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The authors in this issue highlight crucial issues facing Commonwealth local governments today – ensuring national influence, maximising revenue generation, encouraging probity in staffing appointments, or dealing with problems of social exclusion and alcoholism, are some of the varied challenges faced by local administrations.

Leading on the Research Papers, is **Mike Reid** of Local Government New Zealand who explores the theoretical and practical arguments for effective central-local engagement. Governing, he suggests, is a 'messy' task of accommodation between plural institutions where the 'command and control' approach of central government is ineffective, and a broader engagement can help local governments reduce risks and influence national decisions. Should this engagement be formalised through constitutional recognition or discretionary partnerships, with LGAs key players?

In a study of action planning in the UK, **Gordon Morris** explores the flagship Market Towns Initiative, a community-led development programme for in rural communities operating from 2000-2006. The MTI worked, he concludes, delivering successful projects but not genuine local empowerment, as volunteers needed more support and better evaluation could have informed subsequent phases so that, for example, resources were not dissipated too many minimal projects.

Managing local government finance is a thorny problem frequently raised in the Journal. **Kate Koutifaris** and **Vince Magnioni** compare rates versus developer contributions as revenue sources in New South Wales, Australia. Rates contribute more to local government funding but are subject to national rate-pegging controls; developer fees fluctuate with the property market. They argue for better financial data, and freedom for local governments to raise funds in order to meet increasing service delivery requirements.

Lazarus Nabaho debates the merits different personnel management systems in supporting local government decentralisation in Uganda. His three models consider personnel systems that are integrated with central government, separate or hybrid. Uganda's separate personnel system, he suggests, encourages staff appointments based on patronage rather than merit, and exacerbates difficulties in attracting and retaining staff. A hybrid system of involving the civil service commission in higher level appointments is proposed.

In the Commentary papers, **Chris Taylor** and **Jed Donoghue** suggest how local governments can lead on combating social isolation, highlighting good practice in North Sydney, Australia, where the council is fostering three programmes: a training video for volunteers, a centre for older single men, and a neighbourhood drop-in centre. They suggest that local councils play a critical role in identifying major risk factors such as age and poor health, and promoting technology and community innovations to tackle these. **Muhammad Sayadur Rahman** explores the role of members of parliament in the newly constituted Upazila Parishad (local governments) in Bangladesh, suggesting that MPs are playing an ambivalent role in directing development projects at local government level, and until locally-elected representatives regain control over development projects, local government will not be fully accountable to its electorate.

Two Practice Notes tackle very different issues. **Julaine Allan, Lynda Bowtells, and Jehan Zeb** discuss a partnership approach to reducing alcohol-related violence which bedevils rural communities in New South Wales. Focus groups with front-line workers including bar staff, taxi drivers, the police and ambulance workers identify pinch points where problems were most likely to occur, but the jury is still out on to tackle drunkenness through shorter opening hours or softer approaches. Finally **Yogesh Mahor and Ram Gopal Singh** describe a fascinating example of bottom-up planning in Madhya Pradesh, where the state government is promoting a community-led development planning. Initiated at grassroots level (Gram Panchayat - village) development proposals are consolidated through a tiered process to be finalised by the District Planning Committee.

From the **CLGF centre** there is news of an exciting new four-year grant to help local government service delivery – watch this space. Researchers please note that the next **CLGF Research Colloquium** has also just been announced, for the 13/14 May in Kampala, Uganda. Participants are invited to address the theme, *which way forward for local government – capacity building, local economic development and inclusiveness?* Through four relevant issues: accountability, value for money, the MDGs ++, and working across boundaries. Please contact the organiser Gareth Wall (Gareth.Wall@clgf.org.uk) for further information or to register your interest.