalists are favoured in more strategic roles and their skills to navigate complex landscapes, often being expected to quickly grapple with issues outside of their core skillset.

With local government reorganisation on the horizon, for many English councils is it time to reflect on the division and diversity of skills needed in a unitary context? Certainly, within district councils there is a greater connection to neighbourhood-level delivery of services that people see on their doorsteps. They are services that must continue from day one of a new council.

However, in spending terms, the smaller budgets in these neighbourhood services are overshadowed by county-level spend on adult and children’s care, homelessness and special educational needs and disabilities.

Developing a balanced skillset across all services to ensure effective and safe provision will not be a ‘nice to have’ but a necessity. However, there is a clear opportunity for learning and innovation.

Neighbourhood-level service delivery, often provided in-house, allows access to skills otherwise hollowed out by marketised delivery models. The ability to set up systems, supply chains, performance monitoring and quality assurance, people management and operational delivery, is not unique to neighbourhood services. In local government these skills are found in abundance. This could provide opportunities to reset thinking on make-or-buy decisions, particularly in care services, often weighted towards ‘buy’ because of hollowed-out capacity to ‘make’.

Those shaping future public management capacity should look to harness skills in less obvious places to capture opportunities for innovation in service delivery. ■

Mo Baines is chief executive of APSE and a visiting professor at the University of Staffordshire

COHESION

# Rebuilding the scaffolding to repair communities

Community tensions have been rising in the last year, a new survey by Starfish Search has found. Paul Marinko talks to councils about the scale of the challenge, and hears about the need to appoint leaders who can build trust

The year has started with no sign of the challenge of holding communities together getting any easier for councils.

Local elections during 2026 are likely to see further splintering of the centrist political environment that councils have come to accept as the *status quo*. The Right will no doubt see rising numbers of Reform councillors and the likes of the Greens are expected to perform well on the Left.

As views continue to polarize, a new survey of council chief executives, executive directors and directors by Starfish Search has found 74% feel there has been a noticeable rise in community tensions in their area over the past 12 months.

And 77% believe the national political rhetoric is making it harder for councils to manage community cohesion locally, with international events and national debates increasingly playing out at community level.

The survey also found a strong perception that changes in the national political landscape are altering how residents engage with local issues, with 81% of senior leaders observing shifts in tone, expectations and behaviour.

Community tensions in the UK arguably hit a new low in the summer of 2024 as riots broke out after Elsie Dot Stancombe, seven, Bebe King, six, and Alice da Silva Aguiar, nine, were killed by Axel Rudakubana at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport.

Councils have been working tirelessly ever since to bring their communities together, not least Sefton Council, which counts Southport within its borders.

Sefton chief Phil Porter recently told *The MJ*: ‘What we are trying to do as a council is what all councils should be doing – listening to communities so that they feel

the council, combined authority and the Government works for them.’

Speaking following the survey results and reflecting on the impact of the Southport tragedy, Sandwell MBC chief executive Shokat Lal said: ‘I think that was a wakeup call for local authorities about the size and scale of the challenges that were out there, and how hollowed out the community engagement infrastructure was, in the sense that the scaffolding no longer existed.’

Sandwell has worked at pace to replace that scaffolding and Lal says the message that has come through loud and clear is councils will be frowned upon if they only engage with communities when there is a problem – it needs to be an ongoing process.

Yet, despite the sector’s willing recognition that local authorities are central to cohesion and place shaping in the increasingly collaborative world of regional government, 30% of survey respondents feel their council is not viewed as a leader on community cohesion locally.

**‘The risk for the future is that we disinvest from that face-to-face communication, from that neighbourhood working, from embedding our teams within the communities that they serve’**

This was not generally attributed to inactivity, but to the reality of shared leadership across partnerships, particularly with police, community safety partnerships, faith groups and the voluntary sector.

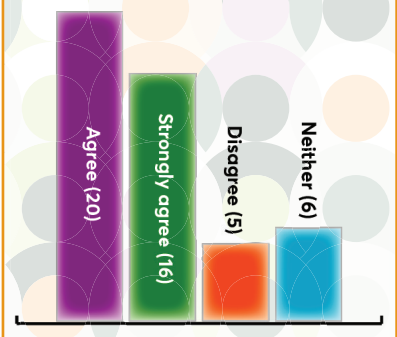
As one officer put it: ‘The public take no notice of us unless we put up the price of parking.’ But this has not meant councillors have felt any less pressure. More than three quarters of respondents (76%) indicated councillors in their area feel under pressure from local activist groups when making decisions on contentious issues.

The survey highlighted a consistent set of barriers preventing visible leadership, including fear of personal attack, aggressive social media scrutiny and concern about being seen to be ‘taking sides’.

With visible, confident leadership generally recognised as necessary for local authorities to achieve effective cohesion, these findings point to growing challenges



The current national political rhetoric is making it harder for councils to manage community cohesion



\*Based on 47 responses  
Data © Starfish Search

to future community togetherness. But many feel that it is the local authority’s rightful place to be taking the lead on community cohesion.

‘I think we need to step back into that place,’ says Lal. ‘We are the leaders of cohesion in local government, and we’ve got to make sure that we come back into that space and we demonstrate the capacity, the skills and the competence to make sure we support all our anchor institutions and the communities that we serve.’

‘They expect that from us.’ A further challenge, inevitably, is financial. Responses to the survey revealed the dominant concern is that further funding reductions will make community cohesion harder to sustain. Many respondents highlighted the risk that reduced capacity will force councils to focus increasingly on statutory services, leaving less scope for

early intervention, relationship-building and place-based cohesion work.

Referring to capacity for cohesion activity, one respondent said: ‘That is pretty difficult when our priority is dealing with local government reorganisation as well as continuing to provide a good level of service to our communities at the same time as facing a very difficult financial settlement under the Fair Funding Review.’

‘Public confidence in local government is on the decline mirroring the falling confidence in central government. Conversely public confidence in my own council is high but falling in line with that.’

While the survey found that 66% of respondents believe local government is seen by residents as effective at managing community tensions, as well as 83% feeling their council’s communications on contentious issues are timely and trusted

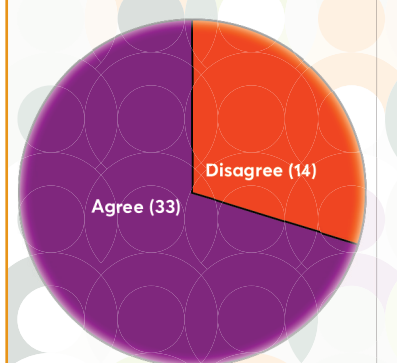
and a similar number reporting strong alignment between political and corporate leadership on tone and approach, just over half (57%) believe their council has sufficient staffing and budget capacity to proactively manage community cohesion. Furthermore, just 60% believe their monitoring systems are strong enough to identify emerging problems early.

And councils recognise the hard yards on cohesion must be done face-to-face. While Lal’s Sandwell has quarterly ‘community summits’ others are making use of citizens’ assemblies.

But as one chief adds: ‘I think the risk for the future is that we disinvest from that face-to-face communication, from that neighbourhood working, from embedding our teams within the communities that they serve.’

The findings suggest that community cohesion is becoming an increasingly

Do you believe the council is viewed as a leader on community cohesion



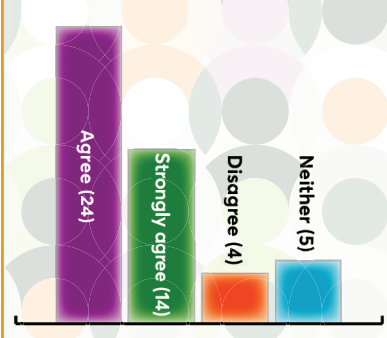
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Data © Starfish Search

If no, please explain why (selected responses?)

- I think the majority of people view this as the role of the Police service
- I don't think anyone thinks about us in this regard
- There is a strong community leadership locally and the council is part of this and works well with the various groups
- Community cohesion is primarily viewed as a policing matter
- There are active community groups and partnerships in the area, of which the council is one element
- Because our members are very split so we have a situation where the two tribes criticise the other
- Public take no notice of us unless we put up the price of parking

\*Based on 47 responses  
Data © Starfish Search

Changes in the national political landscape are changing how residents engage with local issues in our area



\*Based on 47 responses  
Data © Starfish Search

complex and high-risk leadership challenge for councils which now requires not just technical competence but confidence, resilience, political acuity and deep place-based understanding.

As Lal says: ‘I think over the years we’ve kind of lost those skills because the focus on the importance of community cohesion hasn’t been there.

‘It’s not that we’ve not seen this as being important, it’s been a capacity issue. That capacity issue has resulted in a real deficit in skills.

‘I think it should be a prerequisite as you recruit people in senior leadership positions that they have a really good understanding about the communities that they serve.’

And he adds that in an increasingly polarised and highly-charged political environment, political skills – with a small ‘p’ – are evermore key for senior officers.

‘It’s important that we differentiate between what the role of the local authority is and what the role of a political party is.

‘In this space we have to have senior leaders who are able to speak truth to power and are able to differentiate the political from the delivering of services and demonstrating that political neutrality.’

Tim Farr, senior partner and lead for the local government practice at Starfish Search, said: ‘The survey sharpens our understanding of the lived pressures facing chief executives and senior officers, particularly around visibility, personal risk and leadership alignment.

‘This strengthens our ability to assess candidates not just on experience, but on how they think, communicate and hold authority under scrutiny; how they navigate ambiguity and moral complexity; and how they build trust across political, organisational and community boundaries.

‘In a context where leadership risk has increased and the margin for error has narrowed, the research underlines the importance of values-led executive search that helps councils appoint leaders who are genuinely equipped for the realities of modern place-based leadership.’ ■

## districtview



By Maxine O'Mahony

For 2026, I’m reflecting on something deceptively simple. It is not headline-grabbing, rarely attracts political theatre, and will never trend on social media. Yet it’s the substance of public service and the place where real, lasting change happens.

A brilliant local government director (thank you, Steve James!) recently encouraged us all at Breckland to think about ‘finding the magic in the ordinary’. And when I look at what district councils do every day, I see that magic everywhere.

Councils are often described through tiers, functions and systems. But for residents, councils are experienced through the everyday rhythm of life. In parks where children learn to ride their bikes, at the leisure centre where confidence grows and loneliness eases, in safe and clean town centres, secure tenancies, thriving markets and community cafés where people are known by name.

None of this is dramatic, it is ordinary. Yet it sends a powerful message: you matter here.

The proximity of districts to communities keeps leadership human and services grounded. Councillors and officers meet residents in supermarkets, at school gates, on football pitches and in lunch clubs. That closeness enables early intervention in its purest form: a housing officer noticing damp affecting a child’s health, planners creating green spaces where people feel they belong, environmental health officers keeping restaurants safe and economic development officers helping employers offer people their first job.

Our services profoundly shape wellbeing, safety and aspiration. This is the magic – the cumulative impact of modest acts, done by people who care about their place and their communities.

As we move through local government reorganisation, it is tempting to focus on structures and financial models. But what also matters is that residents trust us to collect their bins, are confident their park feels safe and are reassured their council home is cared for. We must not lose the magic that currently exists.

We must preserve place-based leadership, visible presence, trusted relationships and problem-solving. If we can combine that with the opportunities of reorganisation, we will not simply create new authorities, we will create even better places to live. And that really is magical. ■

Maxine O'Mahony is chief executive of Breckland DC