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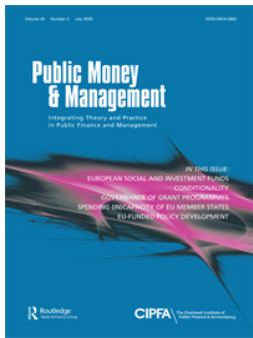
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# New development: Redefining failure in English local government—Implications for research and practice

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## IMPACT

The current challenges facing English local government of austerity, structural changes, and increasing demand are well known and understood in practice and research. These issues have contributed to record levels of intervention and widespread use of exceptional financial support, with sector representative bodies warning that more councils will face these challenges in future. In this context the national Labour government has committed to resetting central–local relations and closed the recently established Office for Local Government. While there has been extensive research on state failure, scholars of public administration and statecraft have overlooked how ‘failure’ is represented and constructed at a sub-national level, and the impact this brings to central–local relations. This article analyses the current context of English local government to advance a broader conceptualization of failure for the sector, arguing that learning from recent experiences should be a prominent research agenda and priority in practice.

## ABSTRACT

English local government has undergone an unprecedented wave of bankruptcies, requests for ‘exceptional financial support’, and central government ‘intervention’. These developments have made ‘failure’ a watchword in debate and practice. However, ‘failure’ is an ambiguous term with theories of state failure reserved largely to nation states. Reviewing the recent history of local government, this article puts forward a new conceptualization of local state failure based on the dilution of democratic controls through central government appointed commissioners/envoys; immediate financial solvency (through the issuing of Section 114 notices); and longer-term financial health through the awarding of exceptional financial support (EFS) and the capitalization of revenue budgets. This broader approach provides the opportunity to acknowledge the impact of wider relations of networks and tiers of government to provide a more dynamic and nuanced understanding. Building from this, the authors outline an emerging research agenda regarding state failure in a municipal context.

## KEYWORDS

Accountability; austerity; central–local relations; failure; intervention; local government; multi-level governance; policy networks

## Introduction: Failure in an English local government context

‘Failure’ has been understood by scholars in political theory and statecraft as either market or non-market failure. However, in a context of increasingly interwoven political, government and market economies, this divide is increasingly recognized as outdated (Furton & Martin, 2019). Failure has been characterised variously as state failure (Chomsky, 2006), government failure (Le Grand, 1991) and organizational failure (Andrews et al., 2006), but there remain significant challenges within the public administration field to consider the interplay between the context, factors and institutions which characterise ‘failure’.

In particular, Dollery et al. (2006, p. 339) have noted that while scholarly attention has centred on the cousins of market and government failure ‘local government failure remains a largely neglected member of the same family’ and that ‘comparatively little effort has been expended on government failure at the municipal level’ (ibid., p. 343). Given the high-profile instances of local government failure under the original clauses of the Local Government Act 1999, there is an urgent need for academic and practitioner consideration.

## Conceptualizing state failure

The concept of state failure contains a number of implicit values and assumptions. It gives primacy to the concept of the sovereign *state* as a unified political order in the Westphalian tradition (Milliken & Krause, 2002) recognizing principles of authority and independence within a defined geographic border. This links to issues of state sovereignty, which in an increasingly connected world of public, private and political networks may benefit from reconsideration. In response, Wolff (2005) called for greater consideration of failure across different tiers of government, including individual, local, national, regional, and global levels, specifically calling for increased focus on international considerations.

The slippery and politicised nature of ‘failure’ was highlighted by Chomsky (2006) who described the term as ‘frustratingly imprecise’ (2006, p. 1). In an attempt to add due precision, Chomsky provided specific characteristics of failure at a nation state level, listing population safety, guaranteed fundamental rights, functioning democratic institutions, and provision of core services. However, this normative approach has been challenged by authors such as Hameiri (2007), who describe the term ‘state failure’ as

‘problematic’ recognizing that focusing analysis at an institutional level minimizes the role of wider social and political contexts and conflicts.

Often, the discussion of state failure is linked to specific high-profile government actions, inactions and their consequences, including issues like famine, civil war and armed conflict (Iqbal & Starr, 2007). The relationship between such militaristic indicators and the social characteristics referenced by Chomsky are clear, and have even been carried forward into formal positions, including the UK government’s former Department for International Development’s definition of ‘fragile states’ across four themes of capacity linked to safety, effective political power, economic management, and administration of services (Iqbal & Starr, 2007, p. 3).

However, this model of identifiable ‘substantial failure’ (Keech & Munger, 2015) presents a high bar to clear—particularly in a Western context—and is linked directly to ill intent or ill-advised direct action. Weimer and Vining (2011) describe ‘passive failure’ failing to respond to failure, as well as ‘procedural failure’ where inadequacies of decision-making undermine progress. Similarly, Milliken and Krause argued for failure to be considered not just through the lens of catastrophe and collapse, but through missed opportunity to deliver ‘the vision of the progressive, developmental state that sustained generations of academics, activists, and policy makers more than any real existing state’ (2002, p. 762).

### Conceptualizing state failure at a local level

We have argued that understanding failure in a local government context requires moving beyond the Westphalian and neo-Weberian models of ‘state failure’ and neo-liberal understandings of ‘market failure’, taking stock of the specific context of local government and its power relationship with higher tiers of government.

Failure in a UK local government context must therefore be considered within the contested power dynamics between central and local government. Barnett (2020) has documented the ‘local trap’, linking the diminishing influence of councils to growing centralization and shrinking capacity. The characteristics of local state failure also differ from national counterparts. Dollery et al. (2006) in their ‘Australian theory of local government failure’ highlight issues of asymmetric information, the political capture of local councillors, and voter apathy as key themes in undermining the delivery of strategic goals and objectives at the local level.

Scholars have analysed failure in an English local government context by reviewing relative service performance. Turner and Whiteman (2005) used the English Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) benchmarking framework to look at 15 poorly performing councils, while Jones (2013) used the same framework in a longitudinal analysis, considering the underlying causes of ‘corporate failure’ and approaches to ‘turnaround’ in 23 councils based on their corporate inspections, performance reports, and interviews.

However, while it is clearly important to differentiate indicators of ‘poor performance’ from failure, it is not clear at which point such a threshold becomes crossed. This illustrates important questions for this research agenda,

regarding the relationship of service standards and failure, recognizing that these aspects are likely to be the elements which has greatest impact on residents’ quality of life. This includes consideration of the effectiveness of the existing framework of regulation and assurance that surrounds councils and their services, including the wider network of Ofsted, CQC, and external audit. Moreover, publicly available information on service performance through resources such as the Local Government Association’s (LGA) Local Government Inform tool enable comparison to be drawn both between organizations and service areas, illustrating the extent (if any) to which service specific failures can (or cannot) be contained within one service area of an organization. Furthermore, the current backlogs and delays in the audit arrangements for local government, with only 1% of councils and other local bodies publishing audited accounts on time for the financial year of 2022–2023 (MHCLG, 2024a) illustrates wider issues of stewardship and capacity challenges beyond councils but impacting their operating context both organizationally and across the sector. A valuable resource of information regarding these issues at a council level are Corporate Peer Challenge reports, completed through a peer-led sector-led improvement approach and referenced in the 2024 Best Value Framework. These voluntary reviews consider issues of performance, governance, finance and capacity in the round.

There is increasing discussion in UK press regarding local state failure, typified by a *Sunday Times* editorial which questioned if failing councils had been ‘badly run’ or ‘squeezed dry’ (Colville, 2023). The answer, according to Andrews et al., is both ‘to some extent attributable to difficult circumstances (such as diverse needs and poverty) and management characteristics (such as weak leadership and poor performance management) thus performance failure is associated with both misfortune and mismanagement’ (2006, p. 273).

### A broader conceptualization of failure in English local government

There are multiple indicators which could be used to illustrate and conceptualize failure at a local level in English local government. A tempting approach would be to follow much academic literature (for example Jones, 2013; Turner & Whiteman, 2005) in analysing service standards, which directly impact on residents’ lives, at an individual or council level and tracking performance over several years. However, there is no consensus on what standards qualify a judgement of ‘failure’. Further, given the breadth of services provided by councils, with over 800 statutory functions, it would not be possible to cleanly disentangle these performance changes from wider social, economic, or political factors.

Instead, we present a model built on three key indicators, which better responds to the fiscal and strategic challenges confronting English local government. The next section of this article provides a pen-picture on their recent incidence across the local government sector:

- *Dilution of democratic controls*—The council has had controls removed from locally elected politicians through the appointment of central government commissioners.

- *Immediate financial failure*—The council has declared itself effectively bankrupt through issuing a Section 114 notice.
- *Longer-term financial failure*—The council has been forced to apply to central government for Exceptional Financial Support (EFS).

### Current indicators of failure in English local government

The legal and legislative underpinning for ‘failure’ in English local government is set out in Section 15 (6) of the Local Government Act 1999. This states that, if the secretary of state is not satisfied with a council’s compliance in delivering ‘best value’ on behalf of residents, central government may conduct reviews, inquiries, or even direct that the powers and functions of the council are passed to a nominated person for a period of time. Turner and Whiteman (2005) described the use of these powers and formal intervention as a ‘last resort’ (2005, p. 637) for the reasons that councils would often already be working to address these issues, the risk that improvement is externally led rather than internally owned, and the financial and capacity costs that would be placed on central government as a burden. Recognizing these issues, it is therefore worrying that there are more councils that have been subject to a best value inspection in the past four years than over the preceding 20 as illustrated in Figure 1 taken from publicly available information on these inspections on the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) Website (MHCLG, 2024b).

Figure 1 illustrates the stability that existed with limited use of Best Value Inspections, with four being completed between 2010–2020, and the significant increase that has taken place since 2020.

Beyond formal inspection through the Local Government Act 1999, there are further indicators of failure within the sector. This includes high-profile instances of councils issuing a Section 114 notice such as Birmingham City Council and Woking District Council in 2023. These section 114 notices (under the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and originally intended to support the voice of finance within the organization) require councils to legally report if they cannot set or deliver a balanced budget, with

recognition that they should only be issued in the most severe of circumstances such as when a council cannot meet their commitments for the year. Worryingly, a 2023 survey of 114 council chief executives and 71 council leaders found that one-in-five believed their organization was likely to issue such a notice over the next 18 months (LGA, 2024).

A further indicator within the sector is the level of EFS which is being applied for by councils. Since 2020, the UK central government has aided councils to address ‘financial pressures that they considered unmanageable’ (MHCLG, 2024c) through the form of capitalization directives that enable authorities to meet revenue budget pressures through capital resources. In the four years since this framework was introduced there has been a significant increase in the use of this framework rising from nine applications in 2020 to 19 in 2024. However, more concerning is the total level of funding which is being applied for through these directives rising from approximately £270 million in 2020 to over £2 billion in 2024–2025. (N.B. This is based on the 30 applications published in on the MHCLG website on 20 February 2025.)

Figure 2 shows the increasing number of councils applying for exceptional financial support. While there were four councils applying for support in 2020–2021, this had increased to 30 councils in 2025–2026. This cumulative chart includes a number of councils who have applied for support more than once.

These indicators of central government intervention, declarations of bankruptcy, and exceptional borrowing costs for future years are all at record levels in English local government and therefore illustrate ‘failure’ both at an organizational and wider system perspective. In this context, it is important that research into these issues does not consider failure only at a municipal and organizational level, placing undue focus on specific examples or case studies, but instead seeks to consider the wider relationship and issues facing the sector. One significant factor is the UK government’s approach to austerity, which since 2010 has seen some councils losing 60% of their income (Gardner, 2017). Importantly, these reductions have taken place against the backdrop of increased demand and need for services from residents (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Authors such as Hernandez (2021) have highlighted the impact of

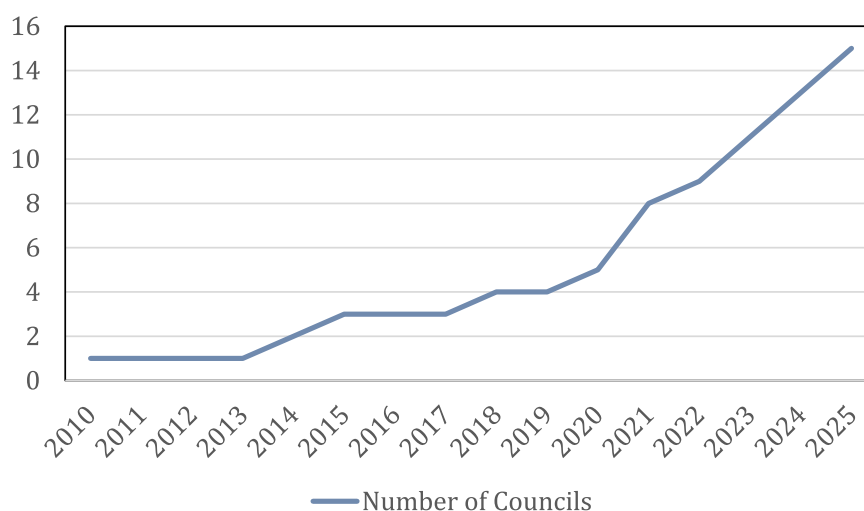
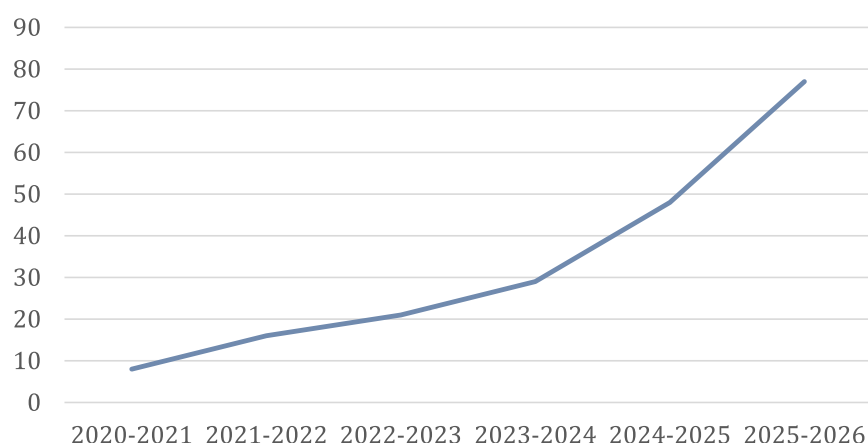


Figure 1. Central government issued Best Value Inspections (presented cumulatively).



**Figure 2.** Cumulative annual applications for exceptional financial support.

**Table 1.** Implications and application of this lens (table content accurate as of April 2025).

	Organizational Implications	System and network implications	Incidence and prevalence (from 2020 to April 2025):
Dilution of democratic controls	Impact of external roles in formal decision-making processes. Organizational response to external direction. Externalization of improvement advice. Increased external monitoring and oversight.	Requirement for expertise and capacity. Formal capture and identification of 'failure'. Increased central accountability for local standards. Formal use of best value in standards for sector.	<b>Nine councils</b> 1. Nottingham 2. Liverpool City Council 3. Slough 4. Sandwell 5. Thurrock 6. Woking 7. Birmingham 8. Tower Hamlets (with government appointing 'ministerial envoys' instead of commissioners). 9. Spelthorne
Immediate financial failure (S114 issued)	The loss of 'strategic space' with financial requirements becoming priority. Prioritization of financial viability over service standards. Prioritization of immediate financial viability over longer-term issues.	Questions regarding funding settlement for the sector. Issues of oversight and assurance.	<b>Seven councils</b> 1. Croydon 2. Nottingham City Council 3. Slough 4. Thurrock 5. Woking 6. Northumberland 7. Birmingham
Medium/long-term financial failure (applied for EFS)	Immediate financial challenges exacerbating the council's medium-term position. Organizational understanding of complex financial borrowing. Financial decisions working on a longer timeline than electoral cycles.	Questions regarding funding settlements for the sector. Impact of austerity. Medium-term impacts of borrowing on social inequality.	2020–2021: Government agreed to support eight councils with EFS. 2021–2022: Government agreed to support eight councils. 2022–2023: Government agreed to support five councils. 2023–2024: Government agreed to support eight councils. 2024–2025: Government agreed to support 19 councils. 2025–2026: To date 30 councils have applied for support (MHCLG, 2024c). (N.B. Not all agreements resulted in EFS with some councils withdrawing their applications.)

austerity on the relationship of local government with central government, drawing attention to the exacerbation of territorial inequality but also the impact on capacity. This impact on capacity is shown with the local government workforce shrinking from 2.7 million to 2 million from 1999 to 2024 and is potentially exacerbated by central government employment figures rising from 2.3 million to 4 million in the same period (ONS, 2024). Eckersley and Tobin (2019) further argued how austerity was a vicious cycle where local areas were required to make further savings with less capability and resource to address these challenges. In this context, there is a risk that the current approach of UK central government to intervene through statutory powers, appointed commissioners/envoys, and capitalized future revenue could potentially further weaken the strength of the sector over the short, medium, or long

term. Furthermore, as austerity enters its 15th year, further examination is needed regarding the impact of this policy on council reserves, including how organizations have used funds to enable transformation, bridge change, or as a place of last resort in setting balanced budgets.

### Local state failure: a research agenda with policy implications

This article has developed a broader view of failure within the English local government sector based on indicators of dilution of democratic controls; immediate financial solvency; and long-term financial health. This conceptualization both extends and sharpens our understanding of local state failure by identifying how failure is constituted in the context of central–local state

relationships. This addresses a significant theoretical gap in the public administration literature on local state failure and contributes to parallel research agendas on the effects of austerity (Hernandez, 2021) and capacity (Eckersley & Tobin, 2019), as well as regulation and oversight in this context (Murphy & Jones, 2016).

This article invites scholars and policy-makers to consider issues of failure not through the traditional prism of individual organizations or states but constituted through relational dynamics across tiers of government to further develop a full framework of these issues and their interplay. This recognizes failure as the consequence of complex social relationships that shape institutions and working patterns (Hameiri, 2007) and responds directly to Mellahi and Wilkinson's (2004, p. 34) observation that: 'any attempt to explain organizational failure will not be complete unless the interplay between contextual forces and organizational dynamics is taken into account'. Better understanding failure can also help identify what constitutes success in a fiscally constrained local government context, recognizing failure and success are unlikely to be static descriptors (Chesterman et al., 2005). Scholars could build on our conceptualization by applying wider perspectives linking relations between tiers of government, including policy network theory (Rhodes, 1990), multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2010) and the strategic state (Elliott, 2020).

Discussion of failure in UK local government in policy and press continues to centre on the attribution of blame to individuals and organizations. Institutional and statutory features of UK government regulation also sit uneasily alongside our conceptualization. The legislative basis for failure in the Local Government Act 1999, for instance, lands blame with municipal authorities for not meeting 'best value'.

To make progress we need to understand failure as a more dynamic and multi-faceted concept beyond its normative origins in state failure. To this end, our article provides a basis for further research and analysis, given primacy by the increasing trend of sectoral crises in modern public administration. Building on Andrews et al.'s (2006) distinction between failure from misfortune or malpractice, our contribution enables scholars to consider in finer detail how narratives of blame are constructed and applied in specific instances of failure. By exploring further, the differences between indicators, their particular drivers, antecedents and consequences, we may better predict and react effectively. Given the incidence of failure among UK local authorities, and potentially other sectoral bodies such as universities, there is also an imperative to supplement our conceptual model by developing indicators which might predict as well as assess failure.

This agenda presents the opportunity to revisit the narrative that surrounds local government improvement in England. Cochrane (2016) said that he had 'frequently been tempted to write the obituary of English local government' (Ward et al., 2015, p. 435) while writing at the same time John (2014) put forward a narrative of English local government as the 'great survivor'. Given the long-term impacts of austerity (Gardner, 2017), current examples of failure will help to furnish, disprove, or merge these conflicting positions.

Finally, by resetting discussion on failure from blame to improvement, there is a significant opportunity for change,

and local government in England deserves better. This research is timely given the Labour government's commitment to 'reset' its relationship with local government, as well as the Devolution White Paper committing to look at issues of reorganization where there is 'evidence of failure' (MHCLG, 2024d, p. 18), this demonstrates the need to operationalize the term 'failure' within the current practice, legal, and legislative context of the sector. Additionally, the recent launch and closure of the Office for Local Government, which was designed to consider 'early warnings' of failure in the sector (MHCLG, 2024e) highlights the remaining challenge of developing preventative approaches to these issues. This work should involve consideration of the structural requirements of the sector to work strategically, as well as learning from other jurisdictions including Wales, Scotland, and beyond, to consider the cumulative impact of austerity, and the need for clarity regarding the terms of engagement in instances of failure. Furthermore, this work needs to ground these issues into a broader and fully formed framework which builds on the body of research in public administration, including themes of centralism, central-local relations, and intergovernmental relations (Laffin, 2007).

## Disclosure statement

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