

Chapter 8
Political Management in Local Government
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1. Introduction

An important, if often neglected, part of political marketing is delivering the actual product and positively impacting people's day-to-day lives. Local councils play a crucial role in this but are often forgotten in election analysis. Marketing always puts the customer at the heart of the process, and in political marketing and management, we should, therefore, highlight the lived experiences of the electorate. Local council services constitute the primary interaction individuals have with the state, and these services significantly influence public perception of the country's direction and a leaders' brand. Indeed, a common theme in opposition parties' electoral campaigns in this election was to ask voters whether their services have improved or deteriorated since the Conservatives assumed power 14 years ago. Thus, understanding the electorate through the lens of local council services is crucial. This chapter draws on a comprehensive qualitative interview study conducted within local councils across the UK during the 2019-2024 parliamentary term. It outlines relevant literature, methodology, and then research findings including the significant challenges local councils face, examines the impact of these challenges on the 2024 general election, and discusses the critical future tests for the new Labour government to maintain its fragile electoral base.

2. Literature Review

This research draws upon the expanding body of literature on political management (Lees-Marshment, 2020), the application of industrial and organisational (I/O) psychology in political work (Silvester, 2008), and the growing research on political motivation from both political science and management (Post et al., 2010; Kapoutsis et al., 2017; Wyatt et al., 2022) which often states that motivation to engage in politics is trait-like, motivated by either self-serving or benevolent notions, with more recent research casting doubt on such claims (Blickle et al., 2018). It aims to highlight the importance of party mechanisms in applying political management techniques across all state institutions, with a particular focus on the often overlooked local councils.

3. Methodology

This research incorporates an extensive inductive qualitative study conducted during the 2019-2024 parliamentary term, involving interviewing 60 political workers within local councils across the UK. The study includes 30 council officers, whose positions range from junior managers to chief executives and members of senior leadership teams, as well as 30 councillors, encompassing first-time councillors to council leaders and mayors. This chapter highlights the critical role of party engagement in local councils through an in-depth analysis of 723 pages of qualitative interview data, applying attribution theory (Munton et al., 1999) and template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017) to uncover the causal reasoning behind political activities. By integrating primary data with contemporary electoral data, it emphasises the importance of aligning political management between central and local institutions.

4. Research Findings

Local Council Context in the UK 2024 Election

In the UK, local governments' spending power is primarily derived from central government grants. These grants were cut by 40% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20, decreasing from £46.5bn to £28bn in 2023/24 prices (Atkins & Hoddinot, 2023). This reduction in

funding coincided with rising demand for essential statutory services that local councils must provide, including education, children's safeguarding, adult and children's social care, temporary accommodation, waste collection, road maintenance, and homelessness support, among others. Consequently, with both a funding squeeze and increased demand for these basic services—excluding discretionary ones—councils across the UK declared themselves effectively bankrupt through section 114 notices. Financial struggles remain the most urgent issue for local councils, comprising their ability to deliver both statutory and discretionary services to the standard they desire.

However, the impact of economic strain extends beyond service cuts to those who work within local government organisations. Elected councillors and employees who strive to improve their communities faced an environment of intense resource competition across all departments. From a management perspective, research shows that environments marked by perceived internal conflicts and organisational politics, like those in local councils, lead to decreased engagement and higher turnover intentions among staff (Kane-Frider et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2009). This in turn makes delivering political promises even harder.

Impact of Financial Strain on the Local Council Workplace Culture and Conditions

Financial distress, thus, is only one of the several challenges facing local councils that incumbent governments have overlooked, should address, and will need to consider through the lens of political management. The interviews conducted for this research revealed that the financial strain has exacerbated the 'political arena' (Mintzberg, 1985). This arena, similar to those in traditional organisations, extends beyond party lines and the formal council chamber, where all personnel must compete for every available resource. Those working in this arena voiced concern about growing social and political divisions that drive abuse beyond scrutiny for all of those involved within local council structures, extending beyond the scrutiny one may 'expect' of your elected officials. For example, a mayor in a local district council commented that:

"The worst thing that happened recently is social media. We didn't have social media 12 years ago, now its used as abuse, of members of the staff, from the public, but even worse, from members of the council [councillors]! I can think of members of my own party and honestly [I'm] disgusted to be associated with."

Additionally, mechanisms that have been put into place to increase transparency and accountability have led to increased self-serving individual political behaviours by some councillors, including impression management techniques and politicking. As perhaps one of the most famous viral examples of live-streamed council interactions with Jackie Weaver and her 'lack of authority' demonstrated (BBC, 2022), local councils are increasingly aiming to provide their constituencies with a webcast of the local council chamber.

From a political science perspective, it is entirely understandable that it seeks to aid local democracy by providing everyone with sufficient broadband the ability to listen to their local provision. However, from a management perspective such developments have had a negative impact on behaviour.

"One of the worst things, in my opinion, was putting in the webcasting because the staff did not like it when it first went in because you end up performing to a camera the whole time. They are frightened of what they say; everyone is frightened of what they are saying all the time. And it encourages councillors who wouldn't normally say anything to perform. It is ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous. That was a real stupid thing that we did, and I was warned by councillors from other councils that said

you'll regret that because you will get everyone performing to the camera, and that is exactly what has happened" (Local Councillor, District Council)

Whilst social media can be a wonderful tool to ensure accountability and transparency to reach the electorate that is often disillusioned by politics, it also creates a space for negativity, and abuse. First, we must recognise the abuse's impact on all individuals working to better their communities working in local councils. It is evident that abuse, harassment, stalking, threats, assault and other horrendous forms of intimidation are growing against individuals within our local democracies, and this is unacceptable. Warnings from the Jo Cox Civility Commission (2024), bodies representing local authorities, and the LGA make clear that this abuse is on the increase, with councillors reporting standing down because of intimidation and abuse (LGA, 2022). Whilst this extends beyond the scope of this chapter, social media companies have a responsibility to ensure that such actions and behaviours are clamped down on.

However, as the quote above highlights, within local councils, the processes and structures that should safeguard the interactions between actors are weak and ineffective and can be exploited for personal and political gain. If councillors use their large local following within their community to scapegoat employees within the local council, it is likely to significantly impact the efficiency of local operations and create a highly toxic workplace. Public services can deteriorate without a productive working relationship between councillors and officers tasked with implementing their decisions.

As such, we have allowed our local democratic institutions to flow with the status quo, adopting new technologies and initiatives without considering the impact of the individuals within these institutions. The relationships between the elected politicians and the public servants are tenuous, and the divisive rhetoric that has captivated politics throughout the West has not escaped our local institutions. This is important because services break down without an effective and manageable relationship between the decision-making councillors and the day-to-day implementers of those decisions, i.e., the officers.

The Need for Strategic Human Resource Management in Local Government

Therefore, while often controversial, one solution that could yield significant benefits is the more strategic implementation of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices throughout local government institutions. Implementing HRM in political environments is challenging because it involves formalised procedures that dictate behaviour within organisations (Silvester, 2008), which may conflict with the autonomy politicians exercise in carrying out their mandates. However, the structured application of HRM practices, such as rigorous selection and comprehensive training, is crucial for maintaining the integrity and efficiency of local councils.

For example, during the selection process, HRM policies can help political parties avoid candidates whose past actions, particularly on social media, could damage both the party's national brand and the reputation of local institutions. Cyber vetting, which involves internet surveillance and social media background checks (Berkelaar and Harrison, 2017), is one such practice that, while more stringently applied at the national level, is often overlooked at the local level. The consequences of this oversight are evident in the increasing number of social media gaffes by local councillors, leading to suspensions and damaging the public's trust in our state apparatus and party's brand image. For instance, some councillors have faced

suspension for both historical and more recent controversies, including antisemitic and racist posts.

Although the Local Government Association has provided guidance on appropriate social media behaviour for councillors (LGA, 2024), the emotional and reputational toll of these incidents suggests the need for a more robust and coherent HRM framework to manage and mitigate such risks effectively. This is highly problematic because of the unique demands of political institutions, which require transparency, debate and accountability. However, the current practices protecting the relationship between councillors and officers within the workplace, with an assigned individual to ensure councillors are respectful to officers within the council chamber, are outdated. Our political world has evolved, and we must ensure systems are in place to protect both councillors and officers within our evolved systems.

Reform as an opportunity for National impact

This creates a space for the new Labour Government, as whilst reforming toxic local governance may not initially appear to be a central priority for the Labour government under Sir Keir Starmer, if he is truly committed to his vision of “restoring service and respect to politics, ending the era of noisy performance, and treading more lightly on people’s lives” (BBC, 2024), addressing dysfunctional local state governance presents an actionable opportunity to make a real difference. Furthermore, political marketing studies emphasise the importance of political branding (O’Cass & Voola, 2011; Schneider & Ferie, 2015). By positioning himself as a public servant dedicated to reform, and seeking to influence the culture of the local state apparatus, Starmer can positively influence both his own and the party’s image (Davies & Mian, 2010). After Labour’s brand suffered early setbacks due to accusations of elitism and self-interest, a decisive move to strengthen local governance—restoring it to one characterised by community-driven, compassionate politics—could be a powerful step toward (re)building trust and credibility.

The Conservative Party Discussion of Local Councils in the Election

Given the troublesome position that the Conservative governments have overseen within their time in power, it is perhaps not surprising that the electorate had such a negative perception of their local services. The above circumstances within this chapter are most likely the considerable cause of the YouGov findings that 65% of the electorate thought that their Local Government services were worse off than when the Conservative government came into power in 2010, with shockingly only 2% thinking these services are better (YouGov, 2024a). For constituents, this reinforces the perception of the incompetence of the ruling party; it is highly likely that the Conservative government lost this election because of these negative public perceptions; 81% were dissatisfied with the way the government ran the country, 68% disagreed that the Conservatives were competent (Ipsos, 2024). There is no more pressing and unequivocal indicator of a country's trajectory than the state of its local services, which constituents encounter daily.

Therefore, with the financial and cultural challenges facing local councils, it was surprising that Rishi Sunak chose to focus on the financial troubles of Labour-run Nottingham City Council during the final televised debates. He highlighted the council's bankruptcy, framing it as a "glimpse of the future" for voters if Labour were to win. While the Nottingham location of the debate may have influenced his decision, the broader narrative around local council struggles is shaped by years of financial decisions made by successive Conservative governments which have formed an intensely difficult current position for local councils across the country.

This narrative and, thus, the wider importance of valence—how voters judge the performance and competence of a government—was a key factor in this election. Over two-thirds of voters viewed the Conservatives as incompetent (Ipsos, 2024), and whether fair or not, local services are often seen as a reflection of national governance. For many, local services are their most direct interaction with the state, and when these services fail, blame is not always placed on the local council but often on the ruling party at Westminster. Local services, therefore, play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the country's overall direction.

Lessons to be learnt from the Conservative Party's management

This research underscores the critical role of communication strategies within local councils in shaping these perceptions. Interviews with council members revealed many successes during the last parliamentary term—new leisure centres, stadiums, roads, affordable housing, and community initiatives supporting the most vulnerable. Yet, these achievements are often overshadowed by negative narratives, rarely reaching the public consciousness. This is strange because the impact of forming political narratives in priming the electorate are evident (Aragones et al., 2015).

To avoid the same pitfalls as the Conservatives, Labour must overhaul its communication strategies. While national governments spend millions promoting their achievements, local councils often remain on the defensive, justifying their decisions rather than celebrating their successes. For Labour, shifting the narrative from criticising opposition-led council failures to highlighting the positive outcomes of their own councils is essential for building public trust and strengthening their political position ahead of future elections. This chapter also highlights the need for future scholarly attention investigating the impact of party brands within local areas when prioritising positive communication strategies.

The Labour Party's discussion of local councils in the election

Through both the primary and secondary data applied thus far, alongside the enormous 174 majority that Labour gained, it would seem that Labour is in a privileged, stable position? Unfortunately for Labour, this is not the case. The data showcases very little support for Labour, glaringly showcased by YouGov's AI language model, which found that 48% of respondents voted Labour "to get the Tories out", with shockingly only 5% voting because they agreed with their policies (Yougov, 2024b). The electorate is not overly convinced by the policies and the offerings that the alternative parties offered, showcased again by the large achievement of 72 seats by the Liberal Democrats, with a campaign run on the character of their leader Ed Davey, with very little in terms of marketing their policies. In fact, the electorate did not believe that any party would deliver for them on vital issues such as the economy, immigration and the NHS (ITV, 2024). It lends credibility to the argument that the Conservatives lost this election rather than Labour winning it. It will bring no excitement or optimism to councils that Labour's only policy announcement for the financial struggles of Local Councils during the campaign was to 'change the funding model' to provide a different payment schedule. Without the advantage of opposition, the Labour party will have to ensure they do not become the perceived ruling party of incompetence that fell onto the Conservatives.

This reflects one of the potential 'cut-through' messages within the 2024 election; the Labour Party and Sir Keir Starmer made a significant point of consistently referring to 'A Renewed Social Contract,' with a focus on communities and local institutions 'Country First, Party Second' with a theme of removing the supposed greed of the previous government, whereby they were in political positions for their self-serving benefit. The marketed message was

compelling to some, with the leader of the Conservative party a billionaire, the previous Tory leader damaging the economy through a 'personal endeavour' to reshape the fabric of the economy and the backdrop of various COVID contract scandals.

However, this narrative was problematic, and this research can showcase this in relation to local council institutions. Extant literature has often suggested that motivations to engage in politics at the individual level have been trait-like (Kapoutsis et al., 2017; Callander, 2008) and dispositional to individuals, suggesting that the Labour Party should strongly consider seeking a more effective selection process to ensure that they are selecting community-guided individuals. However, as the next section will highlight, this research strongly suggests that this will not be enough to return the nation's politicians, at both national and local levels, to other-focused bastions of service over greed because the context matters in political motivation and does not reflect such simplicity.

Motivations at a Local Council Level

A central theme of Labour's electoral campaign has been the emphasis on political motivations, particularly the shift from what they describe as the self-serving rule of the previous government to what Keir Starmer envisions as a return to 'public service'—or, in academic terms, 'benevolent' political motivation. While this is a laudable goal, it lacks substance without a deeper understanding of *why* individuals engage in political activity. This research sought to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the meaning behind Starmer's motivation-focused message. Key questions arose: Can insights from management and I/O psychology guide us in fostering individuals motivated by the communal good rather than self-interest? Can improved selection procedures, stringent checks, or performance evaluations make a difference?

To answer these questions, this research took a modified attributional approach (Munton et al., 1999). It extracted each interviewee's causal reasoning statements behind their political activity from their qualitative interview and used template analysis to find themes within their reasoning statements. The research revealed that individualised political motivations to engage in political activity among impartial public servants and politicians, in this case, councillors, are more nuanced than being influenced by a trait like self-serving or benevolent political will currently posited within the literature (Kapoutsis et al., 2017). Whilst literature has shed light on the contested characterisation of what benevolence would be aligned to, i.e. a reciprocal motivation, an altruistic or collective one (Blickle et al., 2018) this research went a step forward and showcased that political motivation is multifaceted, often with notions of self-serving and benevolent will within a singular political behaviour.

For example, senior public servants often articulated that they engaged in organisational political activities such as mentoring others for benevolence. These individuals were grateful for the opportunities local institutions had provided them to aid their community and wanted to give back to individuals on a similar path. However, these officers also made clear that whilst benevolence was one reason, their involvement in this activity was not one-dimensional. They were acutely aware that mentoring individuals creates a reciprocal relationship from which they could benefit in the future. In addition, councillors within this sample at all levels, junior, mid-level and senior, had multifaceted reasons behind political behaviours such as networking. Most would articulate that they networked with constituents or community groups to ensure they were close to the electorate whilst also knowing that this would enhance their profile and image within the community, elevating their chance of electoral success in the future.

In fact, whilst this highlights that an evaluation of your environment heavily influences political motivation, it also showcases that political motivation morphs throughout individuals' careers. For example, the junior councillors' causal reasoning was often driven by an individualised benevolent motivation to provide a link between the constituents and the council, to empower and represent. However, this reasoning was far less prevalent at the mid and senior levels. It was *often openly more self-serving*, seeking to be the political figurehead of various local initiatives within their communities, such as leisure centres, stadiums, railway provisions, housing developments and road networks. This suggests that the seniority of politicians, whether they have longevity and thus a more extensive network and reputation or sit on the cabinet, influences motivations behind political activity.

In the context of elections, this is important because the efficiency and responsiveness of local councils play a pivotal role in shaping public perception of the incumbent government. This chapter argues that for most citizens, the primary interaction with the state occurs through public services, which are directly influenced by the effectiveness of local government institutions. An inefficient council can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction among constituents, as it often fails to address critical issues such as public infrastructure, social services, and community projects. This inefficiency can be particularly damaging for the ruling party, as voters may perceive it as a reflection of the broader government's incompetence or negligence. The motivations of councillors, whether driven by self-serving interests or communal benevolence, significantly impact the quality of these services. Therefore, the seniority and associated motivations of public servants and elected officials affect not only the delivery of essential services but also the political fortunes of the party in power. In this light, a nuanced understanding of political motivations within local councils is crucial, as it highlights the intricate relationship between local governance and electoral outcomes.

Potential Actions Towards 'Service for the People'

Focusing on the environment surrounding politicians is crucial if Labour aims to realign political motivations. The traits of the individual are important, but so too are their job roles, seniority, perceptions of power and the political climate. In the short term, the logical focus must be on creating a political environment that does not reward self-serving behaviour. As seen from scandals at the national level, such as the expense debacle, cash-for-honours, lockdown parties, and controversial COVID contracts, reforming this environment will be challenging but essential for restoring public trust and integrity in governance.

The Labour Party should prioritise establishing more robust oversight mechanisms within local institutions. This could involve modifying the traditional 'monitoring officer' role with independent watchdogs tasked with identifying and addressing unethical behaviours, conflicts of interest, and improper political activities. Simultaneously, parties considering the efficiency of councils and their brand should implement frameworks that actively reward members who prioritise public interests. For instance, improving local communication channels to highlight successes and publicly celebrating the exceptional efforts of local councils in supporting their constituents can create a culture that values integrity and service. This dual approach—rigorous oversight paired with positive reinforcement—can help foster trust and accountability in governance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

There is an intricate relationship between financial constraints, political motivations, and public perception within UK local councils. Funding cuts have strained resources, reshaping

institutional cultures and eroding trust among employees, councillors, and the public. Amplified by social media, scrutiny and abuse exacerbate these challenges, underscoring the need for improved communication and workplace practices. Addressing these issues is vital for effective service delivery and rebuilding public trust. For Labour, tackling local governance challenges offers an opportunity to establish a community-focused and ethical national brand. However, realigning motivations requires addressing both individuals and the broader political context. Success will hinge on Labour's ability to reform governance structures to embody integrity and accountability, strengthening councils as pillars of public service. Ultimately, local councils remain critical to public trust in government, as they are the most immediate and impactful touchpoints for citizens.

This chapter recommends that all parties and institutions integrate these lessons into their strategic planning, emphasising the essential role of local institutions in shaping outcomes. Table 1 offers lessons for UK parties in particular and Table 2 for global practitioners.

Table 1: Key Lessons for UK Parties to Learn

For all parties: Mind the delivery gap • Acknowledge that delivery is what ultimately shapes voter trust; good policies mean little without tangible results. • Recognise local councils as the frontline of delivery, requiring investment, collaboration, and realistic expectations to achieve impact. For the Conservatives: Rebuild relationships from the ground up • Use time in opposition to re-establish strong connections with central and localised divisions, demonstrating respect and a commitment to mutual goals. • Develop policies that empower local councils as key partners in implementing solutions. For the Labour Government: Build a mission-led, delivery-focused local state • Promote collaboration between central government and local councils to foster a mission-led, service-oriented ethos that translates promises into action. • Support workplace improvements within local government to enhance productivity, morale to help form a service devoted to the public

Table 2: Key Recommendations for Global Future Practice

1. Integrate local government delivery into campaign strategy, recognising its role as a cornerstone of success. 2. Strengthen political management structures by embedding coordination between central and local government institutions. 3. Ensure that communication channels between political leadership and local councils are clear, frequent, and reciprocal to enhance policy alignment and execution. 4. Invest in the professional development and positive workplace culture within local government to ensure it becomes a vehicle for innovative, effective service delivery. 5. Prioritise clarity, consistency, and coherence in communication to convey unified leadership and build public confidence in governmental capacity at all levels.
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For researchers, this chapter has also shown why we need to research political management. Whereas from a political science perspective, increasing transparency by broadcasting council events seems good for democracy, it neglects to consider the impact on individuals and their behaviour within an institution. Applying management concepts helps to ensure we consider the individuals within government, and more strategic implementation of Human Resource Management practices for both elected councillors and their advisors has the potential to improve local governments' ability to deliver for the people they are designed to serve.

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