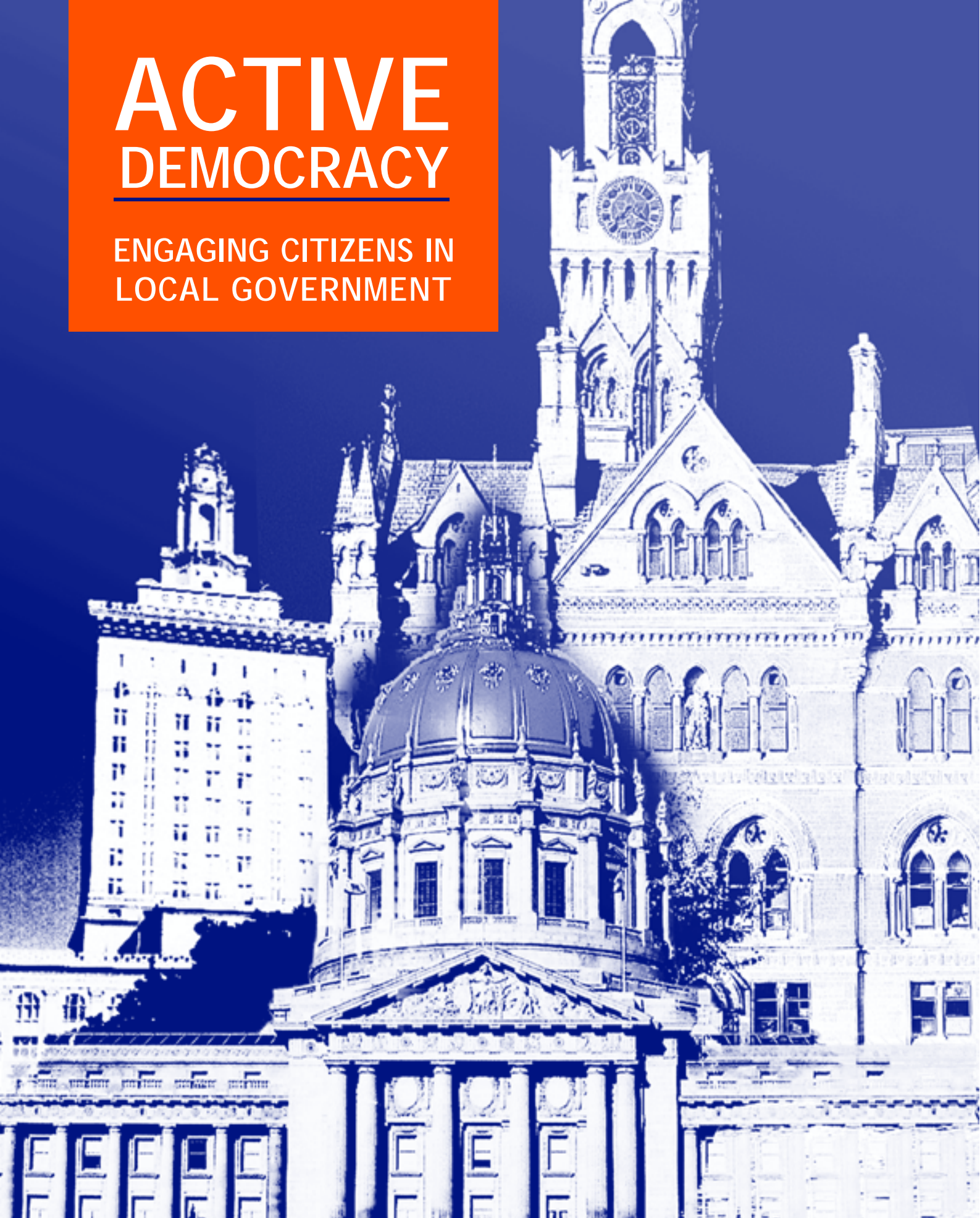


ACTIVE DEMOCRACY

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT



Report of the Local Government Management Network USA Study Visits 2000

Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust

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- 1 The Study Visits
- 2 Structure of City Councils in the USA
- 3 Elections & Voter Turnout in the USA
- 4 The Decision Making Process
- 5 Citizen Participation in Decision Making
- 6 Citizen Engagement in Policy and Overview
- 7 Volunteering & Citizenship
- 8 Towards Active Democracy

Appendix - Tables of Cities Visited

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1 - THE STUDY VISITS

The Local Government Act 2000 requires local authorities to adopt new models of political management. What are the implications for senior managers and members in adopting new political structures?

This report is the result of study visits to eleven US cities (see Appendix) in Spring 2000 by eight senior managers from UK local authorities. The original objectives of the research were:

- to analyse how similar models have developed and operate in local government in the USA, including the role of elected mayors and city managers, and
- to identify the potential implications for officers and elected members of new forms of political management by examining experience and practice in the USA.

In addressing these objectives, what we found raised some profound questions about local democracy. A decision was taken to focus this report more on the possible transferable learning from the extensive opportunities for citizen engagement in USA local government, rather than concentrate on the democratic models. *The central theme of this report is the degree to which citizen involvement gives credence and validity to the local democratic processes in the USA, where the city council ethos was found to be one of listening, response and expectation of enthusiastic citizen engagement.*

WHAT IS LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

The Government's determination to modernise local government challenges councils' roles as autocratic service providers and the way they respond to the communities they serve.

"Modern councils succeed when they put people first, when they work and take decisions in a culture of openness and accountability to local people".¹

New political management structures are intended to make decision making speedier and more transparent. The evidence from the study visits is that in the USA there is greater consultation and engagement in decision making than in UK local government. Councillor Dave Sullivan, Mayor for Lewisham, comments:

"The general calibre of the majority of councillors is not so high that we should trust it before we trust the electorate".²

Active citizen participation is the cornerstone of local government in the USA. The UK Government has established electoral turnout as a key indicator of local authority success in engaging its citizens. Is this sufficient, or should there be additional measures of success in involving citizens and stimulating interest in local government? When citizens can participate actively in local democratic processes, is this better for local democracy than relying on the representative roles of councillors elected on a broad manifesto that may owe more to national politics rather than local issues? Geddes and Davis note:

"The concern expressed by government about the role of local political parties, especially in so-called 'one party local states' where many voters are said to have little effective voice, is intensified by the perceived behaviour of party groups on councils acting as unified blocs".³

Whilst in the USA, we saw that the openness of decision making, the high levels of citizen engagement and the political processes themselves benefited from an ethos of community interest rather than political manifesto.

This report is not intended to recommend USA models and processes for integration into the emerging UK democratic models. Some of the processes observed in the USA would be difficult, if not impossible, to translate into UK local government in its current form. This report, therefore, raises three key questions for local democracy in the UK:

- *Is electoral turnout a sufficient measure of citizen engagement in local democracy?*
- *Is a large elected body commensurate with good, strategic decision making?*
- *Does the party political process support or detract from local democracy?*

2 - STRUCTURE OF CITY COUNCILS IN THE USA

Local government in the USA has evolved since the 1850's to reflect local requirements, contrasting with the UK experience of nationally determined re-organisations.

CASE STUDY - DEVELOPMENT OF SAN DIEGO CITY COUNCIL

- 1769 San Diego settled by Europeans
- 1850 San Diego incorporated as a city 27 March. The first city council consisted of a "common council" with five members and a mayor. The City Marshall, City Attorney, City Clerk, City Assessor and City Treasurer were all elected officials.
- 1852 City declared bankrupt. The State dissolved the council, replacing it with a three-member Board of Trustees.
- 1872 Board increased to five members, with return of some previous powers.
- 1887 Voters adopted a new Charter providing an elected mayor-council form of government.
- 1889 Mayor a strong executive, elected city-wide. The city council comprised two houses; the Board of Alderman (two representatives from each of nine wards) and the Board of Delegates (nine members elected at large).
- 1905 Two Houses consolidated into one House of nine members (one from each ward).
- 1909 Nine-member council replaced by five members all elected at large.
- 1915 Members appointed a Manager of Operations for the administration of city departments.
- 1931 A new charter introduced (which, with modifications, still exists today), creating a city manager - council form of government. Seven member council: six council members

and the mayor. Council members nominated by district but elected city-wide.

- 1963 Number of districts increased from six to eight. Council now comprises eight members and the mayor.
- 1974 Mayor and members become full-time positions
- 1988 Election system changed to district elections. Only the mayor and the City Attorney now elected at large.

Source: "The History of San Diego"

The flexibility and local discretion open to city councils in the USA has resulted in a range of models, adapted to suit local conditions and circumstances.

Forms of local government in the USA, 1999

Form of Government	Number	Percentage
Council – City Manager	3,285	48.2
Elected Mayor - Council	2,978	43.8
Commission	144	2.1
Town Meeting	334	4.9
Representative Town Meeting	65	1.0
Total	6806	100

Source: *Municipal Year Book 1999, International City/County Management Association*

Although there is a wide diversity among councils, the two main forms of local government in the USA are the council - city manager and the elected mayor - council models. The study visits covered a range of cities which have adopted these models, the key features being:

THE CITY COUNCIL - MANAGER MODEL:

- Little or no party politics
- Likely to have five to eleven elected representatives, including the mayor
- Mayor selected either by the council or directly elected by voters
- Power rests in the elected council
- City manager serves "at the gift" of the council, being responsible for the management of the council and implementation of policy decisions
- Clear separation of roles between elected representatives and officers within a locally

- determined constitution or charter
- Tendency to have longer term planning horizons
- The most popular form of government for communities with populations of 5,000 or more

THE ELECTED MAYOR - COUNCIL MODEL:

- Voters elect the legislature and the executive
- Mayor is often head of the city government departments
- Mayor's authority varies from ceremonial to many having extensive power
- Tendency to more politicisation of the elected mayor role
- Elected mayor usually has high public profile
- A strong elected mayor can provide clear direction and community leadership

BOTH MODELS:

- Have high levels of public accountability
- Contain explicit checks and balances within decision making processes
- Emphasise consensus decision making
- Have clear accountability, open decision making and well defined rights for citizens
- Lack partisan or high profile party politics at the local level

ONGOING CHANGE

In terms of organisational change there was little evidence of debate about new structures of government, the consensus being that the forms of government have been developed based on what works best for individual cities and circumstances. For example, current debates in San Diego city council include moving from the council – city manager model to the elected mayor - council model, the council's relationship with other agencies, and the fixed term periods of office (two terms of four years) for elected representatives. In November 2000, a referendum in Norfolk, Virginia will seek residents' views on changing from a city manager to an elected mayor model. In other cities there is much discussion as to whether representatives should be elected "at large" (representing the whole city area) or by district.

USA LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

The financing of local government in the USA is significantly different to the UK system. A higher proportion of revenue is derived from local taxes, such as property and sales taxes. For example, San Diego city council has a budget of \$2,204 billion for the fiscal year 2000, 28% of this coming from local taxes and 41% from user fees. The remainder of its

revenue comes from capital project funds (17%) and special revenue and tax funds (14%). Hotel, or "transient occupancy tax", is a valuable source of income for many tourist cities such as Monterey. The community has opportunities to influence the local budget. Notably, the public has to give approval to the introduction of new taxes; in California increases in tax of more than 1% require a two-third majority vote in a ballot. It is common for the draft budget to be subjected to several stages of public consultation, through means familiar in the UK such as community forums and market research.

THE NUMBER OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

The modernisation proposals in the UK do not provide for any reduction in the number of elected councillors, unless the council itself wishes to put forward proposals as part of ward boundary reviews. City councils in the USA, by comparison, generally have between five and eleven elected representatives (see Appendix). The councils rely on other bodies (such as commissions and boards) for much of the work that has traditionally been conducted within committees in the UK. However, the debate on size of councils is clearly starting in the UK, with the Liverpool Democracy Commission recommending a two-thirds reduction in the number of elected members for Liverpool and the Kerley report into local government in Scotland recommending specific reductions for a number of Scottish authorities.

THE ROLE OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

The small number of elected representatives in the USA models gives them a well defined role in the decision making process and to the communities they serve. The size of the city councils results in representatives focusing on strategic issues, formulating local legislation and policy. Whilst the checks and balances on decision making are inherent within the local constitutions, the very public

nature of decision making at a local level in the USA provides a powerful public scrutiny role. These models and processes may not be immediately transferable to UK authorities, but the degree to which elected representatives are able to engage citizens can provide valuable lessons for developing externally focused roles for councillors in the UK, whilst ensuring opportunity for fuller involvement in the decision making process.



City Hall, Oakland

THE PARTY POLITICAL DIMENSION

Party politics is predominantly absent in USA local government, with representatives being elected on a non-partisan basis. This can provide representatives with high individual public profiles and recognition. Representatives are frequently elected on the basis of local priorities or single issues. Conversely, party politics in the UK tends to reduce an individual's profile at the local level, with many decisions being taken on party lines.

The dilemma for local democracy in the UK is that the discipline of party politics is usually necessary to achieve cohesive decision making and political direction with a large number of members. Political groups are likely to have members of both the executive and scrutiny bodies meeting together in private. This raises issues of accountability, the strength of scrutiny, transparency of decision making, and members' profiles in the community.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The organisational structure of city councils in the USA was found to be varied, but apart from the different services covered (police, fire, but not education), the structures observed bore many similarities to those of UK local authorities. Differences are more noticeable in respect of officer roles, with clear constitutional parameters in many city councils governing roles and relationships with elected representatives. In many city manager – council models, protocols require all communication and instruction from the council to be solely via the city manager, with no direct instruction or interference with staff by the elected representatives. In elected mayor - council models, particularly in the larger cities, the mayor is likely to have dedicated support staff and strong influence over council departments.

AUTONOMY

The modernising agenda in the UK presents conflicting issues for local authorities. On one hand, greater freedoms are being encouraged, such as the power to promote economic, social and environmental well-being. This is balanced by increasing central influence and control through extensive external inspection and intervention powers for central government. How these tensions will be resolved is crucial to the success of the new models and increased public involvement in local government.

The USA models are rooted in their communities, underpinned by a culture of individual self-help that contrasts with the UK situation of higher dependency on the state for support. In the short term this may

hinder an increased level of citizen engagement. It is further exacerbated by the many organisations involved in providing services at the local level, making it difficult for the public to understand the role of the local authority, and equally for councils to be able to demonstrate that they can make a real difference to community issues.

Once established, new local government political management structures and processes in the UK will need to be regularly reviewed to ensure continued improvement in local democratic processes and to maximise local discretion and community leadership. Current legislation is a stepping stone to further changes, not the long term solution for improved local democracy.

3 - ELECTIONS AND VOTER TURNOUT IN THE USA

There are many tiers of elections and ballots in the USA, from state and presidential elections through to city council, local board and public body elections. In all cities visited, there was a strong sense of public interest and awareness of local council issues. Where there is an elected mayor, most citizens will know his or her name and his or her values. Local media reports municipal issues and in larger cities there may be a channel dedicated to council meetings and activities. What impact does this have on electoral turnout? The answer is, surprisingly little.

The declared turnout in the state elections of 1996, a presidential election year, was 82.2%, compared to a 71.5% turnout in the UK national election of 1997. These figures mask a significant issue in the USA electoral system – low voter registration, which was 65.9% in 1996 compared to a UK registration of 98.7% (1990 figure). The USA turnout, on a comparable basis to UK turnout, was therefore 54.2% of the voting age population.

There is also greater variation in turnout between cities at local elections than in the UK. In recent local elections in Monterey, turnout was recorded as 63.1% of the registered voters. In Sunnyvale (a city council highly regarded for innovation and its advanced performance management system) the turnout was 23.2% of the registered vote. Low levels are also recorded in many east-coast cities; Baltimore had a 34% turnout on a registration level of 68%. However, the comparative low level of electoral turnout does not reflect disinterest. For example, most citizens we spoke to in San Francisco knew the name and record of the mayor – Willie

Brown Jr. – who is considered a powerful figure, unifying the city council and other agencies. Efforts to increase electoral turnout in the USA have focused initially on improving electoral registration. In the USA it is the responsibility of the citizen to initiate their registration, unlike the proactive canvass process in the UK. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 enables US citizens to register at a wide range of offices, by post or even at the same time as applying for vehicle registration, hence the more popular reference to ‘Motor Voter’. Some states have recorded this initiative as successfully increasing registration, although national data from the US Census Bureau indicates a decline in registered voters from 68.2% in 1992 to 65.9% in 1996⁴. More recently, Arizona introduced internet voting for the Democratic Party’s presidential primary election in March 2000, with a resulting 35,765 internet votes placed, three times the total turnout in the previous 1996 election⁵.

Experiments with new forms of voting in the UK 2000 local elections appeared to have no discernible impact on voter turnout, the exception being a positive response to increasing the postal vote.

‘Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996’, US Census Bureau, July 1998, identifies a range of reasons why those who were registered did not vote, the main reasons being:

no time off / too busy	21.5%
not interested	16.6%
ill / disabled / emergency	14.9%
didn't like candidates	13%

A further possible factor may be that, if citizens know they can become involved and even influence those decisions that are of importance to them, the impetus to vote in elections is reduced.

There is little evidence that the political models of elected mayor and city manager stimulate electoral turnout. Yet the low levels of electoral turnout do not reflect a lack of interest by citizens in local democracy; conversely, there is evidence of high levels of public engagement and involvement in the USA, which is explored in the following section.



Leaving a meeting, San Francisco

4 - THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

A key feature of both the USA and the emerging UK models of local government is the distinct separation of responsibilities in the decision making process. The USA models have clearly defined roles between policy and implementation, legally underpinned by the local charter or constitution. The UK models differ, but nevertheless maintain a clear separation between the executive and the overview and scrutiny functions. There is significant officer delegation within the USA local government models, which is governed by formal protocols.

The decision making process will differ depending on the type of council and its size, but in all councils visited in the USA the process was well defined, with appropriate checks and balances, in some cases involving officer veto powers.

The responsibility for setting the council agenda will vary from city to city. However, an informal consensus building approach is usually necessary at an early stage to obtain the majority support necessary to facilitate the successful passage of a proposal. Many issues arise through input from members of the community, either through elected representatives or directly through public input to a council meeting.

CASE STUDY - THE DOCKETING SYSTEM IN SAN DIEGO CITY COUNCIL

Known as the 1472 procedure, this approach to decision making ensures that all relevant considerations are taken into account before the matter is placed before the city council for consideration:

Originating department prepares details of the decision sought, with supporting papers, and the 1472 docket.



Approval required within that department at a senior level



To City Manager for initial consideration



To City Auditor for financial review and legality to be determined



To City Attorney to prepare appropriate legal documents



Returned to originating department for completeness check



To City Manager with background information and details needed to recommend and justify the requested action before the city council



To Rules Committee Consultant for consideration and allocation on an agenda for the city council. This must be submitted two weeks before the appropriate council meeting to enable processing and publication of proposals.



City Clerk provided with adequate instructions for processing all documents following council action



City council consideration

This procedure enables clear and proper consideration of issues by the relevant departments but can lead to a long decision making cycle and is subject to individual office-holders being able to either speed or delay progress.

Decision making in the USA councils provides a number of issues that councils in the UK may usefully consider when introducing new political management arrangements.

- USA city councils have greater legislative power, being able to introduce byelaws by local decision.
- The local constitution defines the local checks and balances. For example, in many elected mayor – council models, the council (legislature) and the mayor may introduce local legislation, with decisions subject to a power of veto by the council.
- Although some formal processes for introducing issues to the council appear to be lengthy, the reality is that in many cases the time from

origination to final decision is comparatively short. Council agendas can be long (20 pages is not unusual), but much of the agenda consists of a "consent agenda". The consent agenda contains officer and non-controversial recommendations or decisions which are made public and formally approved in their entirety, subject to any item being raised to the main agenda by any representative (or sometimes at the request of the public).

With the increasing pace of change in modern society there needs to be provision for taking quick decisions in a way that ensures appropriate accountability and levels of involvement. The USA model involves significant delegation to officers and this is seen as a key feature of the emerging UK models.

The decision making processes in the USA involve extensive citizen participation. Public involvement is not limited to speaking at meetings. The following sections illustrate the degree to which citizens in the USA can engage with their councils, to a greater extent than currently exists within the UK.

5 - CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

In every city visited, all meetings of the council, boards and commissions are open to the public (unless the business was explicitly confidential). Citizens are able to speak on any item of business, usually subject to a time limit, and many council meetings have a slot for citizens to address the council on any topic. Dialogue with the community forms part of the routine business of the council, enhances public awareness and involvement, and emphasises the leadership role of the council.

Councils in the USA exist explicitly to serve, and be accountable to, their citizens and to this end all non-confidential business is conducted openly. In California 'The Brown Act' states that citizens do not "yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them, nor do they give them the right to decide what is good for them to know or not know". The Act further states that citizens "insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created". This, together with an extremely high level of public interest in local affairs, sets the scene for the way decisions are taken in city hall.

Although there are local variations, the procedure for decision making and ensuring public access process broadly follows a general model:



Council Meeting, Oakland

FORMAT OF A TYPICAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING

- Notices of meetings and agendas are posted on official posting boards outside the city hall, and are available in public libraries and on the council's website, which also lists past papers and decisions. Copies of the reports will be available from the council in advance of the meeting as well as at the meeting itself. Newspapers will highlight meetings and current issues.
- Members of public are given a chance to speak on any subject not on the agenda at an open forum at the beginning of the meeting, which usually lasts 15 to 20 minutes. Those wishing to speak collect a 'speakers card' and lots are drawn. Those selected are given a specific time allocation (usually 3 minutes) to address the council. No discussion or decision can be made at the meeting concerning open forum matters, to ensure public views can be heard on the issue, but such issues can be referred for consideration at a future meeting.
- The 'consent' agenda comprising routine, non-contentious matters is then considered. However, any citizen or council member can request specific items be removed and subject to separate discussion and action.
- Public hearings on specific, pre-advertised issues are considered on which the public can speak. After residents have spoken at public hearings the council may take a decision or defer action until the next council meeting.
- With limited exceptions the public can speak on all agenda items before the council, usually using a 'speakers card' system.
- Organised groups can make larger presentations by prior agreement.
- The council will consider written comments submitted by the public.

Meetings are frequent – usually weekly or fortnightly – and the major meetings usually commence early evening and continue until business is concluded, sometimes past midnight. These are open to the public, but there are provisions for closed sessions when confidential matters are discussed. In California such matters must fall within the ‘Brown Act’ provisions (see above). The beginning of the meeting can often include ceremonial matters and presentations to staff or citizens to recognise achievement or service to the community.

Considerable numbers of people attend meetings. For example a relatively uncontroversial Oakland council meeting attracted approximately 100 people. At this meeting the level of public speaking was of a high standard, and young people played an active and constructive role. Many more people are likely to attend if a contentious issue is to be considered. Some councils have ‘watchers’, who are well versed in the relevant legislation, who monitor the decision making process and "whistleblow" if necessary. Special consideration is given to those with disabilities attending council meetings. If notice is given, assistance is available for translation and sign language services or large print versions of documents, and all venues are user-friendly for those who are hearing impaired or physically disabled.

In many cities the council meetings are broadcast live on radio or cable television, sometimes re-broadcast some days later. Council meetings may also be recorded on audio and video cassettes that are available to the public. There is evidence that such broadcasting is widely watched and can have a significant effect on public thinking. In one city, constitutional changes instigated by citizens are underway to exclude what is considered to be inappropriate conduct – the result of public observation of council business on television.

Use of the internet is more developed in the USA. It is an accessible and low-cost means of disseminating information and receiving views from members of the public. Most USA city websites contain comprehensive information about council business.

The geographic spread of the USA results in most radio, TV and printed media being more localised, so local issues have greater prominence. There are many local papers, many of which are free. One such special interest paper in San Francisco devoted most of its April 2000 edition to details of a city council proposal to amend assistance to the homeless and how this was defeated by public vote. Many UK councils have opportunities for petitions to



Newspaper Vending Machines, Berkeley

be put before members and some public comment allowed, although public access to decision making in the UK is far less developed than in the USA. The UK falls short of the USA model of providing comprehensive opportunity for citizens to raise issues and speak on public agenda items. There are, of course, exceptions, and some UK authorities are beginning to enhance the public's role in decision making. In Spelthorne District council, the public can put their views to councillors at meetings considering major policy issues and future spending priorities. A public question time is held at the start of meetings and, providing that a prior copy of the question is received, any person can ask the Leader of the Council a question about the council's activities. Similarly when the council is considering a recommendation made by a committee, any resident can put forward their views for three minutes before the council discusses the recommendation and makes a decision. In another example of innovation in public access, both Lewisham and Newham have experimented recently with broadcasting council meetings on the Internet.

Citizen engagement does not end with meetings of the council. It extends to all aspects of policy formulation and decision making through involvement in a variety of processes, outlined in the following section.

6 - CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY AND OVERVIEW

The shape of US government follows a very non-municipal model of civic society, leading to less dependency on local councils and a greater sense of collective responsibility. Citizens participate in the local democratic process in a variety of ways.

CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

The relatively small numbers of elected representatives are highly visible in their localities and consult their communities using a wide range of methods. Consultation includes snapshots such as residents' surveys and opinion polls, similar to the UK, as well as newsletters or meetings to give residents information and invite their views. USA city governments also use referenda and ballots that depend on the specific legal framework of US local government. Citizens can initiate votes on an issue if they collect sufficient support by petition, and are able to vote on legislative, policy and administrative propositions.

City councils have established effective ways of engaging citizens. In Norfolk, Virginia, the Civic Connection monthly newsletter discussed the budget, advertised the relevant public meeting and invited comments by post or e-mail (the final budget stated that it was "developed with a full awareness and sensitivity to high community expectations and pent up basic needs"). This newsletter also advertises the times, dates and venues of various council meetings, including full council, zoning appeals, planning commission etc. At the back of the newsletter is a 'to do' list which invites residents to contact the council on issues such as potholes, raking leaves, repairing signs, painting and graffiti removal.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Most city councils have advisory and policy development bodies, usually referred to as boards or commissions, that consider specific issues and make recommendations to the city council. In this way they contribute to the council's policy formulation and decision making function. In practice the council members will usually accept the views of such bodies and endorse their recommendations.

The constitution and selection of such bodies varies, depending on the local city charter or constitution. Formation of boards and commissions can be through:

- direct appointment by an elected mayor
- appointment by the city council
- public election
- applications from citizens who have an interest in the issue covered by the body

In some elected mayor - council models where the mayor is invested with a high level of power, he or she may nominate a significant number or all of the

advisory body, which ensures the mayor's influence on policy making (although such nominations are usually subject to council approval). Whilst some of the elected boards and commissions have executive powers, most are appointed and advisory only. Their remit will vary according to the priorities of the council.

A considerable amount of business is debated by boards and commissions – covering a wide range of services and issues. The use of such advisory bodies reduces the amount of routine matters before the council, while still allowing for public scrutiny. Such bodies are also used for more in depth investigations of issues such as homelessness.

CASE STUDY - BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS IN BERKELEY

In Berkeley, citizen participation in boards and commissions is viewed as fundamental to local democracy. Citizens are encouraged to take part in over forty established commissions or boards as a right and a duty. The commissions, engaging some 250 citizens, range over many areas including energy, libraries, arts, equalities, environment, health, welfare and homelessness. Two of the important commissions are disaster planning (preparation for earthquakes) and the Citizen Budget Review Commission. Commissioners serve not more than eight consecutive years and on some occasions are required to have a defined level of experience. The Fair Campaign Practices Commission is responsible for regulating appointments of commissioners.

- Attendance at meetings is seen as crucial and three consecutive absences from meetings can result in expiry of appointment
- Expenses are paid at \$13 per meeting (an additional \$7 can be claimed for childcare expenses)
- There are strict guidelines on conflict of interest and disclosure statements have to be submitted, covering areas such as gifts, loans, employment, assets, property, investments and relationships
- Officers are responsible for keeping commissions informed of the council's timetable
- Berkeley Council asks each commission to produce a quarterly report

A variation of the board and commission model could be used in the UK to enable overview and scrutiny committees to develop a pro-active, participative policy making role. This could result in non-executive members together with non-elected representatives (residents, academics and business people) investigating issues and options in a particular area, reporting findings and recommendations to the Executive for consideration.

It is worth noting that councils in the USA face similar problems to their UK counterparts in trying to encourage a diverse range of citizens to join community based forums.

PUBLIC INFLUENCE

Interest groups in the USA (for example, ethnic minorities, disabled citizens, environmental groups and the gay community) appear to be well organised and influential. In San Francisco many of the supervisors advocated the interests of particular minority groups. Communities and interest groups have access to professional and voluntary advocates and lobbyists to articulate their views to the city government.

ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES LISTENING AND CONSULTING

In the USA, elected representatives, including mayors, board or council members, actively engage in a wide range of consultation in addition to the more familiar types of casework undertaken in the UK. This seemed to be both broader and more systematic than UK equivalents and integral to the local government process. Examples were wide ranging within and across cities. All had high levels of elected representative engagement in dialogues with groups of citizens as well as with individuals. For example, in San Francisco the elected mayor:

- visits local groups and organisations
- has a monthly open house with 25 tickets for the public (which are queued for)
- has his own television show

In Oakland and Santa Cruz, elected representatives hold meetings in coffee shops, have open meetings without an agenda, knock on citizen's doors to seek their opinions, and have introduced telephone hot-lines to enable citizens to raise matters direct. Elected representatives in San Francisco and Monterey set up area- and issue-based community consultation meetings, where members meet with neighbourhood groups to discuss resource allocation proposals (see section 7 for information on community self help and volunteering schemes).

CASE STUDY - CONSULTATION IN THE PREPARATION OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BUDGET

The preparation of the San Francisco budget is carried out over a lengthy period to allow for citizen input at various stages and to offer opportunities to present views to elected representatives and to the mayor. Budget meetings on particular services are public hearings and form part of debate surrounding the preparation of the mayor's budget. So, for example, it would be widely advertised that the parks budget was being discussed and residents with an interest would turn up. There may also be area-based meetings on the budget and public meetings on the final proposals. Elected representatives would also convene meetings with constituents, including specific interest groups. The result of the consultation process invariably results in changes being made to planned expenditure.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

In the USA there is a great deal of consultation with local businesses, stemming from the fact that the private sector expects to contribute to community life and works within various partnerships to improve the city. In Baltimore, the mayor has engaged businesses to work with city agencies to improve public sector performance. Some 150 executive volunteers are involved in management and efficiency studies of five city government agencies: fire, public works, housing and community development, health, and recreation and parks. The project was developed with the Greater Baltimore Committee - "the region's most prominent organisation of business leaders".



City Hall, San Francisco

Chambers of Commerce are usually active, well organised and maintain regular dialogue with communities and city councils. In Santa Cruz and Oakland, the Chambers of Commerce work with the city councils, focusing on projects such as:

- providing financial assistance to programmes for educating under-privileged children
- assisting local children's hospitals, usually through donations
- partnering schools
- raising money for parades and civic events
- funding improvements to highways.

In one case a worker was seconded from the Chamber of Commerce to work with the city council.

CASE STUDY - SANTA CRUZ CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce explicitly states its commitment to improving the community in its vision statement. The business sector takes an active interest in community development and improvement. One of the most successful examples of partnership and redevelopment work took place following the devastation caused by the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. In addition to loss of life and injuries, a large number of buildings, including most of the downtown area, were destroyed. As a response to this devastation the city council set up Vision Santa Cruz, a partnership between the local business community and the city council to redesign and re-establish the downtown.

Vision Santa Cruz comprised 18 representatives from, or nominated by, the city council and 18 representatives from business. All representatives consulted the public at every stage to get their views and agreement to their proposals. The process was roundtable and inclusive. It took 1000 hours of meetings to get the vision for downtown approved by all participants. To help fund the earthquake recovery programme, the voters of the City of Santa Cruz passed a special measure to raise over \$6million through a special sales tax, to be spent on downtown reconstruction.

The vision is now a reality and the redevelopment is complete. The result is a redesigned, pedestrian-friendly downtown. It has also been an economic success, stimulating increased patronage of the downtown district. The mixture of two and three storey buildings

has allowed shops and restaurants to dominate the street scene with some leisure use (such as cinemas) at first floor level, and with residential units in the upper floors.

COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS AND COMMUNITY PLANNING

Councils in the USA also fund some community organisations. In Monterey, a network of neighbourhood associations has developed and these aid the council in developing neighbourhood funding programmes. Whilst their constitutional arrangements have to be accepted by the council, these bodies are not controlled by it. They participate in a resource allocation scheme that distributes part of the 'hotel' tax to local capital schemes. Each neighbourhood organisation puts in bids for area improvements and representatives from each organisation come together to form an overall body that reviews bids and recommends funding allocation to the council. The recommendations are usually accepted and council officers provide assistance to the groups to develop and cost proposals. Whilst there are similar neighbourhood arrangements in the UK, it is the community base in the USA models which is of particular interest, plus the fact that it is constituted at both neighbourhood and city-wide levels. In the UK it is more likely that neighbourhood organisations would involve elected members (section 7 examines volunteering in more detail).

CASE STUDY - SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY PLANNING GROUPS

San Diego has a network of 42 community planning groups, covering a population of 1.3 million, which has been established over twenty years. Predominantly focused on land use and planning development issues, these groups are run by and for the local community. No council funding is available to support these groups, although they are supported by council officials who attend the meetings.

The October 1999 San Diego resident satisfaction survey revealed that 19% of residents had been to a community planning meeting in their neighbourhood during the last five years – a figure which has remained constant over the last three studies.

Community planning groups are a powerful and influential voice in the decision making process, so much so that developers will attend their meetings and seek to gain the support of the group, making changes to plans as necessary, to ensure support

when the matter is passed to the city council. Decisions taken by the city council are heavily dependent upon the positive support of community planning groups. This applies equally to the monitoring of planning conditions to ensure compliance with granted permissions.

There is much that local authorities in the UK can learn from USA local government in respect of consultation and community planning. Communities can develop their own forms of organisation and take responsibility for a wide range of issues, independent from elected councils. The USA methods of encouraging debate and involving citizens in decision making processes will require significant cultural shifts in UK authorities, but has the potential to genuinely enhance public engagement. USA elected representatives use a wide range of imaginative methods to maintain dialogue with their communities. However, it is worth stressing that there appears to be little correlation between citizen engagement and increased voter turnout. Even in USA cities, where voting can determine major issues such as levels of taxation, the voter turnout is similar to that in the UK. It may be that UK authorities need to develop a broader range of measures to evaluate public participation, and that voting should be regarded as only one measure of public engagement.



City Hall & Gardens, Santa Cruz

7 - VOLUNTEERING AND CITIZENSHIP

VOLUNTEERING

In the USA there is a strong tradition of community self-organisation, with groups working alongside councils but preserving a strong sense of independence. Councils are able to mobilise this culture of community self-help and encourage volunteering. Examples include:

- The Great Green Sweep – a day of ‘cleaning and greening’ Oakland and San Francisco (involving thousands of volunteers participating in over 80 events)
- Beach flats annual spring clean-up say in Santa Cruz
- 1000 events between 16-22 April 2000 in the USA to increase awareness and support for city, state and national parks
- A day of storm drain stencilling (to warn against polluting the sea) tree planting and counting users of the bay cycle/pedestrian pathway in Monterey
- Neighbourhood clean-up days organised at Arlington and Norfolk in Virginia
- In Norfolk, council employees supplemented a large community turnout

In San Francisco a volunteering scheme is linked to Welfare to Work. The Department of Public Works encourages businesses and residents to support ‘Adopt a Street’, which gives participants with little or no work history hands-on experience of street and pavement cleaning. Equipment and training is provided and sponsors, such as Starbucks and Burger King, help to generate funding.

These types of focused initiatives indicate a greater willingness for citizens in the USA to compliment and supplement what many would perceive as council responsibilities. The level of volunteering appears to be high, particularly in respect of neighbourhood improvement. This is fuelled by local newspapers which provide news and opportunities for public involvement in community affairs.



Volunteers meeting, Monterey

CIVIC LEAGUES

Volunteering and citizenship seem to go hand in hand in the USA. A good example of this is the civic league movement. In Virginia, civic leagues are well-established and influential community associations, which form part of a single federal league. They tend to be self-financing and not dependent on councils for funding. The nearest British equivalents are tenant/resident associations. Civic leagues are run

for and by local communities and they form a hub for people to get together and then consult with government. This is well demonstrated in a typical constitution (Meadowbank Civic League, Norfolk Va.):

"This League is formed and its members join together for promoting civic betterment, community spirit, and neighbourliness; to preserve and enhance the appearance of the homes and the community; to encourage the highest standard of citizenship; to encourage the preservation and protection of properties and the rights of property holders; to promote facilities for community recreation and social activities; to express the viewpoints of the residents on various aspect of community life and to support and undertake various worthy projects for the social, physical and economic betterment of the community. In pursuing these objectives, the League shall constantly remain aware of the political, fraternal and religious beliefs and affiliations of the individual members and shall not endorse any political party or candidate, nor involve itself in controversial issues relating to politics or religion... Though you may not actually see what the Civic League does for you, we are there to make sure that the comfort level of the residents remains as when the league was first formed. Our longevity and continued lines of communication with the city help to do this".

CASE STUDY - THE CIVIC LEAGUE MOVEMENT IN NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

The civic league movement in Norfolk is particularly active, with a city-wide federation of civic leagues representing 45 groups. Additionally, there are a number of other civic leagues that choose not to be federated, collaborating with the others when appropriate. Civic leagues frequently lobby the council on wide-ranging issues and are shown a noticeable level of deference by council members and officers. The federation in Norfolk expressed a great deal of appreciation of the role and impact of the city's Communications Manager who provides a valuable conduit between city hall and its communities.

Generally, civic leagues meet once monthly for approximately 2 hours. Guest speakers such as the council manager or the Chief of Police are regularly invited to attend. All new householders in a neighbourhood are contacted and invited to join. Whilst active membership tends to come

from the over 45 year olds, younger members pitch in when there are significant issues affecting their community.

CIVIC LEAGUES FUND THEMSELVES BY:

- selling advertising space in newsletters to local businesses,
- annual subscriptions in the range of \$5-\$10 per annum
- fund raising at garage sales
- recycling schemes, where leagues hold clean-up days and gain points (transferable into cash) for recyclables collected
- help from local businesses who allow them free out-of-hours use of their offices for phone canvassing, attracting other sponsors, copying etc.

CITIZENSHIP

The timing of the study visit coincided with local preparations for the national census, results of which will provide some statistical evidence of community cohesion, for example through housing and ethnicity patterns. The councils visited were active in promoting the completion and return of census forms.

There appeared to be high levels of inclusion around service review from council departments, and an expectation and willingness from citizens to play their part. Each of Norfolk's six police districts has a PACE (Police Assisted Community Enforcement) team which meets regularly to review crime issues and other concerns. PACE teams include residents, religious and business leaders, police lieutenants and officers, as well as representatives from council departments and agencies, including the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority and the juvenile and domestic courts.

There is a lot to learn from the US model of civic volunteering and similar community contributions are already being developed in some UK councils through, for example, street leader schemes. However, to achieve the strong levels of independent community organisation and self-help evident in the USA will require a long-term process of promotion and culture change. In this context the national policy commitment in the UK to build community leadership skills and regenerate communities is opportune.

8 – TOWARDS ACTIVE DEMOCRACY

John Prescott, in his foreword to 'Local Leadership, Local Choice' (DETR, 1999) states that "central to our modernising agenda is giving people a real say about how their council can modernise the way it works". Evidence suggests that people have little interest in the form of local government, but are "naturally more interested in services, in outcomes for local communities"⁶. In city councils in the USA, people contributed to the day to day activities, decision making and policy formulation. These processes may prove to be of value in aiding UK local government move from passive consultation to active participation.

The drafting of guidance for the Local Government Act Part II (2000) shows a shift in the role of scrutiny towards overview and scrutiny; in addition to providing a check and balance to the executive, the guidance now emphasises the role of policy development and review. This brings overview and scrutiny committees closer to the operation of many boards and commissions in the USA, which develop policy and legislative proposals for recommendation to the city council.

The elected mayor and city manager forms of political management for UK local authorities are reflected, albeit with some fundamental difference, in existing city council structures operating successfully in the USA. However, attempts to directly overlay the American models on UK local authorities is likely to fail, for several reasons:

- party politics in the UK would inhibit the openness and community engagement which is so evident in USA city councils
- USA city councils generally operate in a culture which is more readily engaged in local democratic issues and which has a stronger ethos of self-help and volunteering
- the diversity of city council structures in the USA reflects the diversity of its cities and culture – a strong message from the US is that the structure should be what is appropriate for, and what works for, the specific city

The debate in the UK on the issue of executive committees meeting in public would appear perplexing to officials and representatives in USA city councils, where the absence of party politics at a local level negates much of the need for private meetings. Tony Travers suggests that in the UK,

"Conventional party politics are now a big turn-off for many younger voters, those with one-off policy concerns and people from a national or religious background where there is no tradition of voting for one of the major parties" ⁷.

The study team remains convinced, however, that the inherent transparency of decision making, the culture of promoting and welcoming citizen participation, and the many mechanisms open to citizens to become involved in local matters, contain valuable lessons which may contribute to the development of responsive and open local government in the UK.

What is required is development of genuinely open and accessible local government, increasing citizen involvement in decision making, and debate on the operation of party politics at a local level. The response to these issues is key to engaging the interest and participation of citizens in new forms of active democracy.

1 *Local Leadership, Local Choice, DETR, 1999*

2 *Municipal Journal, 22-28 October 1999*

3 *'Deepening Democracy or Elite Governance' Public Money and Management, April/June 2000*

4 *'Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996', US Census Bureau, July 1998*

5 *'Getting out the e-vote', Government Computing, April 2000*

6 *Phil Swann, Municipal Journal, 23-29 June 2000*

7 *"A capital shake-up", Local Government Chronicle, 5 May 2000*

APPENDIX - CITIES VISITED
TABLE 1 - SIZE AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE

CITY	POPULATION	FORM OF COUNCIL	NUMBER OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES	EMPLOYEES	ROLE OF MAYOR	NUMBER OF "AT LARGE" MEMBERS (Elected "city-wide" rather than for a district)	ELECTED OFFICER POSTS
Oakland	388,100	Elected mayor - council	7 elected representatives PLUS elected mayor.	5,000 (3,000 FTE)	Powerful mayor who is also chief elected officer	1 council member and mayor	City Attorney City Auditor
Berkeley	107,800	Council - city manager	9 elected representatives (including mayor)	1,620 FTE	Mayor has similar powers to other council members	Mayor	City Auditor
Santa Cruz	53,200 (10,117 from Santa Cruz University)	Council - city manager	7 elected representatives	813	Mayor elected for 1 year term by council	All 7 at present but petition submitted to make all 7 representatives elected by district	
San Francisco	780,000	Elected mayor - council	11 elected representatives PLUS elected mayor	27,000	Powerful mayor	11 + mayor. Changes underway to elect 11 council members on a district basis from 2000.	
Monterey	30,000 resident 60,000 daytime	Council - city manager	5 elected representatives (including mayor)	446 full-time 42 part-time	Mayor has similar powers to other council members	Mayor	
Sunnyvale	130,000 residential 200,000 daytime	Council - city manager	7 elected representatives (including mayor)	1,200 (850 FTE)	Example of a pure council - city manager model. Mayor elected by council for 1 year term.	6 + mayor	
San Diego	1.3 million	Council - city manager	9 elected representatives (including mayor)	11,000	Possibility of change to elected mayor	Mayor	City Attorney
Del Mar	5,000	Council - city manager	5 elected representatives (including mayor)	55 FTE	Mayor elected for 1 year term by council	Mayor	
Baltimore	703,090	Elected mayor - council	18 councilmen (3 per district) PLUS elected mayor PLUS president	27,830 FTE	Powerful mayor	Mayor + president	
Montgomery	850,000	Hybrid	9 councilmen (5 districts)	25,533	Legislative power is vested in elected council but executive power lies with the county executive	4 councilmen	County Executive
Norfolk City	238,000	Council - city manager	7 elected representatives including mayor (5 smaller districts + 2 "superwards" for the whole city)	9,431	Mayor elected by council but Autumn 2000 referendum may result in directly elected mayor structure	None	

TABLE 2 - ELECTIONS AND REMUNERATION

CITY	REGISTRATION LEVEL 1999	ELECTORAL TURNOUT 1999	REMUNERATION FOR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES
Oakland	57%	c 30%	\$65,000 per annum for council members Mayor: approximately 80% of a comparable council's City Manager's salary
Berkeley	65%	c 30%	\$1,800 per month + benefits for council members \$2,800 per month + benefits for mayor
Santa Cruz	73%	c 40-50%	\$1,000 per month + benefits for council members \$2,000 per month + benefits and \$500 expenses for mayor
San Francisco	83.4%	46%	\$37,000 per annum + benefits for council members \$? + benefits for mayor
Monterey	64.4% (county figure)	63.1%	\$400 per month \$600 per month for mayor
Sunnyvale	66.5% (county figure)	23%	\$1,100 - \$1,200 per month for council members Mayor - a little more
San Diego	67.5%	20-30%	\$55,000 per annum - council members \$70,000 per annum + office budget - mayor
Del Mar	80% (estimate)	48%	\$3,600 per annum for all council members
Baltimore	68.5%	34%	\$120,000 per annum for the mayor \$48,000 per annum for council members
Montgomery	81%	23.5% for last election, but this increases if it occurs at same time as presidential race	\$110,000 per annum for directly elected executive \$50,000 per annum for council members
Norfolk City	52.4%	23.7%(local) but as high as 68% in presidential election	\$23,000 per annum for council members \$25,000 per annum for mayor