



Improvement

Councillor's guide

2011/2012

Edited by Andy Jackson

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References to government, government policy, plans and intentions, refer to their status in March 2011.

Some councillors quoted in the text may no longer hold the offices ascribed to them.

If you have difficulty reading the Councillor's Guide please contact councillors.guide@local.gov.uk

The Councillor's Guide is published simultaneously on the Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk and may be downloaded free of charge.

Foreword

Congratulations on becoming a councillor – and on behalf of the Local Government Group I want to offer you a warm welcome to the world of local government and to offer our help and expertise.

This is a tough time to be in local politics and public life and I congratulate you on putting yourself forward. We've received the toughest financial settlement in living memory and that will mean we all have to make some very difficult choices.

As you know having just fought an election, keeping up that level of dialogue with your residents now the election has passed will be really important. Explaining and involving your local community in making the decisions will help make sure that if even if these are tough decisions, that they are the right ones.

With pressures on budgets, it's quite easy to see just how interconnected local public services are and how during good and bad times it's vitally important to work with others in different parts of the public sector.

It might feel like your life has been swamped by meetings! But I would advise you to look at how certain meetings with other public sector partners can be incredibly helpful as we work to make a difference to our local area.

Local government can be a very complex world and can come with a language seemingly of its own!

While of course you will have your fellow councillors and council officers to call up on for help, beyond that there is a great deal of information available from the LG Group. We'll be sending you a fortnightly magazine, *First*, to keep you up to date with latest policy developments and we have a full events programme throughout the year.

I hope to have the opportunity to meet you myself at the annual conference in June where I'll be stepping down at the end of my term as chairman. Throughout my time at the Local Government Association I have really valued the support of my fellow councillors.

Margaret Eaton

**Councillor Baroness
Margaret Eaton, DBE DL**
Chairman of the Local Government
Association

Introduction

The Councillor's Guide is an introduction to the world of local government. It covers the main things new councillors need to know. Whether you have a few hours to spare or just 10 minutes, you can dip into this guide to find information about the key areas in which you will become involved.

This year's guide is published at a time of great change for local government as the Localism Bill makes its way through Parliament.

In view of the speed of change, councillors are urged to use internet resources to find the most up to date and in-depth information about the topics and issues that concern them.

Readers will find two of the most useful websites are that of the Department of Communities and Local Government at www.communities.gov.uk and the Local Government Group's new site at www.local.gov.uk

Local Government Group website www.local.gov.uk

The Local Government (LG) Group's new website features extensive information for councillors that is not covered by this Guide. The site's pages are regularly updated. The site is due for launch in June 2011.

The website has a section devoted to the development of councillors. It contains guidance on political leadership and advice on the different aspects of a councillor's role.

The website also contains 'Councillor Comment' – dedicated to showcasing lively and provocative opinion pieces from councillors throughout England and Wales.

Allied to this, the website features guidance and good practice on more than 40 areas of local government improvement, ranging from equality and diversity to economic development.

The LG Group website also provides:

- information about all the LG Group's products and services for councils, including the political leadership training offered by the Leadership Academy
- details on what central government policy means at a local level
- an overview of how the LG Group is working on behalf of the sector and how councillors can feed into this process
- email bulletins that feature handy digests of the latest news and best practice from across the LG Group.

The LG Group website is also closely connected with the Knowledge Hub – an online environment for local government to produce and capture its own knowledge and innovation.

The website offers practical guidance to help councillors use social media. It references some key publications, for example 'Connected councillors: a guide to social media', which demonstrates:

- how councillors are already using social media to engage with local residents and campaign on important local issues
- how councils can use social media more effectively to support better services for local people
- the role councillors can take in leading this digital revolution.

Access these free resources by going to www.local.gov.uk and clicking on 'Local Leadership' in the left-hand menu.

The Knowledge Hub

In tandem with the new corporate website will be a new Knowledge Hub. This is an innovative social business environment that will enable councillors to take greater advantage of social media tools and techniques to support more effective knowledge sharing.

The Knowledge Hub is intended it to become the definitive online resource for local government to generate and capture knowledge. It will offer a suite of free online tools to help councils and councillors innovate and improve together.

Launching later in 2011, the Knowledge Hub will build on the current community of practice platform at www.local.gov.uk/communities to support networking, collaboration and knowledge sharing.

For more detailed information on the Knowledge Hub go to:
www.local.gov.uk/knowledgehub

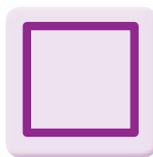
Features



Councillor's
viewpoint



Snapshot



Hot topic



Top tips



Case study

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1. Being a councillor



1 Being a councillor

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Local government powers

Local authorities are created by acts of Parliament.

They may be abolished by Parliament and their powers are determined by Parliament. The powers of a councillor are very different from those of an individual citizen.

Citizens are free to do anything that is not specifically illegal. Councillors and their authority can only do what they are specifically permitted to do by law. Acts of Parliament lay down specific duties that must be carried out – mandatory acts and things that may be done by choice, permissive and adoptive acts.

Councillors are bound by statutes but statutes will not stop them making important policy decisions and there is often scope for discretion in individual cases.

Some of the decisions councillors reach may be subject to an appeal to a minister or a government department. Since local government power is embodied in statutes and regulations, its decisions can be challenged in the courts.

The Government does control many of the activities of local government but its Localism Bill is intended to give councils and communities more influence and control over the services they provide or receive.

Publishing the bill in December 2010, the Government stated: “Over time central government has become too big, too interfering, too controlling and too bureaucratic. This has undermined local democracy and individual responsibility, and stifled innovation and enterprise within public services.

“We want to see a radical shift in the balance of power and to decentralise power as far as possible. Localism isn’t simply about giving power back to local government.

“This Government trusts people to take charge of their lives and we will push power downwards and outwards to the lowest possible level, including individuals, neighbourhoods, professionals and communities as well as local councils and other local institutions.”

more information:

Department for Communities and Local Government website at www.communities.gov.uk

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk

Councillor's viewpoint



My Day

Councillor Louise McKinlay, Brentwood Borough Council



As a resident of Brentwood for more than 15 years, I was thrilled to be elected to lead the council last year at the age of 31. I am passionate about our town and all the wonderful things that Brentwood has to offer: beautiful open spaces, great parks, clean streets and a fantastic quality of life.

I start today by taking part in a brilliant initiative that Brentwood is involved with called 'Love where you live'. It's a scheme to engage schools, businesses and residents in tackling the cleanliness of the environment where they live. I'm getting stuck in with various initiatives, like removing graffiti and leading a litter pick in an area of my ward. Seeing how many people are joining me proves that people really do care about their surroundings, and that this new approach to all working together can really deliver.

I am a big fan of Twitter and use it to keep in touch with residents. It allows me to convey messages instantly – something I make full use of by Tweeting regularly from my phone. Today, I'm telling everyone about the litter pick while I'm actually doing it (which also gives me a few minutes break!).

I find Twitter a brilliant tool that allows instant two-way communications, unlike some more traditional ways of contacting people. I can link in with national MPs and I even have a bit of friendly banter with opposition councillors! I think any councillors who aren't embracing new technology like Twitter are really missing a trick.

I'm aware that residents may think: I've taken the time to vote but what exactly does my councillor do for me? Therefore I believe in transparency and allowing residents to see what their elected representatives do. By me updating Twitter regularly, they are able to see what my day consists of. I use it to inform and promote what we are doing and have had local issues raised with me by residents. This allows action to be taken so much more quickly.

After a successful (and mucky!) litter pick, it's back to the town hall, where I make a start on today's council website blog. I update this a few times a week to let residents know what's new, and they often come back to me with concerns or questions they may have.

I then attend a meeting with fellow senior councillors, in which we outline plans for the coming year. We go over residents' priorities and start looking at areas where we can invest more, and those where we can make savings.

We also make plans to hold our first question time session at a local library, giving residents the chance to come and quiz us on decisions that we are looking to take.

After a productive day I'm off home to make the most of the sunny evening, with a barbeque with the family.

I go through the photos that were taken of the rugby sevens at Twickenham a couple of weeks ago, when I went with a group of girlfriends. As we sit down to eat, my husband removes my BlackBerry to stop me Tweeting all evening!



A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.

Local government structures

It is important that councillors understand the structure of their own council and its responsibilities to the community. Councillors will also find it useful to understand the broader local government picture.

Not all local authorities are structured in the same way. They do not provide the same services and do not necessarily even have the same system for elections. The term local authority does not necessarily refer to a council – it can also apply to a number of other authorities such as a police authority.

There are two distinct structures of local government in England:

1 Unitary – a single-tier structure in which an all-purpose authority is responsible for providing most of the services. They are to be found in London, other metropolitan areas and parts of shire England.

2 County and district – comprising at least two levels of local government and found in the remaining counties of England. Often there is a third tier of parish or town councils as well.

England has 54 unitary authorities, 37 metropolitan districts, 27 county councils, 201 shire districts, and 32 London boroughs, plus the City of London Corporation and the Greater London Authority.

Unitary authorities

A unitary authority is responsible for all local government functions within its area.

Typically, unitary authorities cover towns or cities that are large enough to function independently from county or other regional administration.

Each unitary authority sends representatives to a joint board that oversees police, fire and civil defence arrangements across the whole area. These boards are authorities in their own right and set precepts or raise council taxes, but they are not directly elected.

There are also joint arrangements in most areas for waste disposal. Some unitary authorities have parish or town councils in their area.

Metropolitan districts

Metropolitan districts are also unitary authorities, responsible for all services within their boundaries. They are often called borough or city councils. In each metropolitan area there are two joint boards that oversee police, fire and civil defence arrangements. There may also be joint authorities for waste disposal and for transport.

They include metropolitan areas such as: West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire.

The responsibilities of metropolitan district councils are the same as those of unitary authorities. There are very few parish councils in metropolitan areas.

Counties and districts

England's counties often have two and sometimes three levels of local government. Each county has an elected county council providing strategic and more costly services like social services and education.

Each county is divided into several districts, each with its own elected district council providing more local services such as the collection of council taxes and non-domestic rates, housing benefits, health and housing.

Some of these councils are called borough or city councils. These titles are ceremonial and indicate that the authority has a royal charter and a mayor. Many district councils are further divided into elected parish or town councils. A town council is a parish council with a mayor. Most parish or town councils are found in rural areas. Parishes deal with services and problems such as allotments, for which they have a statutory responsibility, footpaths, bus shelters, litter and dog fouling.

London

London has 32 London boroughs and The City of London Corporation, plus the Greater London Authority. The boroughs and City of London Corporation are responsible for local government services in their areas but the mayor and the Greater London Assembly – as the Greater London Authority – act in a strategic way on behalf of the capital to promote its special needs.

Generally, the mayor is responsible for developing strategies to improve London's transport, economy and environment, as well as running the police and fire services. The assembly

holds the mayor to account and makes sure services are being run effectively.

Neither takes responsibilities from the London boroughs.

Council services

Councils provide three types of service to their communities:

- statutory services – such as refuse collection – that councils must provide
- regulatory services – such as pub licensing and trading standards – that councils must also provide
- discretionary services – such as youth services – that councils may choose to provide.

Unitary councils supply all the services listed below. In two-tier areas services are divided between the county council and its associated district councils. A few councils may have different arrangements because of their location or circumstances.

Although services such as highway maintenance are sometimes contracted out to district councils by county councils, they remain the statutory responsibility of the county councils. This is also the case when council services are contracted out to third-party suppliers.

Services provided by county councils

- care and protection of children
- care for elderly people
- care for people with a disability
- community safety
- concessionary travel and public transport support
- conservation/listed buildings

- country parks and countryside management
- cycle routes
- emergency planning
- highway maintenance
- industrial and craft units
- libraries and archives
- local economy support and development
- meals on wheels
- minerals and quarries
- museums and arts
- maintenance of public rights of way
- protecting and enhancing the environment
- public and community transport
- recycling
- registration of births, deaths and marriages
- road clearance e.g. fly tipping
- road safety
- schools, school transport and other education
- strategic planning for the county
- street lighting and furniture
- tourism
- trading standards and consumer protection
- traffic management and transport planning
- tree protection
- village halls and community facilities
- voluntary organisation support
- water courses
- waste disposal
- youth clubs.

Services provided by district councils

- building control
 - regulatory
 - public protection
- car parks
- cemeteries and crematoria
- council tax benefit
- council tax collection
- Crime and Disorder Act
 - community wardens
- economic development
- electoral registration and elections
- emergency planning
 - environmental services
 - environmental health
 - pollution control
 - refuse collection
 - private sector housing standards
 - street sweeping
 - food hygiene and health and safety
 - dog wardens
 - public conveniences
 - streetscene (graffiti, litter and so on)
- grounds maintenance (parks and open spaces)
- housing
 - strategy and development
 - advice and assistance
 - provision
- housing benefit administration
- leisure

- licensing
 - taxis
 - alcohol and public entertainment
 - gambling
- museums and arts
- national non-domestic rate
- planning
 - development control
 - local delivery framework
 - heritage
 - countryside management
- property searches and land charges
- sea defences, watercourses and drainage
- street naming
- tourism.

How the council works

Councils are large organisations employing hundreds of staff and they adhere to set rules and procedures to help them function effectively and legitimately.

New councillors should be given a copy of their council's constitution. This provides the framework within which the council conducts its business and makes decisions. It describes who is responsible for making decisions and how decisions are taken.

The legal nature of constitutions means they are not easy reading but new councillors should familiarise themselves with the constitution and, in the first instance, concentrate on four key topics:

- decision-making and council structures
- procedural matters
- roles of officers
- standards and ethical governance.
- the leader is able to choose the cabinet, which must include at least two other councillors
- the budget can only be defeated if at least two-thirds voted it down.

Council structures

The full council meeting is the sovereign body of the council. Full council is where all councillors meet to debate and take decisions.

Most councils operate a system that separates the decision-making executive from the monitoring and representative functions of the council.

Full council:

- makes decisions on the constitution
- decides policy framework
- decides the budget
- appoints chief officers.

Political arrangements

The Local Government Act 2000, required councils to adopt one of two political management arrangements, leader and cabinet or directly elected mayor and cabinet, by 2010.

Before that most councils had a leader and cabinet system. Each year the council would appoint a leader and each year the leader would decide on how many and which councillors would make up the cabinet, as well as what roles the cabinet undertook.

The changes concerning what is known as the strong leader model means that:

- once elected by full council, the leader continues in office for four years – until the year they are due for re-election – unless removed by resolution

One of the key differences between the two systems is that elected mayors are not councillors – residents elect them directly once every four years. It is also more likely that a directly elected mayor who is not a member of a political party will choose a cross-party cabinet.

This legislation also scrapped the right of smaller councils to retain their committee systems and the option of having a directly elected mayor and council manager.

The executive mayor or strong leader and the cabinet is responsible for:

- agreeing new policy and proposing the budget
- conducting strategic service reviews
- promoting the council's interests in partnership
- implementing decisions of the full council with the council's officers.

There are some areas where the executive does not have responsibility. Quasi-judicial and regulatory functions such as development control, planning applications and licensing decisions are delegated from the council to separate decision-making committees.

Councils must also establish overview and scrutiny arrangements through which non-executive councillors can question and challenge the performance of the executive in a manner that will enable public debate.

Overview and scrutiny committees have to reflect the political balance of the council. Members of the executive are likely to be asked to attend overview and scrutiny committee meetings regularly to answer questions and contribute to debate.

Co-options

Councils can appoint co-opted members to committees – people from the community with specific expertise and knowledge. Some co-options are statutory, such as the parental and religious members of education scrutiny panels.

In other instances councillors will have the opportunity to invite interested members of the community to serve on specific scrutiny inquiries and investigations.

While councillors will always retain the mandate of representation through election it can be useful to include people who may not be strongly represented, such as business people, young people and people from ethnic minorities.

Procedures

Councils have internal procedures that councillors should know about and understand.

They concern:

- standing orders
- agendas and minutes
- defamation and privilege
- roles at meetings.

Standing orders

Full council, overview and scrutiny committee meetings and regulatory committee meetings are governed by procedural standing orders.

The interpretation of standing orders is the chairperson's responsibility. Councillors need to familiarise themselves with them to ensure they comply with them and know when to challenge them if they believe they have been broken.

The standing orders specify the timing of council meetings, the order of business, rules of debate and other matters of procedure. It is important to understand:

- the rules of debate
- declarations of interest
- terms of reference for committees.

Agendas and minutes

The law requires notice of a public meeting, with its date, time, venue and agenda, to be posted publicly five clear working days before the meeting takes place.

Some councils circulate the agendas of all meetings to all councillors in advance. This allows them to check whether there are items coming up that concern their ward. If there are issues of interest to the councillor or their ward, they can ask to attend the meeting as an observer.

A councillor may also ask to speak on behalf of ward constituents but cannot vote unless he or she is a member of the committee concerned.

At all formal meetings of the council, a record is made by council officers of the decisions taken, the background

papers received and the reasons for the decision. The minutes are made available to the public.

Records must be kept and made public when an individual executive member or mayor has taken a decision.

All council meetings and committees are open to members of the public unless there are legal reasons to exclude them.

The executive is required to set out its programme of work, where it is known, in a forward plan. The plan will include all key decisions due to be made by the executive in the following four months. The plan must be made public and made available to the relevant overview and scrutiny committees at least two weeks in advance of the commencement of the period covered.

Defamation and privilege

The law of defamation is potentially a dangerous and expensive one for councillors. Councillors can be sued for defamation by saying or writing anything that will “lower a person in the estimation of right-thinking people”.

Councillors have some limited protection and to allow them freedom of speech they are given qualified privilege in council meetings. This can protect them against being sued for defamation for something they say in defending or supporting the interests of their council, or as part of their duty. But it applies only if they honestly believed what they said and were not motivated by malice.

Defamation is a complex matter and councillors should take advice from the council’s solicitor if a difficult situation is likely to arise.

Roles at meetings

The chair runs the meeting and is responsible for:

- opening and closing the meeting
- welcoming members to the meeting
- introducing each agenda item, or asking officers to introduce the item
- ensuring that the debate keeps to the point of the agenda
- inviting members to speak when they have indicated they wish to do so
- summarising at the end of each item
- indicating when and if voting should take place
- controlling disorderly members and putting a motion to remove them
- warning and, if necessary, excluding unruly members of the public.

At scrutiny committee meetings the chair welcomes witnesses and asks members to put questions in a courteous manner.

Preparation for meetings is important, and councillors should read the agenda and any attached papers beforehand. They may also decide to consult local ward groups and constituents or their ward party colleagues on non-confidential items.

If they hold a different point of view, councillors should decide what questions they want to ask at the meeting.

They may want to raise a question on a report with an officer beforehand. Some councils hold pre-agenda meetings and councillors should attend them if they can.

Top tips



Getting the councillor–officer relationship right requires that:

- both should aim to develop a relationship based on mutual respect
- councillors should define the core values of the organisation
- councillors should identify priorities, assisted by the officers
- officers should provide clear advice and offer alternative courses of action where they exist
- councillors and officers should communicate clearly and openly, avoiding ambiguity and the risk of misunderstanding
- councillors and officers should work in partnership to turn the core values and priorities into practical policies for implementation.

Roles of officers

Officers are employees of the council – the people who put policies into effect and organise the provision of services. Officers may also be delegated by councillors to make policy decisions. They are led by a chief executive and senior managers who are appointed directly by councillors.

Council employees include teachers, refuse collectors, social workers and home helps.

Statutory officers

Local authorities are required by law to designate a senior manager as the head

of paid service. This will usually be the chief executive. This person is responsible to councillors for the staffing of the council, ensuring the work of the different departments is co-ordinated, and making sure the organisation runs efficiently.

There must also be a monitoring officer responsible for warning councillors about anything the council does that is likely to lead to legal action or to a finding of maladministration by the ombudsman.

The council must also have a Section 151 officer, usually the director of finance, whose task is to monitor all the financial affairs of the council. This officer has the power to stop the council from spending money if they think it is unwise or unlawful.

All three of these posts are statutorily protected, which means councillors cannot dismiss the post holders without an independent inquiry.

Councillors should expect to be given a chart showing the structure of their authority with the names, titles, responsibilities and, ideally, photographs of senior officers.

Senior managers

The chief executive is the main link between the senior managers of individual departments and between senior managers and councillors. Chief executives advise councillors on procedure, legislation and policy.

Each year the leader or cabinet should conduct a performance appraisal interview with the chief executive.

The chief executive leads a management team that meets frequently to discuss the corporate management of the authority and also meets regularly with the executive or cabinet.

Councillor's viewpoint



My Day

Councillor Barry Coppinger, Middlesbrough Council



Saturday begins with our weekly ward surgery at Berwick Hills library. I meet up with my fellow ward councillor Eddie Dryden. Stacey and Jacqui, the neighbourhood police officers for Berwick Hills, also join us. Surgeries are well attended and the joint working is beneficial, as we can share information and compare notes. This week, residents' concerns include school fencing, damaged grass verges, nuisance trees, a nuisance neighbour, and antisocial behaviour at local garages. All will be followed up in the next few days, as we agree various actions.

Eddie and I also decide to accompany the local police beat patrol the following Friday evening for a bit of youth engagement, and to discuss some local problem solving. We'll visit current hot spots in Berwick Hills, with Stacey, Jacqui and Steve, the council's neighbourhood safety officer for the area, and talk to some of the local young people.

I'm council executive member for community protection and a member of Cleveland police authority, and work with the police at all levels. Neighbourhood policing is one of our main priorities, so it's good to see policies and priorities in action at a local level.

After the surgery, I call home to check with my partner Val that we've got all appropriate ingredients in the house, as we're having some friends round for a meal this evening. I also chat with our sons, Sean and Danny, about their intentions for the day.

Then it's off to Captain Cook's Square in down town Middlesbrough for the Mela Fairtrade festival. It's Fairtrade fortnight, and we've a local programme of events over the two weeks. This includes a public launch event in Radio Tees' reception area as part of their morning show, a tea dance at the town hall, a Fairtrade disco for young people with a DJ and a dance group, fashion shows and markets.

All the events promote Fairtrade products and ask people to give up their usual brand for more ethically produced products.

I'm on the stall for a couple of hours, helping spread the word about Fairtrade and giving out free samples. We've had plenty of visitors during the day and hopefully it will lead to more Fairtrade users in future.

Fairtrade is an international campaign to ensure producers in developing countries receive a reasonable price for their goods, and also supports health

and education projects in their communities. In 2009, Fairtrade UK sales reached £800m nationally.

Our council serves Fairtrade tea and coffee at meetings and encourages all outlets where refreshments are served to use Fairtrade. Is your council on board? There's a lot of useful information about Fairtrade and how you or your organisation can get involved on www.fairtrade.org.uk

Today's Mela also serves as a preview for our annual Middlesbrough Mela in the summer, which brings people from across the region and beyond to Albert Park. Today's event includes live music and dance, a Mad Hatter's Fairtrade tea party, stalls promoting and selling Fairtrade, a freestyle football champ showing off his skills, and a raffle to win five Fairtrade footballs signed by players from Middlesbrough football club.

Then it's back home to tackle the other major challenge of the day ... beef in stout with herb dumplings!

Barry Coppinger is chair of Middlesbrough Fairtrade group.

A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.



Senior managers or directors lead the individual departments of the council. They may also be called chief officers. Senior managers are responsible for advising the cabinet and scrutiny committees on policy and are responsible for implementing councillors' decisions and for service performance.

Usually, a separate group of officers supports the scrutiny committees.

Department structures and titles of senior managers vary. Councillors should learn about the arrangements in their authority and which department is responsible for each service.

Councillor-officer relationships

The relationship between the elected leader of the council and its appointed chief executive is the most important one in local government and has a profound effect on the council's performance.

Officers are employed to manage the council and to help councillors achieve their policy goals. But officers may have to advise councillors from time to time that certain courses of action cannot be carried out.

Officers have a duty to give unbiased professional advice – even if it is not what councillors want to hear.

Officers cannot respond to personal criticism in the same way that politicians can and temper their remarks accordingly.

Top tips



Newly elected members should:

- talk to other councillors
- talk to officers take up training courses offered by the council
- read the council's corporate plan to gain an overview of the council's agenda and priorities
- learn how the council takes decisions and how you can influence these on behalf of the people you represent
- take on new responsibilities with care – don't take on too much too soon
- if you need to make arrangements for public service leave with your employers, speak to them as soon as possible. You are entitled to reasonable time off but your employer is not obliged to pay you for it
- learn to manage the paperwork – learn what you need to read and what you don't, and don't hoard outdated or irrelevant material
- set up a good filing system
- concentrate on matters that interest you and learn them thoroughly
- think about changing to a different policy area at least once during your term
- communicate with fellow councillors, council staff and officers and with constituents
- many council staff will be based at depots and sites – try to visit them informally, but with advance notice, to show support for and interest in their work. Their feedback can often be invaluable and it's a good boost to morale. Be relaxed and make it clear that this is neither an inspection nor a moans session
- set up a schedule for visiting the key groups in your ward over your first year – including faith groups, voluntary groups, major employers, schools, youth centres, tenants' and residents' associations
- tell people in your ward what you are doing.

Mutual respect and good communication is the key to establishing good member–officer relationships. Close personal familiarity should be avoided. It is important to get this right and there are some simple things that can make it easier to establish relationships that work.

There should be clarity about the respective roles of councillors and officers and this can only be achieved through discussion.

The councillor's role

Becoming a councillor is a rewarding form of public service that puts people in a privileged position where they can make a difference to the quality of other people's daily lives.

However, being an effective councillor requires hard work. Every day, councillors have to balance the needs and interests of their residents, voters, political parties and the council. All these groups will make legitimate demands on the councillor's time on top of their personal responsibilities to family, workplace and friends.

It is therefore important that councillors understand their role so they can perform responsibly and effectively for the council and maintain the quality of their personal lives.

The councillor's role takes in:

- representing the ward
- decision-making
- policy and strategy review and development
- overview and scrutiny
- regulatory duties
- community leadership and engagement

Chapters two and three expand on these themes.

Representing the ward

The primary role of a councillor is to represent their ward and the people who live in it. They also have a responsibility to communicate council policy and decisions to people in the ward.

Members of political parties may find that their party offers advice and guidance on doing this.

Community leadership and engagement

Community leadership is at the heart of modern local government and councils are taking on new responsibilities for working in partnership with other organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, to improve services and the quality of life of citizens.

Decision-making

Councillors have a central part to play in making decisions that impact on their ward and across the whole area covered by their council. They will be involved in decision-making through:

- full council
- regulatory committees such as planning control or licensing
- local voluntary organisation management
- sitting on boards and as school governors
- membership of partnership boards
- being employers of staff on appointments panels and disciplinary or grievance appeals.

Policy and strategy

Councillors influence and determine the development and review of the council's policy and strategy. They contribute to this through their:

- role in overview and scrutiny
- involvement in advisory groups and partnerships
- interaction with executive members
- role as a representative on local community groups
- role on area forums and committees
- casework
- membership of a political group.

Overview and scrutiny

Councillors have always been required to scrutinise the council and the overview and scrutiny function is a natural extension of representation.

The process has recently become more clearly defined and distinct and the role of councillors now includes:

- providing a check on the activities of the executive through call-in powers
- monitoring and reviewing policy formulation and implementation
- policy development
- quality review
- scrutiny of external bodies and agencies.

Regulatory duties

Local authorities are not just service providers, they also act as regulators. This involves councillors in quasi-judicial roles on special committees appointed directly by the council, such as planning and licensing committees.

Most councils arrange special training for councillors undertaking these quasi-judicial responsibilities. In these roles, councillors are required to act independently and are not subject to the party group whip.

Support for councillors

Councillors make many different types of decisions and recommendations that have far-reaching consequences for the communities they represent and for council staff.

They also have a leadership role that requires them to engage with and advocate on behalf of local people.

In recognition of the increased responsibilities undertaken by councillors today, councils are expected to provide training and development, facilities, access to information and guidance, and other assets that will help them carry out their roles.

To be efficient and effective, councillors need a range of support services. All councils offer some support, and this may include:

- office accommodation, such as members' rooms, interview rooms, rooms for holding surgeries, public meetings and consultations
- secretarial and word-processing services
- communications facilities – phones, PCs or laptops, email, press office support and so on
- information provision for use internally, perhaps to facilitate scrutiny, and externally, perhaps to respond to enquiries from constituents
- help to manage casework
- research facilities
- care facilities
- training and development
- mentoring.

Councils vary tremendously in the degree of support they give councillors. The level of support offered may depend on a councillor's role and time commitment.

Executive members and overview and scrutiny chairs are likely to receive more secretarial and research support than backbenchers. Non-executive councillors may find that they have very little dedicated support. All councillors should have access to some form of

communication facility and training and development in new roles and ways of working.

Allowances

Councillors are entitled to an allowance set by their council that reflects their level of responsibility and the amount of time they devote to council affairs.

In addition to a basic allowance, extra payments may cover:



Case study Keeping in touch

The extent to which councillors can engage citizens through the internet is influenced by restrictions that prevent the use of council services for political purposes.

The code of recommended practice on local authority publicity states that publicity produced by a local authority relating to councillors should not be party political, limiting the type of content that can be displayed on authority sponsored websites.

Many councillors have overcome these restrictions simply by asking their authority to provide links to external sites with more overt political content, such as those of their local and national political parties.

Bob Piper from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, says: "My website enables me to keep people informed and correct or confirm local rumours. I think that it does assist in raising the profile of myself as a councillor and

hopefully increases respect for the council."

Publishing a website does, however, present challenges for councillors and their authorities and can have a negative impact, particularly if information is not maintained and kept up to date.

Some councillors have set up their own websites and blogs and linked them to their local authority web pages. These sites allow the councillors to be more expansive about their political views and party involvement and, perhaps, offer greater scope for engagement.

Bob Piper uses his website to consolidate his community work by offering up-to-date information on local issues like planning and invites feedback from residents. He has a 'Ward News' section on the site and includes a link to a separate blog where visitors are able to read his opinions on the issues of the day.

www.councillor.info/sandwell/bpiper

- special responsibilities – payable to the leader of the council, portfolio holders, overview and scrutiny chairs, opposition leaders and so on
- childcare and dependent carers
- travel and subsistence
- co-optee’s services
- pension scheme for councillors.

The allowances are all subject to income tax. Some incidental costs – such as use of a home office, telephone and so on – may be deducted before calculating the tax to be paid.

Information technology

Information technology (IT) offers councillors a fast and efficient means

of keeping in touch with the local community. It also gives access to the information councillors need to influence or make decisions.

Councillors will find that electronic communications allow them to get much closer to the people they represent. But new councillors will not necessarily arrive with ready-made computer skills.

Every councillor will need to find out about their authority’s IT systems and how they can access them and use them effectively. To get this right they will need training and ongoing support.

The best councils give their councillors a ‘home office’, including a PC or laptop, so that they can access the council’s IT

Top tips

How the Local Government Group can help



The LG Group offers a range of support and development opportunities for councillors, including:

- the Charter for Member Development specifying roles and responsibilities for member development in individual authorities
- A range of development materials for all councillors, covering a wide range of topics and provided in the council’s own offices
- a range of toolkits and resources to promote and support the role of the councillor and their development is also available on line
- the Leadership Academy for leading members and portfolio holders
- support and advice on specific challenges and issues
- councillor mentoring including ward walks with peers from other councils
- dedicated pages for councillors on the LG Improvement and Development website
- communities of practice offering councillors and council staff a way of sharing ideas, experience, documents and expertise and exploring the latest thinking on particular topics – accessed free via the website. This includes the national member development community of practice www.local.gov.uk/communities

system and the information they need whenever it suits them. They also have technicians who can visit councillors at home to deal with IT problems.

Councils should at least give councillors access to a computer in the town hall. The better the support available to councillors, the more effective they will be.

Good IT systems and skills can help councillors:

- deal with casework more quickly and efficiently
- manage their time better so they don't have to visit the town hall so often
- keep in touch with residents and community groups
- access key documents or other information online rather than waiting for them to be delivered
- access the council's intranet, an internal version of the internet, to find out when meetings are taking place, identify an officer or search for information about specific services
- hold online meetings rather than having to get a group of people to travel to a meeting place
- research information about a particular issue
- access government information
- look beyond the council to see how things are done elsewhere.

Councillors' web pages

A key goal of government's drive to bring public services online was to improve the ability of councillors to use technology. An important part of this initiative required local authorities to provide councillors with the facilities and know-

how to publish their own web pages.

See Councillors and Communications in chapter two.

Research and information

Councils vary widely in the level of research assistance and information they make available to councillors. Those whose authority has a comprehensive information system or intranet will be able to take advantage of advanced and sophisticated research tools.

Many councils have set up research budgets for councillors involved in overview and scrutiny. Some have political research assistants.

These officers are appointed by the council to serve each of the political parties. Their activities are strictly controlled but they will be able to carry out research and some administrative work on behalf of councillors.

Training and development

There are no set guidelines on training and development but most councils offer induction courses to introduce newly elected councillors to the workings and responsibilities of the council and to familiarise them with systems, facilities and the decision-making process.

A growing number of councils have officers whose job is to provide or organise development opportunities for councillors. This may be by offering development of particular interests and specialities and could include topics like housing, transport, planning, scrutiny skills, working with the media, presentation skills, enhancing political leadership skills, assertiveness, time-management or speed-reading courses.



Communities of practice for local government

Social networking sites such as Facebook and the growing Twitter community feature heavily in the news with their focus on communicating regularly in a shared online environment.

LG Group's communities of practice collaboration platform offers a similar resource, but with a clear professional perspective and range of additional advantages. It is free and provides a secure environment for its members to share experiences, ideas and solutions. It also acts as a workspace to store and share documents and the means of finding others doing similar work or with similar concerns.

According to Councillor Sally Newton of Hertfordshire County Council: "The content is good and informative and has helped confirm that my council is on a similar track."

The advantages for councillors joining a community of practice include the provision of:

- opportunities to network, share and develop ideas and practice on a daily basis
- a single space to store, share and access documents
- a people finder tool to locate councillors, member services officers, or other staff working across the sector.

There are active members working across a diverse range of communities, from customer service to community cohesion. There has also been a series of online conferences run on the communities of practice platform, including the National Councillor Online Conference – Adult Social Care, specifically for councillors to discuss adult social care issues, and councillors connected: the social media online conference.

These online conferences work as normal conferences, with speakers, discussion, questions, and answers, but operate within the online environment, thus being more convenient, and saving time and money.

Many are run by councils, others by national organisations and a number are specifically aimed at councillors.

The national member development community was set up to enable councillors and others with member development responsibilities to work collaboratively and participate in member development programmes, providing a valuable means of direct communication.

www.local.gov.uk/communities

In some councils, councillors have regular away days or weekends to discuss strategic and other issues. Others have regular joint events for officers and councillors, to formulate strategy and build good working relationships.

The LG Group offers development opportunities through a number of programmes and Local Leadership activities.

Member development and the charter

Given the amount of change facing local government it is more important than ever that councillors have the necessary skills to make the decisions and provide leadership to their communities. The Charter for Member Development and the underpinning good practice guidelines provide a framework to help councils build their councillors' skill and expertise.

A higher-level charter (Level 2 or Charter Plus) provides a further challenge for councils that have already achieved the charter.



Snapshot

The South East Employers Organisation (SEEMP) requires

councils signed up to its member development charter to provide an action plan based on:

1. Being fully committed to developing councillors in order to achieve the council's aims and objectives
2. Adopting a councillor-led strategic approach to councillor development.
3. Having a member learning and development plan that clearly identifies the difference development activities will make.
4. Seeing that learning and development is effective in building capacity.
5. Addressing wider development matters to promote work-life balance and citizenship.

Councillor Michael Tunwell, chairman of SEEMP, is very positive about the strategic thrust that is taking place in member development: "We want to do all we can to support councils in their approach to training members. It's very important especially since modernisation and the introduction of cabinet and scrutiny.

"There is a much more professional approach to the job and extra responsibilities. As councillors, we need to be trained as fully as we can."

Councillor Tunwell compares the charter with Investors In People (IiP): "It's about councils demonstrating commitment to investing in members and, like IiP, it focuses on individuals and the parts they play in the organisation's effectiveness."

He also emphasises that councils are likely to become more successful and more efficient by making sure that development relates to corporate priorities.

2



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Representing the ward

No one has a more important role than the ward councillor in ensuring that local democracy works and residents believe in it. Councillors are the bridge between a community and its council.

The councillor's job goes beyond simple advocacy on behalf of the ward. Representation involves building relationships with individuals and groups, to inform, consult and empower people and facilitate effective community involvement in local government.

People's champion

The principal job of a councillor is to represent the ward, but the task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals is a complex one.

Some groups are very hard to involve. Generally speaking, the wider their range of approaches to community contact, the more people councillors will reach. In addition to representing individual voters, councillors should try to keep in touch with:

- local opinion formers such as action groups and community group leaders, residents' association chairs, leaders of leisure groups, local media, and 'stalwarts' of the community
- highly mobile groups, including students who pass through a community quickly without ever becoming involved in it – in some areas, up to a third of the residents move between one election and the next
- groups that are differentiated by age such as the young and the elderly

Councillor's viewpoint



My day

Councillor Arash

Fatemian, Oxfordshire County Council



I use the daily commute into the centre of Oxford to think about the day ahead and the issues and challenges it will no doubt present.

The commute will almost always be in the form of my beloved racing bike. I really enjoy cycling – it's a great way to keep fit and one of the quickest and easiest ways to get around Oxfordshire.

However, the journey will invariably bring up a highways issue that I will try to report while it is fresh in my mind. We saw a great improvement in highways work in Oxfordshire since our new contractor took over last year, and local people have also realised this but, given the recent bad weather, this is an uphill struggle.

I leave the bike at county hall and make the short journey to the office, checking the BlackBerry for any important messages regarding adult social care, my portfolio responsibility. We have introduced some big changes in response to the recent financial pressures and it's important to make sure they are bedding in smoothly without service users noticing too much.

We are also in the midst of our roll out of 'Transforming adult social care', which should be complete later this spring.

I am continuing to work pretty much full-time in my day job, while also taking on the adult services portfolio. This will be a split day.

I am very fortunate that our company office is located a five-minute walk from county hall, but also that I have a very understanding employer who is fully supportive of my elected and cabinet roles and allows me the necessary time off from work. I am very grateful to the directors for being so supportive when under no obligation to do so.

I work for a strategy consultancy called White Space and the morning is spent in a series of meetings, team catch-ups and client conference calls. A lot of our clients are facing issues that stem from the recession and, given the hard times ahead for local government, I find it easy to relate to the issues they are facing.

As I make my way to county hall for what promises to be a busy afternoon, a quick glance at Twitter allows me to catch up on local and national news headlines.

Some people may scoff at BlackBerries and iPhones, but I find them invaluable and an essential tool when combining two roles. I find it's also a great way to keep update with local issues and yet another way to engage with my constituents.

At county hall, I hold a series of meetings and workshops on a number of services issues. Today, I have also had an update meeting and an interesting workshop. We recently had a dementia awareness day in Oxford that went down really well and there is some key learning to take on board.

With the day over, and after clearing some emails and council papers, I glance at the bookshelf and briefly flirt with the idea of some reading for leisure.

I am enjoying every waking minute on both jobs, but my one regret is that I don't have time to read for pleasure any more – so I settle for a trip to the gym instead.

Still, these days at least there are far fewer potholes for the bike to negotiate!



A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.

Councillor's viewpoint



My day

Councillor Flo Clucas, Liverpool City Council



People often ask me how I spend my spare time. Along with just about every councillor I know, I don't get much of it! But, when I do, I research my family tree.

Family trees connect us with yesterday and today. In my case, they connect me with my Italian ancestry and with World Wars I and II.

These events, unconnected though they seem, form the basis of my interest in European affairs. They also take me to my day job!

For the past 11 years, I have been lucky enough to be a part of European Union (EU) funding partnerships that have received some €2billion for Merseyside alone. We meet regularly to look at how we can best spend the EU cash we have and to approve projects.

Some of the money, about €8million, will go to the energy efficient housing stream that I helped bring in for all European regions. Changing the rules; one of the successes of the job!

The regeneration of Liverpool and much of Merseyside owes a good deal to the EU. We have approved millions to be spent in the northwest and Merseyside: millions that will change lives and communities.

Seeing the links from one generation to another, from one country to another, and bringing those links together has been an incredible experience; none more so than developing links with Italy. Not just my great granddad this time, but my dad too. As a British prisoner of war, an Italian family saved him and fellow prisoners from starvation.

We should never forget those times of hardship, loss and destruction, times, too, of great heroism and sacrifice.

As a nation, 60 years ago we saved Europe from fascism, and Liverpool played its part as the gateway for Atlantic convoys. As a city, over the last 15 years Europe has helped save us from devastating decline.

The two are inextricably linked for the EU was born out of the pain and suffering of World War II. Now it keeps the peace, in spite of the disagreements that nation states have.

Back at home, as for many of us, the council's budget has loomed large in our thinking, as we prepare for the next few years. We know how hard life is going to be for the public sector and had, in 2009, already set in train planning for the next five years. We knew then that central government was reducing the money available to us.

Our settlements in recent years have generally been less than the average settlement; for the current year, it is one point five per cent out of an average of some four per cent.

We have trimmed the fat for the last 10 years but our aim is to protect the most vulnerable. This year, 2011, has seen all parties on the council – Labour, Liberal Democrat, Liberal and Green – come together in the budget process. The goal is simple, to protect frontline services as far as we can. So, work on the budget was the Christmas and New Year task.

Christmas is a holiday I love. It brings family and friends closer together and whether one is a believer or not, helps focus minds on those less fortunate than us.

This year, a special place in my mind was for Galle in Sri Lanka. Devastated in the tsunami, it has slowly been rebuilding and I have been privileged to play a small part in that regeneration. So, as I did this year on Boxing Day and as I will next, I will think of those we know out there, the villagers, those who lost family on the beaches or on the train, and remember the day that took so many lives.



A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.

Councillor Clucas was recently honoured by the Italian government for her work in reconciliation and furthering relations with Italian cities, councils, and people.

- hard-to-reach groups, people with disabilities, members of under-represented minority ethnic communities and the silent majority who do not seek active community involvement.

See Councillors and communications.

Representation

People expect their councillors to represent them on the council. To do an effective job councillors will have to develop skills that enable them to:

- Communicate – good councillors inform residents about important local issues or council policies and seek their views. They also develop relationships to ensure they learn about local issues and problems when they first arise. Councillors are often the first people to hear about things that affect their wards and should not assume that others already know about them, or that information should be handed down on a need-to-know basis. Councillors should be proactive and make it their job to tell people what is going on. The exceptions to this rule are what are known as Part 2 items that councillors receive in their council papers. Confidential information of a sensitive or commercial nature should not be passed on to the public. If councillors think that certain items have been classified Part 2 without good reason, they can argue for change in council.
- Facilitate and empower – people often assume they are powerless to make any difference in their community but councillors will often be able to empower individuals or groups through: – listening

carefully to the issues involved

- providing relevant contacts in local government or other services
- helping to develop a range of achievable solutions to problems
- facilitating meetings, petitions, surveys and so on - offering an overview of a situation - encouraging negotiation and compromise between different groups.

- Support – councillors should offer support to individuals, organisations and businesses in their areas. They should represent community views to the council and to other strategic partners like the police and health services. They may also become involved in campaigning on local issues and begin working with the council and other bodies to bring improvements to their wards.

Services and contacts

Frequently, residents either don't know which organisation or which council department is responsible for a particular service – or don't know how to contact them.

Councillors can make information like this available and easily accessible to their constituents and some produce and deliver short lists of key local contacts.

Understanding the ward

New councillors should get to know their wards. They should buy a local map and mark the ward boundaries on it and make sure they have an up-to-date electoral roll. Councillors are entitled to a full copy of the electoral roll, but voters can ask to be excluded from the version available to the general public. The roll

is available on paper or in an electronic format that can often be merged with a data management system. This can help considerably with casework management.

Ward walk

Councillors should go for a walk, cycle or drive around their ward or division – even if they have lived in the area for years – looking at roads, pavements, play areas, open spaces and other community facilities. The condition of roads has been a particular issue following the winter of 2010/11.

They should report things like broken fences or equipment, potholes, graffiti and faulty streetlights to the appropriate council department and record action taken – useful as a demonstration of achievement.

Some councillors carry out ward walks accompanied by fellow councillors or key council officers so they can make decisions on the spot. A few quick wins will make a good first impression.

The ward walk should be a regular activity, accompanied on occasion by key local contacts like residents' association chairs, town or parish councillors or community police. It's useful to build a shared knowledge of problems in an area and discuss possible solutions.

Many councillors find it invaluable to go on a ward walk accompanied by a Local Government Group accredited peer.

Getting to know people

The council should be able to provide a directory of council officers and other useful contacts such as the police, local MPs, other tiers of government and health bodies, but councillors will need

to build up their own directories of key contacts relevant to their area.

Councillors in the same ward can share this information to save duplication of effort. For example, a list of groups in the ward should include community and residents' associations, places of worship, schools and playgroups, neighbourhood watch and leisure or sports groups, local police and fire and rescue services.

This will enable councillors to introduce themselves and arrange meetings with others involved in the community and to keep their ears to the ground.

Councillors should also be aware of council property in the wards such as housing, leisure facilities, parks and open spaces, depots, libraries, community centres and so on.

It is also worth knowing the main employers in the immediate area and whether a particular type of industry or business is a major employer of local people.

Communities with large commuting populations are likely to use council facilities differently from those where most people work nearby.

Councillors should also keep a diary of ward events and attend as many as possible if it is appropriate to do so.

Community involvement

Changes in local government have led to a greater emphasis on community involvement. Many councils have tried to decentralise operations and decision-making and to increase residents' involvement in local affairs.

Some have developed community involvement by:

- introducing area offices so that services are more accessible
- assigning community development officers to groups of wards
- delegating decision-making to parish or town councils
- developing local area committees or town forums
- appointing town centre or community centre managers to work with communities.

See chapter three.

Working with others

Most councillors will share their ward or division with others. There may be town or parish councils covering all or part of it and, unless the council is a unitary authority, there will be county, district or borough councillors covering the area too.

Councillors from the same political party, or fellow independents, are a valuable resource and may be able to agree a degree of workload sharing. Assuming they are not also newly elected, other councillors will already have a good idea of the main issues in the ward and should have contact with key groups and individuals. They can show new councillors the ropes and introduce them to useful people, but all councillors need to develop their own perspective on things and not rely on the opinions of others.

Councillor's viewpoint



Ward walks

Councillors at Castle Point BC in Essex undertook a series of ward walks as part of a Local Government Improvement and Development-led programme.

Gail Boland, who walked her Boyce ward in the Benfleet area with member peers, says: "I was initially very sceptical about the whole thing. It put my back up that somebody from outside the area should be able to come in and tell us what to do. I thought nobody could know my ward better than I do. But I had to eat my words!

"The member peers were great – they pointed out things I'd never even noticed before.

"We used to have a forum for residents to express their concerns, but ward visits really do give a much better picture of what local people want. At the forums the same people would come every time, wanting to raise the same issues.

"On walks you meet loads more people – like mothers with kids who don't have time to attend meetings – and you get a much wider range of concerns and viewpoints.'

David Marchant, the council's chief executive, decided to take part in the walk too. "I wanted to take part so I could get to grips with some of the issues facing the council on the ground," he says. "However, the

process really helped give me a better picture of the issues facing members and I've been able to take early action on some problems that were causing frustration.

"One big lesson was the ability of member peers to demonstrate just how rewarding and empowering it can be to engage with people at a grass roots level. As a result of the walks we are constructing a new neighbourhood plan."

David Logan, one of the member peers who took part, says: "One of the great things about ward visits is that you get to see the physical environment up close. The environment always has a great effect on the psychology of the people who live there.

"Physical isolation is a common problem for many authorities, and it can lead to a parochial attitude that adversely affects corporate performance. In Castle Point's case I was very impressed by the members' local knowledge and their relationships with residents.

"The problem lay in their ability to get things done at a corporate level. This is often the case with ward walks – they expose corporate weakness in the council as a whole, rather than in individual councillors. They can give a much broader perspective on things than you would expect."

Eoin Egan, who visited Benfleet's Appleton ward, says the council's progress has been long and hard. "We often feel isolated because we have had to make some hard decisions that are unpopular with residents," he says. "The involvement of a peer member proved a great asset, as they have the knack of suggesting small changes that could prove beneficial in the long term."

Susie Kemp, a peer, who did the Castle Point walk, says: "We can get so bogged down in our everyday work as councillors that we forget to go out and talk to people. The Castle Point members got a positive response from everyone they met. I think they – and probably all – councillors need reminding to stand up and be proud of sharing their achievements, instead of worrying about problems all the time."

Councillors from opposing political parties may balk at the prospect of working closely together but should at least aim to develop positive working relationships – councillors frequently find that the interests of the ward override party loyalties.

Parish and town councils

Councillors should get to know the local parish or town councillors if such councils exist in their areas and attend some of their meetings, which often have a slot for public participation.

They may also be able to help parish councillors access services in a higher authority. Councillors representing the same area on different councils can work together to resolve local issues.

This guide does not cover the work of parish councils. Councillors interested in the work of parish and town councils should visit the National Association of Local Councils website at www.nalc.gov.uk. The NALC publishes its own guide.

Area offices

Area offices are usually one-stop shops where people can register any matter they want the council to deal with. They help to co-ordinate local service delivery. Residents may also be able to access services electronically, make payments and gather information at these offices.

Community development officers

These officers work with local communities and councillors, aiming to develop good communications and strategic partnerships between residents and service providers. They work to involve whole communities, including the hard-to-reach groups, in decisions that affect them.

Area committees and community forums

A number of local authorities are experimenting with area committees and community forums and there is a range of different models in operation. Some area committees consist solely of councillors supported by council officers.

There is usually an opportunity for public participation, with presentations, petitions and questions encouraged. In community or neighbourhood forums, committee members include co-opted representatives of community groups as well as councillors.

They provide opportunities for citizens to become involved in local decisions. Area committees or community forums may:

- have delegated budgets and decision-making functions
- develop and monitor community action plans
- drive local scrutiny
- decide planning applications (elected member-only committees), issues and campaigns.

Local campaigns

As part of their work in the ward, councillors may become involved in, or lead, local campaigns. This could involve anything from campaigning for a zebra crossing or more affordable housing, to starting a credit union. There may also be politically motivated campaigns.

Councillors approached with an idea for a local campaign they support may wish to:

- carry out some consultation to find out how widespread support for the idea is
- help organise a campaign group that brings together key people talk to council officers or to outside bodies that may be able to help
- organise petitions or public meetings
- help people make presentations to or ask questions of committees
- bring different groups together to negotiate solutions
- involve the local press, radio and television
- publicise it on their personal web page or blog.

Councillor's viewpoint



My day

Councillor Michael Watson, Borough of Broxbourne Council



I am woken as normal by my son Toby letting me know from his room that it's time to get up and get going.

Toby is only two years old but is already the undisputed boss in the Watson household although his sister Abigail, who is a month old, will be fighting him for that role soon enough.

I jump up to feed him his breakfast and get him ready for his day, and when that's done I can get on with mine. I have taken the day off work because I have a number of daytime meetings. I love being a councillor and I'm proud to represent Waltham Cross, but the amount of council meetings held during working hours, either in the morning or late afternoon, is not easy to manage if you have a full-time job. It's certainly not conducive to attracting and retaining young people as councillors. That said, I organised most of today so I only have myself to blame.

My first meeting is with some young people who want to discuss my proposal that Broxbourne should have a youth council and elected young mayor. This is something

that I have called for in the council chamber, with reasonable support, but no plans have yet been put in place.

As a member of a small group up against a party with a big majority, I think it's important to pick achievable objectives and focus your campaign on them, and I hope that by putting pressure in the right places I can persuade the ruling group to give it a go.

Next up is a meeting at a local community centre to publicise the 'People's record' which is a website for local residents to share their photographs, memories and hopes for the future. Waltham Cross is on the verge of participating in a piece of history, as it's hosting the Olympic canoeing event at a purpose-built facility just down the road. Schemes like this complement that.

After grabbing some lunch I go to visit several residents in my ward who have contacted me about issues affecting their day-to-day lives. I prefer to see the problems first hand and for me this is the best part of being a councillor – the opportunity to reassure and help people on the issues that matter. In the evening,

I attend a meeting of the planning and licensing committee. Until recently Broxbourne council was in the planning dark ages and refused to allow members of the public to make oral representations for and against applications before the committee.

When I was elected this was one of the things I wanted to change and, thanks to a campaign, the public are now allowed to speak. It has been a great success. After discussing a number of important applications, it's time to head home and relax by catching an (recorded) episode of Spooks, one of the few things I watch religiously.



A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.

Councillor Watson has subsequently become leader of the opposition on the council.

Councillors should not feel obliged to run the whole campaign – often their involvement will be as a participant, supporter or facilitator. They shouldn't be tempted to claim more than their fair share of the credit – involvement will help raise their profile anyway.

If a councillor doesn't support a particular local campaign but is asked to help, they can still fulfil their role as a councillor representing the whole community by:

- telling people how to present a petition to the council, how to speak to a committee or how to ask questions

- advising on council policy and procedures
- giving contact numbers of bodies or individuals that may be able to help
- being honest – they shouldn't hint to campaigners that they support a cause if they oppose it
- making sure people have access to accurate sources of information.

Surgeries and casework

The problems and issues people raise with ward councillors are known as casework. Casework may sometimes lead on to policy development or issue campaigning, but can be distinguished from these by virtue of the fact that casework deals with the resolution of a specific problem.

Casework comes through surgeries, letters, phone calls, emails, responses to leaflets and door knocking. Some councillors find that there is relatively little casework while others have mountains of it.

Usually, the higher the level of deprivation in an area or the less efficient the council, the more casework there will be. If there is not much casework, councillors should find out whether it is because they represent a very self-sufficient community or because their profile is too low.

Most residents are unaware that their councillor can help them resolve many issues, and it is up to councillors to let them know that this is part of their role.

Surgeries

People expect to be able to contact their councillor. The traditional way of meeting constituents is through the use of surgeries. Surgeries enable councillors to:

- meet their constituents
- solve people's problems
- gain support for their work and ideas
- discuss the impact of council policies on the area
- raise their profile
- be an effective advocate for the people and communities they represent.

There are two main types of surgery – traditional surgeries based in a building and street surgeries.

Traditional surgeries

In the traditional surgery, the councillor advertises a time and place where they will be available to speak to constituents. People turn up and wait to see their councillor. Punctuality is essential.

Advantages of a traditional surgery

- having a regular time and place for surgery makes it easier for people to know how to contact their councillor
- the surgery can be shared with other agencies constituents might wish to visit, such as community police officers or advice centres
- at times when the surgery is very quiet, it's a handy place to catch up on paperwork
- some councils organise and publicise a traditional surgery for a cluster of wards, with a rota of councillors attending and council officers on hand to provide support and pass on details to other councillors in the area.

Top tips



Managing casework

1. Install a dedicated telephone landline or mobile.

- you will be called day and night – use the answering machine or service, especially after normal hours
- make sure that the outgoing message makes clear who you are and what information you want from the caller.

2. Know the system – work the system.

- use a simple form for casework at surgeries to capture the key facts
- use email – it is the swiftest means of communication within the council
- communicate with the council officers who handle members' enquiries or contact the relevant executive direct, if that is how your council operates – members' casework officers will manage the standard of replies better and ensure target response times are met
- only contact senior directors or the chief executive on major issues
- advertise your surgeries widely in the community and keep them to a regular pattern
- listen to your constituent – then agree the problem and action with them to close down the surgery interview or phone call
- give clear instructions to council officers – either to write to the constituent with a copy for you, or to work through you
- copy the constituent in on what you have sent to officers unless it is confidential
- organise paperwork and computer files but keep it simple
- keep it civil – avoid being rude, overly critical or aggressive to council staff
- don't make assumptions or make rash promises – something may change your perspective on the case.

3. Getting the balance right.

- 'It's the system' – many cases will be about the 'system being wrong' or claims that it has been administered wrongly – ask the right questions and make judgments about the rights and wrongs of a case
- you could influence changes in policy and improvement in service delivery
- look for solutions, not someone to blame

- 'I know my rights!' – some cases will be about constituents 'banging their heads against a brick wall' because they are not getting what they want. You will frequently discover that a policy decision or system is correct and has found against your constituent correctly but they refuse to accept it
- be honest but firm about what you can and cannot do for your constituent

4. Learn to use your 'councillor's sixth sense'.

- trust your instincts – people will sometimes try to use you or avoid telling you everything you need to know and may not be aware of their rights
- trust your judgment – know when to fight a case and when to accept officers' decisions or views as the right response
- look at the bigger picture – trying to by-pass or short cut the system or requesting special treatment for one constituent may make things worse for everyone.

Disadvantages

- the location of the surgery will be more convenient for some constituents than for others. Councillors can get around this to some extent by moving the location around the ward but this minimises the benefit of having a fixed time and place for the surgery
- only a small minority of constituents will come to a surgery so the time might be spent more effectively by getting out and meeting people.

Premises

Council premises are convenient and should be made available at reasonable times without charge to councillors. However they are not always conveniently located. Community centres, schools or village halls can provide a good alternative but will usually charge a fee.

Buildings linked to a political party are best avoided as they will put some people off and may create the impression that councillors will not represent all residents equally.

The building chosen should have lavatories, somewhere that could be used as a waiting room, an interview room and, perhaps, tea and coffee making facilities.

Councillors wishing to use laptop computers may wish to check the availability of wired or wireless internet access.

Street surgeries

One alternative to holding traditional surgeries is to run street surgeries, where the councillor knocks on doors to solicit casework. When conducting a street surgery it's useful to take someone

to hold files and be prepared to act as a 'minder' if necessary.

Advantages of street surgeries

- councillors can gather concerns, opinions and casework from people who would not normally attend a traditional surgery
- councillors are able to gather a more representative sample of opinions by soliciting views and moving around the ward or division than they would be able to by waiting for people to come to them
- councillors can target hard-to-reach sections of the population
- councillors have an opportunity to look around their patch while doing the surgery
- councillors are sometimes shown a problem directly.

Disadvantages

- predicting where to find their councillors becomes more difficult
- sharing surgeries with other agencies is not usually possible
- operating in bad weather can be difficult.

Publicity for street surgeries

Councillors can obviously use all the communications discussed earlier but it's a good idea to send out a street letter too. By distributing leaflets a few days beforehand, they can tell people when they will be in the area. It can be helpful to mark streets visited on a map to keep a geographical balance around the ward. Councillors shouldn't just turn up unannounced – people need time to formulate their thoughts.

Conflict

People who come to see councillors about serious or intractable problems are often stressed and may be angry.

If someone becomes aggressive councillors should: offer whatever help and advice they can but not promise more than they can deliver just to calm people down. This will only make the situation worse in the long run.

If people are racist, sexist or offensive in other ways, councillors should not respond but bring the interview quickly to a close. If they are in a building, they should stand up, walk to the door and lead the way out. If they feel it is safe to do so, they may wish to explain why the remarks made are unacceptable.

Difficult cases require a strategy devised in advance to manage the situation.

- all surgeries have their 'regulars' – councillors should be polite but firm and encourage them to help themselves in future
- some constituents may be obsessive or unstable – councillors should not be afraid to explain the limits of their role as a councillor or when behaviour or attitude is unacceptable
- take advice from council officers about managing surgeries and carrying out a risk assessment of the venues.

There are training programmes that show council staff how to deal with awkward or aggressive customers and new councillors may find them useful.

Feedback

After making initial inquiries the councillor should keep the constituent up-to-date with progress. They won't know what's going on unless they are told.

Councillors should act as advocates – seeking to influence better decisions for constituents, but knowing when to say 'no'. They should avoid taking personal responsibility for a problem because the focus of blame or hostility will shift on to them.

It's better for the constituent to feel that the councillor is working in partnership with them rather than as their agent.

Some statements or comments may break the law so councillors should keep a record of all discussion and correspondence in case they decide to take further action or someone makes a complaint. Any witnesses should be identified and recorded.

Casework is rewarding and frustrating in equal measure. Each case will be different and each must be handled with a degree of humility as constituents with evidence of failure by 'the council' probably see their councillor as a last resort.

more information:

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk

Planning and fettered discretion

Public opinion is often at its most vocal over planning. Councillors may find themselves approached over contentious planning applications that are of great concern to the community.

While it is important to involve people in the development of their community, councillors must be careful how they do it.

The Nolan Committee's third report on standards in public life set out the problem: "Local democracy depends on councillors being available to people who want to speak to them ... it is essential for the proper operation of the planning system that local concerns are adequately ventilated. The most effective and suitable way this can be done is via the locally elected representatives."

However, it adds: "Such lobbying can, unless care and common sense are exercised by all parties concerned, lead to the impartiality and integrity of a councillor being called into question."

It is easy for councillors to be thought of as biased – either in favour or against – even when they are not, so it is important to treat planning matters with the utmost care.

If a councillor is seen to have decided how to vote in advance of a planning meeting, either by their stated support for a particular outcome or by their participation in lobbying, they are said to have 'fettered their discretion' and should play no part in the decision on the application concerned. This applies not only to planning applications but also to such matters as plan making and site allocation.



Planning reform

The Government's Localism Bill proposes changes in the planning system intended to make it clearer, more democratic, and more effective.

The key proposals are:

- the abolition of regional strategies setting out where new development is needed in each part of the country
- the abolition of housing targets for different areas
- the right for communities to draw up neighbourhood development plans and say where they think new houses, businesses and shops should go and what they should look like
- enabling groups of local people to bring forward small developments such as new homes, businesses and shops
- a requirement for developers to consult local communities before submitting planning applications for very large developments
- strengthening planning authorities' powers to tackle abuses of the planning system, such as deliberately misleading planning applications
- allowing proceeds from the community infrastructure levy – the money raised from developers of new buildings – to be spent on maintenance as well as on new buildings
- the Government will have the power to require that money raised by the community infrastructure levy goes directly to the neighbourhoods where development takes place
- limiting the discretion of planning inspectors to insert their own wording into local plans
- ensuring that rather than focusing on reporting plans' progress to central government, councils focus on reporting progress to local communities
- requiring councils and other public bodies to work together on planning issues in ways that reflect shared interests
- abolishing the Infrastructure Planning Commission, an unelected public body that currently makes decisions concerning major national construction projects, and giving responsibility for taking decisions to government ministers.

See chapter 3 for more information about the Localism Bill.

more information:

Department of Communities and Local Government website at www.communities.gov.uk

To avoid prejudicing their objectivity, councillors must have a full picture of the facts and will need to listen to opposing arguments. They should consider the planning officers' comments and recommendations before making a decision.

In practice this means councillors:

- can meet with and listen to the views of interested parties but should explain that they will keep an open mind until they have heard all the arguments, including those put forward at the planning meeting
- should not say or do anything that would make it appear that they have decided how to vote on an application in advance of the meeting
- who are concerned that it might be alleged that they have fettered their discretion by any discussions they have, should take an officer of the council with them when they go to listen to the views of other people
- can still decide to get involved in a campaign for or against a particular application but will not be able to participate in the decision-making and should not pressurise other councillors to vote in a particular way.

more information:

Planning Advisory Service website at www.pas.gov.uk

Standards and ethics

Public confidence in local democracy is an essential aspect of an open and inclusive society. This can only be achieved when those serving their communities adhere to the high standards expected of them.

On accepting office, councillors are currently required to sign the statutory national code of conduct, a set of provisions that guides members towards the standards of behaviour expected of them when in office.

Currently, all councillors are required to comply with these provisions and an agreement to abide by the code of conduct is part of the declaration of acceptance of office for new councillors.

General obligations

Under the code of conduct, councillors must:

- treat others with respect
- not do anything that seriously prejudices their authority's ability to comply with any of its statutory duties under equality laws
- not bully any person including other members, officers of the authority, clerks or members of the public
- not intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person who may be a complainant, a witness, or who may be supporting the administration of any investigation or proceedings
- not compromise the impartiality of anyone who works for, or on behalf of, the authority
- not disclose confidential information, or information which they believe

to be confidential, unless it is in the limited circumstances outlined under disclosure of confidential information below

- not prevent anyone getting information that they are entitled to
- not use their position improperly to the advantage or disadvantage of themselves or anyone else
- not bring their office or authority into disrepute
- not seek to improperly influence decisions to the advantage or disadvantage of themselves or anyone else
- only use the resources of the authority in accordance with its requirements
- use the authority's resources for proper purposes only – it is not appropriate to use the resources for political or party political purposes, unless it is lawful and in accordance with their authority's requirements
- take into account the advice from their monitoring officer or chief finance officer when reaching a decision.

Coming changes

A number of significant changes to the standards regime were proposed in the Localism Bill published in December 2010, which is expected to receive Royal Assent in late 2011.

The present regime entailing a model code governing local authority members' conduct and enforced through local authority standards committees, regulated in turn by Standards for England, will continue considering, investigating and determining allegations of misconduct until Royal Assent is received.

The changes proposed in the Bill can be summarised as follows:

- Standards for England (formally the Standards Board for England) will be abolished
- councils will no longer be required to have a local standards committee
- councillors will be required to continue to register and declare personal interests and will not be allowed to use their position improperly for personal gain – failure to comply with these requirements will constitute a criminal offence.
- the current requirement for councils to adopt a model code of conduct and for councillors to abide by it will be abolished – but local authorities will be free to adopt their own voluntary code of conduct
- the requirement for councils to maintain a standards committee will be abolished – but local authorities will be free to set up voluntary standards committees to consider complaints about the conduct of elected and co-opted members. Such committees will, according to councils' local constitutions, be able to censure but will not be able to suspend or disqualify members from council membership.



Snapshot Nolan report principles

- **Selflessness** – holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.
- **Integrity** – holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.
- **Objectivity** – in carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.
- **Accountability** – holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.
- **Openness** – holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.
- **Honesty** – holders of public interest have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any arising conflicts in a way that protects the public interest.
- **Leadership** – Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Confidential information

Councillors must not disclose information that they believe to be of a confidential nature, unless:

- they have the consent of the person authorised to give it
- they are required by law to do so
- the disclosure is made to a third party for the purposes of obtaining professional advice provided that person agrees not to disclose the information to any other person

- the disclosure is reasonable and in the public interest, made in good faith and does not breach any reasonable requirements of the authority.

If a councillor has concerns regarding confidential information and believes it is in the public interest for the information to be disclosed, they should first ask for reasons why the information is confidential.

Councillors should not disclose confidential information on the assumption that the disclosure is in the

public interest without first raising their concerns with the appropriate channels prior to making any disclosure.

It will be the councillor's responsibility to explain what steps were taken prior to making the disclosure and to justify why the disclosure should be regarded as in the public interest and not a disclosure for political purposes.

more information:

Standards Board website at www.standardsforengland.gov.uk

Department of Communities and Local government website at www.communities.gov.uk

Strategy and policy

Councils need strategies and policies to enable them to lead their communities, deliver services and promote wellbeing.

They need to be clear about what they want to achieve, so that they – and their communities – can judge how successful they are in achieving those objectives.

They should prioritise what they want to achieve, to make the best use of resources to meet the needs of local people. They also need to be able to demonstrate value for money.

Strategies should explain how the council intends to achieve its vision. Policies should explain the actions that will be taken in different circumstances to do this.

Councillors are at the heart of this. They determine what the council should be trying to achieve and are ultimately responsible for making it happen.

The executive – or cabinet – is responsible for developing strategy and for the overall policy approach of the council. Ward councillors also contribute to the development of strategy and corresponding policy through their involvement in overview and scrutiny.

Councillors influence and determine the development of a council's strategy and policy through:

- full council
- the executive or cabinet
- overview and scrutiny
- participation in area forums and committees
- casework
- involvement in advisory groups
- local community groups
- membership of a political group.

It is insufficient to simply develop and approve strategies and policies. They need to be implemented with vigour. Councillors need to check that action is being taken and the desired results are being achieved through performance monitoring. If they are not, they should consider what else needs to be done and performance-manage delivery.

Community strategy

Every council has a duty to develop a community strategy, in consultation with partners, which sets out how it will promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area served.

Councils have usually done this by forming local strategic partnerships (LSPs) with other local bodies to help develop and implement the

strategy. With the abolition of local area agreements (LAAs), many areas are reviewing their partnership arrangements.

Through LAAs, councils, their partners and central government agreed targets – with a balance between national and local priorities – for the achievement of which ‘performance reward grant’ was paid. While partnerships continue to be seen as vital, many places are streamlining their structures, plans and reporting.

In addition to the community strategy, councils will have corporate or strategic plans that show how they intend to deliver elements of the strategy, improve their services and modernise the organisation.

Council policies should underpin the delivery of the plans. It is obviously important that council strategy and policy are informed by the views of local people.

Involving and informing

There are many different mechanisms and techniques available for identifying the views of local people. They range from traditional customer surveys through to more innovative approaches such as citizens panels, citizen’s juries, focus groups, referendums and targeted surveys.

These are not variations of the same thing.

Citizens’ panels are large, representative groups that are polled from time to time, while citizen’s juries – the apostrophe is traditionally put in what seems to me the wrong place – comprise around a dozen people investigating a topic in depth over a week or so.

If a council’s strategy is to meet the needs of the community, all the processes that go towards its development must be transparent, credible and authentic. This should enable the council to obtain views that are representative of the communities they serve, providing sound evidence for the choices to be made by councillors.

Strategies should reflect the views and needs of the community in a recognisable and visible way. Councils should have a rigorous approach to policy development, with competing options fully evaluated on the basis of robust evidence, before decisions are finalised.

In this context, overview and scrutiny plays a valuable role by gathering evidence and providing a forum where policy options can be evaluated.

Councillors therefore have an important role in ensuring that council policy is realistic and based on sound evidence and rationale.

When developing policies, councillors will consider any legal implications, government policy, community needs and aspirations, party political issues, and the council’s resources and capacity. A risk assessment may also be required.

more information:

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk

Finance, the budget and productivity

Central government plans public spending on a multi-year basis. Its spending review announced in October 2010 set totals for public spending until March 2015. For local government this means a real terms cut of 28 per cent over this period. Grant reductions in the first year, 2011/12, are 12.1 per cent.

The sum total of grants to local authorities is known as total aggregate external finance. In 2011/12 this will be £72.7billion.

The revenue and capital budgets of a local authority represent two of the ways in which councillors can make their policies and strategies come alive.

Revenue and capital, income is received from a variety of sources and spent on services that benefit local people, but each is subject to different rules.

The budget year starts on 1 April each year and finishes on 31 March the following year.

New councillors will usually join the council after the revenue and capital budgets for the year have been agreed but there is a role for councillors in their first year in monitoring the budgets and ensuring they are spent on delivering the council's policies and strategies.

Revenue and capital budgets cover all the resources of the council – money, employees, services, assets and so on. Budgets are among the many tools councillors have for carrying out the policies of the council. The starting point is for councils to look closely at what they are trying to do.

The budget process concerns choices that may be:

- politically led
- policy led
- aimed at redirecting the way existing services spend
- an aid to cross-departmental working.

The key thing for a councillor is to ensure that the strategy and policies agreed by the council influence and inform the budget-setting process.

Expenditure

Revenue expenditure is money councils can spend on day-to-day things such as salaries, electricity and printing – things that 'get used up' and have no resale value

Capital expenditure is money spent on the:

- acquisition, reclamation, enhancement or laying out of land
- acquisition, construction, preparation, enhancement or replacement of roads, buildings and other structures
- acquisition, installation or replacement of movable or unmovable plant, machinery, apparatus, vehicles and vessels.

The definition is a wide one and when there is any doubt the relevant officers should be asked to determine whether expenditure is capital or not.

Income

Most revenue comes from:

- general government grant, which councils can spend as they wish as long as the expenditure is lawful

- specific government grants, some of which, such as the Dedicated Schools Grant, are ring fenced and must be spent for the purpose they are given
- charges the council sets for some of the services it provides, like leisure facilities
- council tax
- business rates that are set nationally, collected locally, but then redistributed by central government to councils as part of formula grant.

Formula grant

The biggest sources of income is formula grant, which consists of redistributed business rates, and revenue support grant and, for authorities with children's services responsibilities, dedicated schools grant, a ring fenced grant which must be spent on the schools budget of the authority.

Formula Grant is based on the idea of equalisation, that is, taking account of relative spending needs and the resources that can be raised locally. Councils with particularly high needs or a low tax base receive more in central support than councils with relatively lower needs or a larger tax base.

However, in practice this is limited by damping rules. A government-determined formula decides how much each council receives from these grants.

The budget

The ruling group or coalition will determine a set of budget proposals, which they will present to full council. The leader of the council and cabinet members will have worked up the proposals after taking advice from relevant officers.

The council must be clear about what it is trying to do. It must have a broad strategy that sets down what it is trying to achieve.

The budget enables councillors to:

- review spending priorities
- monitor actual spending
- control spending by service departments and budget holders
- enable redirection of resources
- plan ahead.

Budgets can also be used to:

- identify gaps in provision
- forecast future demands
- identify financial options.

Most important, the budget is used to set the council tax.

The budget cycle

Since the council tax must be set and councils may collect precepts on behalf of other bodies such as the police, fire and rescue authority and so on, budgets must be agreed on an annual basis. However, planning for the longer term is still very important.

The four main stages of the budgeting process councillors must think about are:

1. Planning and setting the budget – what does the council want to achieve?
2. Scrutinising the proposed budget – does the budget comply with the policies of the council?
3. Monitoring the budget throughout the year – is the budget over or under-spent?

4. Reviewing the budget – did the budgets allocated achieve the desired type and level of service?

The revenue budget and the council tax level must be approved by a statutory date. For county councils, fire and rescue and police authorities and the Greater London Authority this is 1 March each year.

For district councils, unitary authorities and Metropolitan and London boroughs it is 11 March each year.

It is normal practice for the capital budget to be approved at the same meeting.

Budget planning, setting, scrutinising and monitoring can be a time-consuming exercise but it is important that all councillors are involved in or take an interest in the budget process. If the appropriate financial resources are not allocated at budget setting time it is difficult, if not impossible, to deliver on the policies the council has agreed.

Productivity

The four years to March 2015 are going to be extremely challenging to councils and it is possible that the tightening of public spending may go on beyond the current Spending Review period.

The year from April 2011 is the first of two years to which reductions in central government grant have been 'front-loaded'. That is to say, in setting their budgets for 2011/12 and in their medium-term financial plans councils have already factored in significant savings.

In making the savings councils will always want to protect as far as possible the services that local people value the most and those that meet the needs

of the most vulnerable in our society. Continuing to delivering results in those areas while reducing costs in line with reduced funding is the local productivity agenda.

Typically councils have gone through a fundamental review of all their services, carried out in consultation with local people and other local agencies, looking at:

- which services are most important to local people and most important in meeting the needs of the vulnerable
- which services are statutory and which discretionary
- ways to increase income
- opportunities to pool resources
- options for new models for commissioning and delivering services, including a bigger role for the voluntary and community sector, social enterprises and mutuals formed by groups of staff
- ways to reduce management and overhead costs
- ways to reduce the cost of bought-in goods and services
- ways to streamline services
- ways to increase workforce productivity.

Every council is looking at the savings it can make to protect frontline services. The best are also looking at what can be achieved by working with others. That includes:

- counties and districts looking at what can be achieved in two-tier areas
- urban councils looking at what can be achieved across the whole city

- councils working with other local agencies like health, police, fire and employment services
- councils working together nationally and regionally on some fronts
- councils working with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors so that civil society organisations and service users themselves take on more responsibility for services.

This is resulting in the reshaping of local government, including the creation of shared management arrangements and shared services and the divestment of some services. It may result in increased outsourcing too.

In future one of the challenges facing councils and councillors will be to ensure local democratic accountability while delivering services through the new joint arrangements and how to ensure the needs of our communities are properly met when services are provided by an increasingly diverse range of providers.

more information:

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk



**Case study:
Finance – what
does it mean?**

Runnymede Borough Council in Surrey published a glossary of terms on its website to help residents and councillors understand the terms used for different aspects of income and expenditure. This has been updated here to reflect changes to the local government finance system.

Asset Rentals: see Capital Charges.

Business Rates: business rates are collected by the council from local business premises and paid over to the national pool. This is redistributed to all authorities as part of formula grant.

Capital Assets: land, buildings and other assets whose benefit to the authority exceeds one year.

Capital Charges: a calculation of the annual costs, included within the revenue accounts, of using capital assets. This includes asset rentals and, where appropriate, depreciation charges.

Capital Expenditure: expenditure on capital assets.

Capital Receipts: receipts from the sale of capital assets.

Collection Fund: the fund receives all income from council tax, community charge, business rates and government grant and from which precepts are paid.

Council Tax: council tax is charged on all domestic properties in the council's area and will vary according to which band the property has been placed in. Discounts will be applied to the charge if there are fewer than two

liable adults living in the property.

Credit Approval: the amount the Government allows the authority to finance from borrowing or other credit arrangements.

Direct Service Organisation:

government regulations require that local authorities may only undertake certain activities if they have been subject to competitive tendering. If the in-house team wins the tender, they form a DSO for which separate trading accounts must be kept.

Formula Grant: the amount paid by the Government in support of the council's annual budget requirement. It comprises Revenue Support Grant and redistributed business rates. Formula Grant consists of four blocks:

Relative Needs: intended to reflect the relative costs of providing comparable services between different authorities. It takes account of characteristics such as population and social structure.

Relative Resources: takes account of the different capacity of different areas to raise income from council tax due to the differing mix of properties. It is a negative amount as it represents assumed income for authorities

Central Allocation: a sum that is the same, per head, for all authorities that deliver the same services

Floor Damping Block: in order to give every authority a minimum grant increase or maximum grant decrease, grants to other authorities in the same class are scaled back to bring all authorities up to the appropriate floor level.

General Fund: the fund to which all the council's revenue expenditure is charged. The Housing Revenue Account is a 'ring fenced' part of

the General Fund. Net expenditure on the General Fund is met from the Council Tax and the Government's Formula Grant.

Housing Revenue Account:

a statutory account that deals with matters relating to council housing, the cost of which is borne by the tenants and government subsidy.

Investment Income: income from interest receipts on investments held by the council. The level of investment income is proportional to the level of reserves held and prevailing interest rates.

National Non Domestic Rates: see Business Rates.

Precept: the annual demand made on Runnymede as a billing authority, for example, by Surrey County Council and the Surrey Police Authority

Rate Pounding (business rates only): also known as the multiplier, this is the amount that is determined each year by the Government which, when multiplied by the rateable value, establishes how much is levied on each business property. The Local Government Finance Act 1988 restricts the annual increase in the multiplier to the annual increase in retail prices index from September to September

Reserves: these are balances in hand that have accumulated over previous years and are held for defined purposes. Councils regularly review the level and purpose of their reserves.

Revenue Income and Expenditure: the day-to-day running costs of the Authority

Tax Base (council tax only): the amount of money that is raised for every £1 of council tax levied in the area.

Freedom of information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives people rights of access to the information held by councils and other public authorities. This should lead to better public understanding of how public authorities carry out their duties, why they make the decisions they do and how they spend public money. The act creates two principal obligations for councils, from which other obligations stem:

1. All councils must adopt and maintain a publication scheme, setting out details of information they will routinely make available, how the information can be obtained and whether there is any charge for it.
2. All councils must comply with requests for the information they hold unless an exemption from disclosure applies. Councils normally have a maximum of 20 working days to respond to a request but there are circumstances when this time limit can be extended.

more information:

Information Commissioner website at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk

Open data

The Government has placed a strong emphasis on transparency and all councils have been asked to publish expenditure data as well as other accountability and performance information in a code of practice. This will require councils to make information public and freely available for reuse and publication by others.

The open data agenda is gaining ground on more than just the accountability front. Local government bodies all over the world are publishing data and working with developers to help both councils and citizens make better use of open government data. From visualising budgets to working with local people to build up data sets of public assets to helping young people find their way home safely after a night out, open data is supporting innovation and improvement in local public services.

more information:

Make A Difference With Data website at www.madwdata.org.uk

Data protection

The Data Protection Act gives people rights regarding personal information that others hold about them and imposes controls on individuals and organisations that use personal information.

The act applies to councillors in the same way that it does to council employees and covers paper records and computerised systems using equipment owned by councillors or provided by the council.

It is a complex subject and councillors seeking more information should visit the Local Government Group's website or go to Her Majesty's Stationery Office website at www.hmsso.gov.uk/acts to read the act in full.

Councillors are regarded as data controllers if they process personal data and are required to notify the information commissioner of the reasons why they hold and process personal data.



Snapshot In touch

- Chelmsford Borough Council keeps its councillors informed about what's going on via a specially designed portal called the Member's Zone
- information about the London Borough of Islington's four area committees is available through the Areas On Line section of the borough's website, which features discussion boards that gather opinions on local issues
- for South Norfolk District Council, getting closer to the people means connecting parish councils to the district and the county – connecting them to the internet has provided community resources in more than 100 separate parishes
- Basildon District Council has encouraged its young citizens to design their own website through which to voice their opinions
- citizens in the London Borough of Camden can watch and listen to councillors in council meetings via live webcasting from the council chamber.

When holding and processing personal data about individuals in the course of council business, councillors are covered by the council's notification.

If the data is to be used for other purposes – for political activity for example – councillors are required to notify the commissioner. Notification costs £35 a year.

Some councils have paid for notifications for all their councillors.

Councillors using personal data must keep it secure and misuse of data is a punishable offence.

The council's notification will include details of the information it will make available to councillors. This encourages disclosure of information that councillors need to do their job properly.

Councillors should talk with their council's data protection officer and check the council's notification to make sure they are covered. This is particularly important when the data is of a sensitive nature such as ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, political allegiance and so on.

Broadly speaking, under schedules two and three of the act, councillors can process data if:

- the data subject has given consent to the processing
- the processing is necessary for a contract
- the processing is necessary to protect the data subject's interests
- the processing is necessary – a) for the administration of justice, b) for the exercise of any functions conferred on any person by or under any enactment, and c) for the exercise of any other

functions of a public nature exercised in the public interest by any person

- it is necessary for legitimate interests of the councillor or the data subject or if the Secretary of State makes a particular order.

more information:

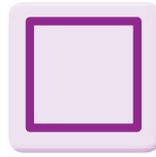
Information Commissioner website at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk



Snapshot Data protection – key principles

Personal data must be:

- processed fairly and lawfully and at least one of the conditions in schedules two or three of the act must also be met
- obtained for one or more specified and lawful purposes and must not be used in other ways
- adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purpose or purposes for which they are used
- accurate and, where necessary, kept up-to-date kept for no longer than is necessary for the purpose or purposes it was obtained
- processed in accordance with the rights of data subjects.



Hot topic Data and information

Councillors often find data and statistics useful in showing how things in their ward compare with other local or national figures. This can help in understanding the strong and weak aspects of the ward and in developing strategies for improvement. Those most highly valued concern:

education – the performance and standards of schools and exam results

housing – the number and type of council properties within the ward, waiting lists, vacancies, re-let times, and waiting times for repairs and maintenance

environment – response times when dealing with fly-tipping, the number and details of food outlets tested, levels of traffic congestion, levels of pollution and the number of missed bins

safety – crime and anti-social behaviour statistics, the number and type of road traffic accidents and the number and type of fire and rescue incidents

facilities – levels of usage of libraries, leisure centres, parks and playing fields and so on.

Local Government Ombudsman

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints from the public about the administrative actions of councils and some other organisations, including school admissions appeal panels and adult social care providers such as care homes and home care providers.

The LGO can also consider complaints from parents and pupils with concerns about their school – but only in some local authority areas. For details go to: www.lgo.org.uk/schools

The LGO is required to investigate complaints in a fair and independent way – it does not take sides and the service is free.

Constituents may ask their councillors for help in making complaints and councils will have their own systems for handling complaints, which they will wish to resolve locally if possible.

But if a constituent is not satisfied with a council's response they may ask a councillor what to do next. Whether councillors agree with the complaints or not they should tell constituents how to complain to the LGO. If asked to do so, councillors can refer the complaints on behalf of their constituents and the LGO will consider councillors' comments on the complaints referred.

The LGO does not regulate councils or overturn properly taken council decisions. Its job is to examine the administrative processes involved and, where things have gone wrong, obtain redress for members of the public who have suffered injustice as a result.

Where they find flaws, they also ask councils to review procedures to avoid similar complaints arising. In this way, complaints to the Ombudsman can help a council improve its services.

more information:

Local Government Ombudsman website at www.lgo.org.uk

Police authorities

In addition to being responsible for holding their own authority to account, councillors represent the interests of the community by holding other services to account too.

In the case of the police this is currently by being nominated by their council to join the local police authority, though the government intends to abolish police authorities from May 2012.

Apart from the Metropolitan Police, each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales is answerable to a police authority consisting of a mixture of councillors and independently appointed members.

The number of members on a police authority varies according to the size of the force but, apart from in the City of London; the councillors are always in a majority of one.

Police authorities have either 17 or 19 members, meaning they have either 9 or 10 councillors respectively. The City of London has 15 councillors out of 17 members.

The Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) is slightly larger than the others with 23 members and their appointment is slightly different. Twelve are drawn from the London Assembly, being appointed



Case study The Ombudsman

The Local Government Ombudsman can consider complaints about most council activities. Here are some examples:

Housing repairs

Mr R complained that the council had failed to repair a leaking drainpipe outside his flat that had caused damage to his internal decorations and some of his possessions. It had not compensated him and had ignored his complaints.

The council carried out the repair, paid compensation of £300 for the delay in carrying out the repair, paid £300 towards the cost of washing, repairing or replacing Mr R's damaged possessions and gave him a decoration allowance so that he could redecorate the affected room. It also reviewed the way it monitored complaints and their outcome.

Council tax

Ms Y set up a standing order to pay her council tax. As there was no council tax reference number on the standing order form, payments she made were not allocated to her account.

Although the council realised the mistake early on, and Ms Y provided proof of payment several times, it took six years for the council to resolve the problem. In the meantime the council continued to take legal action against her for money she did not owe.

The LGO asked the council to pay Ms Y £1,800 compensation for the many summonses, liability orders and bailiffs letters she had received and for her efforts in pursuing her complaint over a long period. The council also agreed to make changes to its system for dealing with missing payments.

Planning applications

Ms A complained about a planning application for a development of three houses behind her home. She said that they would have an unacceptable impact on her property.

The LGO found that the council had failed to notify Ms A and so she did not have a chance to object. But, in granting permission, the LGO found that the planning committee had properly considered the likely effect of the proposed development on neighbouring properties and had visited the site.

The LGO's view was that, even if Ms A had been given the chance to make her objections known, it was unlikely to have made a difference to the decision.

The council apologised to Ms A for its error and updated its records to make sure that the same problem did not occur again. The LGO decided that the council had done enough to put matters right and did not ask for any compensation.

Antisocial behaviour

A council failed to carry out a proper risk assessment before letting a flat – in a block designed for people over 40 and occupied predominantly by elderly and vulnerable people – to a man with a history of antisocial and criminal behaviour. The man's behaviour caused distress and fear to Mrs W, the elderly woman in the flat below, for just over a year.

The LGO found fault by the council, who apologised to Mrs W and paid her £1,000 compensation.

Homelessness

Ms K was eight months pregnant, and fleeing domestic violence when she applied to a council for help. Housing officers applied too strict a test when deciding whether to provide her with temporary accommodation by insisting she provide proof of homelessness first, did not tell her that she could apply for housing as a homeless person, and did not refer her to specialist support for victims of domestic violence.

The LGO found fault by the council, who apologised to Ms K, paid her £750 compensation and improved its procedures.

Special educational needs

A council mishandled the transfer to secondary education of a child with special educational needs. Professionals unanimously recommended that L should attend

a residential school from the point of transfer to secondary education, as her needs could not be met locally, but when the provision was not made, the council said that the recommendation should have been removed from the draft report before it was issued, but had not been.

It considered that a support package already in place met L's needs, but did not explain how the need for a 24-hour curriculum could be met without a residential school placement.

The Ombudsman found fault with the council's removal of a recommendation from a core assessment without full and proper consideration of the impact of that amendment, and its failure to ensure that the needs of L and her family were adequately met.

The council apologised to L's parents, paid them £10,000 and reviewed its administrative arrangements.

by the Mayor of London, while the other 11 are independently appointed, one by the Home Secretary.

The Mayor of London also appoints the chair and vice-chair of the MPA, and the Mayor can chair the authority if he or she so wishes. The authority links with the London boroughs by giving each member responsibility for at least one borough.

The nomination of councillors to a police authority has to reflect the political make up of the council or councils involved. Where a police authority spans more than one unitary or county council, the councils form a joint committee to decide who serves on the police authority.

Changes for 2012

The government is committed to replacing police authorities with a directly elected police and crime commissioner for each police force, apart from the City of London, from 2012.

The commissioners will have the same role as police authorities in securing an efficient and effective police service for their area, and holding the chief constable to account.

As with police authorities, police and crime commissioners will set the police element of council tax, set local policing priorities, and appoint and, if necessary dismiss chief constables.

In London, the Mayor will become the police and crime commissioner for the Metropolitan Police.

Elsewhere, councils will have a role in holding the police and crime commissioners to account through the police and crime panels being set up for

each police force area. Each council will appoint councillors to their police and crime panel, which will have a minimum of 10 councillors.

These panels will be able to veto their police and crime commissioner's precept and their nominee for chief constable. They will also have the ability to compel the commissioner and any of his or her staff to attend the panel and answer questions.

The Home Office intends that the panels will be established before the commissioners take office. Final confirmation of how the panels will work will be available once the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill becomes law.

more information:

Association of Police Authorities website at www.apa.police.uk

Home Office website at www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Fire and rescue authorities

Fire and rescue is organised in three different ways as services provided by:

1. County councils.
2. Combined fire authorities (CFA).
3. Metropolitan fire authorities (MFA).

CFAs and MFAs are precepting authorities and are authorities in their own right.

Fire and rescue authorities consist solely of councillors and are politically balanced. Councillors on county and unitary councils are nominated to serve on their authority by their councils. County councils will also have a portfolio holder leading on fire and rescue services.

In some instances there will be a combined fire authority for an area. For example, East Sussex is a combined authority because it takes in the unitary authority of Brighton and Hove in addition to the East Sussex county area.

The Local Government Association has a fire services management committee that is made up of members nominated from all the English fire and rescue services. The committee provides strategic leadership for the service and links to the department for Communities and Local Government and the minister for fire.

more information:

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk

Top tips Support for Fire and Rescue



Local Government Improvement and Development organises an annual, focused Leadership Academy aimed at chairmen of fire authorities or lead members and portfolio holders. This provides a valuable networking opportunity for fire members as well as interactive development and raising awareness of key issues. LG Improvement and Development also provides a range of bespoke support for fire authority members, ranging from mentoring and top team development, to regional facilitated workshops on key topics involving fire member peers.

- the LG Association provides a fire commission, a network for fire authority members to keep up to speed on key issues
- fire member peers are actively engaged in peer review and challenge programmes for the fire and rescue sector.

www.local.gov.uk

Health and safety

Accidents and occupational ill health can have a significant impact, not only on the person concerned but also on their close family, friends and colleagues. And, as most of the people who work for councils live in the council area, a worker who is injured at work could live in the ward!

It may come as a surprise to newly elected members but councillors have a role in ensuring that health and safety is effectively managed within the council.

But they are not expected to be health and safety experts. The council is required by law to appoint competent health and safety advisors to help managers and members understand the technical and legal issues.

Councillors' roles will depend on their level of responsibility but all have a part to play. All councillors, particularly the leader, deputy leader and cabinet members, should receive awareness training on health and safety to ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities.

The leader

The council leader is expected to demonstrate a strong commitment to health and safety by signing, with the chief executive, a safety policy statement.

They should demonstrate leadership on health and safety by setting an example in what they say and do, both to council staff and the wider community. This is particularly important in terms of ensuring a sensible approach to risk management that is proportionate to the risks.

Leaders need to understand the health and safety policy statement and their role on delivering its objectives. It is crucial that they have an appreciation of the strategic risks run by the council and the broad control measures in place to reduce the risks.

Leaders also need to be told of any significant health and safety issues – such as serious accidents, investigations or potential and actual enforcement action. And the leader and the chief executive should work together to promote a positive approach to health and safety within the council.

The cabinet

The cabinet, advised by officers, should endorse the council's health and safety improvement strategy and ensure it is implemented. The strategy will set out where the council wants to go and how it will get there, it should contain objectives, milestones and a way of measuring progress.

Members of the cabinet will wish to receive regular reports from officers on progress and should be told of significant health and safety issues, immediately if necessary and in cabinet reports. Officers should identify the safety implications of cabinet decisions.

The cabinet will ensure that mechanisms are in place to consult with trade union safety representatives and other staff and that adequate resources are allocated to secure the health and safety of the workforce and others who may be affected.

Cabinet members should be aware of any significant risks within their area of responsibility and the measures in place to reduce them. They should also know

whom to approach for competent health and safety advice.

The full council will approve the health and safety strategy and the scrutiny committee should be satisfied that the strategy is implemented and audited and should question cabinet members on the health and safety implications of policy decisions.

Councillors

All councillors have a role in ensuring councils consider the health and safety implications of decisions and, as members of full council, have a role in approving decisions made by the cabinet.

It is important that all councillors support the principles of sensible risk management and ensure that the council does not make health and safety pronouncements that go beyond what is required.

They should challenge officers and fellow councillors on health and safety decisions that appear excessive.

Using health and safety as a reason to cancel events, for example, can make the council look silly in the eyes of the local community and attract unwelcome and damaging national media interest.

Poor decision-making will undermine the confidence of the community and constituents in the ability of officers and councillors to manage effectively the real risks and secure public safety. Sensible risk management on the other hand will enhance the council's reputation for pragmatic decision making and protecting the community.

more information:

Elected member health and safety workbook at www.local.gov.uk

'Think about health and safety; what elected members of local authorities need to know' is available from the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health at www.iosh.co.uk

Councillors and communications

Modern communications for councils and councillors increasingly reflect the approaches taken by commercial organisations. This means that everything a council or councillor does is believed to affect the way the public perceives them.

Some call it PR or reputation management, some call it marcoms, an abbreviation of marketing communications, and some call it corporate branding. Whatever the name, it means that the council's and councillors' reputations will be affected by citizens' perceptions of just about everything including:

- delivery of key services
- media coverage
- responding to citizens' needs
- civic signage
- maintenance of civic sites and buildings
- litter and graffiti
- safety on the streets
- low crime rates
- good healthcare, education and transport

- sport and entertainment facilities
 - flourishing neighbourhoods
 - their place in the community
- ... and so on.

From this it is obvious that creating positive perceptions of the wellbeing of a community is the responsibility of a number of authorities or organisations in addition to the council – including individual citizens.

However, the council is invariably seen as the community leader. This is why many councils have appointed communications and marketing managers to senior positions, where they play strategic roles alongside the leadership, rather than relying on a press officer reporting to a head of service.

This section looks at communications and reputation management in terms of the individual councillor, although it's useful to keep the bigger picture in mind.

All councillors should expect to generate their own personal publicity. Leaders and portfolio holders will promote council policy and decisions from a corporate point of view and local political parties may have communications strategies to support their members but, otherwise, councillors are responsible for their communications with constituents and the wider community.

Strict guidelines set out the roles and responsibilities of council press or communications officers. For example, they are not allowed to write or send out press releases on behalf of individual councillors – their job is to represent the council to the media and other audiences from a corporate point of view, reflecting

the policy decisions the council has made.

Councils are limited in the information they are allowed to publish concerning individual councillors.

The code of practice for local government publicity which was updated in February 2011 is at www.communities.gov.uk

The need to communicate begins with the election campaign and continues throughout the councillor's career, whether they remain in opposition, on the backbenches or attain leadership positions. Communication is a two-way process: as well as letting people know what they have been doing, councillors will need to listen to constituents and organisations in their area.

Who needs to know?

The different groups councillors need to communicate with include:

- constituents
- fellow councillors
- council managers and staff
- local MPs
- their political party or group
- local organisations and associations
- local businesses and employer
- the media
- organisations working in partnership with the council
- community and faith leaders
- central government and regional and national bodies.

Councillor's viewpoint



Councillor Julie Morris

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council



It may seem easier to represent your residents when your party is in control but there is plenty that can be done for them in opposition too.

When you challenge majority party policies, you have to make sure that your arguments are clear and truly representative of residents' views. Keep residents up-to-date on issues that may affect them and let them know you are at their service.

The methods we use to keep our residents informed and engaged are tried and tested. We publish a regular newsletter, liaise with the local press, keep our website up-to-date, and hold surgeries and consultations.

If you are a new member and not getting a response to these techniques, don't give up. It may just take some time for residents to feel comfortable with you.

One example of the contact we have with our residents was when the council had a choice of two traffic-calming schemes. We targeted 200 households along the proposed route prior to the release of the official council documents.

By delivering tick-box questionnaires in person and asking people to place the completed forms sticking out of their letterboxes, we got a great response. As well as gathering opinions towards the traffic scheme, we collected useful data for our next campaign.



www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk

Different audiences may need to be approached and addressed in different ways. For example, if there is a major change in housing policy, the things staff will need to know will be different from the information the media will be interested in. This is known as taking a different angle on a story, but it doesn't mean changing the facts.

Similarly, some councillors will be communicating with audiences whose first language is not English, some audiences will have broadband internet

access, some will not, and some will have very limited or no access to email or online services – so councillors will need to use a variety of communications techniques and tools to reach them.

Electronic communication is faster and far cheaper than traditional methods. The key question is: Do the people I want to reach with my message have the means to receive it? Most people have a letterbox but there are still many who don't have access to a computer.

Communications tools

Email

Councillors use email to share information directly with residents interested in a particular issue, leaders of community organisations and groups of residents who have set up a newsgroup or email list. Email is direct and two-way and allows councillors to be seen to be in touch, share information and offer support to local people.

Some councillors set up an e-newsletter. This can be a regular update of activity, campaigns and voting record, which is emailed straight to residents who have asked to receive it. It is important to note that when sending e-newsletters, councillors should give recipients the opportunity to decline future editions.

Hand-held devices such as the Blackberry are useful if councillors wish to respond immediately to a query or seek information while at an event or surgery. They combine mobile phone, email, calendar and other facilities.

Websites

Many councillors now have their own websites, or at least their own section of a website. They can carry background information about the councillor, their achievements, contact and surgery details and attendance records.

Advertise the website address in all communications to encourage people to come and have a look. If information about a councillor is carried on more than one site, it is important that simultaneous updates take place so that the information is consistent and unambiguous.

Keep copy short, crisp and to the point to keep readers interested – and make communications clear and focused.

Blogs

Blogs are a simple, and cheap means of communicating. A blog is a personal online journal that looks like a website.

People usually publish them, as diaries and newsletters and visitors are able to comment on each entry. The blog address should be on all printed and electronic communications.

However, councillor blogs are read mainly by political opponents and are now in decline. It is likely the opposition will seize on comments in a lively blog to create negative publicity. On the other hand, a bland blog will not attract readers.

Social websites

Social websites are increasingly popular and if councillors decide to communicate via sites such as You Tube or Facebook they should make a clear distinction between their personal and civic lives.

Some sites allow visitors to add or edit text so entries need to be monitored on a regular basis.

Time is an important factor here and it's worth considering whether information is getting through to the people who matter in the area compared to the hours that Twitter and Facebook take up.

Making a You Tube video can be hugely time consuming but will attract hardly anybody to view it. For example, when the department for Communities and Local Government posted videos on You Tube they went virtually unseen.

Texting

Texting is a widely used and convenient way of communicating, especially on the move. The majority of people use abbreviated words and expression in their texts so councillors need to be sure there is no ambiguity in the texts they send and make sure they clearly understand the content of the texts they are sent. It is not a good idea to send personal and council related texts from the same phone and if a text refers to case work a separate record should be kept.

Newsletters

Councillors should get to know the local community newsletters and contact their editors to see whether they would be willing to publish contributions, either on a regular or an occasional basis. As long as a column is used to let people know what's going on locally and the content is kept free of party politics, many editors will be happy to help.

A number of councils produce their own residents' newsletters or newspapers, delivered a few times a year. Some are for council tenants while others are for all residents.

Councillors should talk to the lead officer if they think they have items worthy of inclusion. It's worth bearing in mind that these publications represent the council as a whole and invariably report on council policy, proposals, activity and results, so individual councillors are unlikely to get regular exposure. Many councillors produce and deliver their own newsletters to update people about their work on local issues. Their political party, if they belong to one, may also produce regular communications. These days, newsletters are published in printed form,

as emails, on web pages or blogs, and as internet downloads.

Local media

It is well worth making contact with the local media and getting in touch before there is a story for them, arranging a time to meet key reporters. The golden rule is to get to know them before you need them, and build up a trust so that you can talk confidently both on and off the record.

There is some confusion about the status of conversations with journalists. The key things to understand are:

- **on the record** – the journalist can report and quote what an individual is saying and may attribute it to them by name
- **off the record** – If you have a good relationship and you ask if you can go 'off the record' and they agree, it is unlikely they will directly report what you have said. There are no hard and fast rules about this although most journalists do abide by it as it allows them to add context to their story.
- **attributable** – the journalist names the source of the information or quote
- **non-attributable** – the journalist may use the information or quote but cannot name the source. The media usually attribute this information to 'insiders' or 'friends'.

Make sure the journalist concerned understands the basis on which you are talking and If in doubt, say nothing. Councillors who have a good relationship with the local media find that the reporters come to them for news and views.

They should be honest and forthright about the council's successes and failures and make a point of contacting journalists when newsworthy items come up. This way, councillors will come to be viewed as valuable and credible sources of news.

Communications planning

Although they call it news and make it seem spontaneous, the majority of stories carried by newspapers, radio and television have been planned well in advance.

News organisations have forward planning diaries that tell them what is happening, where and when, up to six months or more ahead. Local media will know when the council is sitting, when courts are sitting, when school sports days are taking place and when the local flower show is on.

They know because the organisations tell them.

Many councillors put together a rolling communications plan, mapping out the messages they want to send to their constituents and when they want to send them.

These plans can be very simple – just a few notes on the calendar will serve to remind councillors what to do and when. They can update local media diaries via news editors on a monthly basis and schedule the production of newsletters

Top tips Councillors and social media



Like many people, councillors are getting online and finding it a great way to engage with people in their area. Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter are still growing in popularity. Facebook alone has nearly 29 million registered users in the UK .

So how can councillors take advantage of these trends to help them reach out to local people? What are the best tools for reaching different age groups and what strategies can you pursue? What are the possible pitfalls and how can you avoid them?

Many councillors are using a popular online resource, developed by Local Government Leadership and Local Government Improvement and Development, based on 'Connected Councillors: A guide to using social media to support local leadership'.

The guide will give you background on the use of social media, including how to stay out of trouble online. It covers tools such as blogs and Twitter and how to use them to build engagement. There are plenty of examples of councillors who are already using social media well. It also covers how you as a councillor can help your council get the most out of using social media for improvement, innovation and efficiency.

<http://socialmedia.21st.cc/>

and other materials, allowing time for design and print.

In the case of television and to a lesser extent radio it is essential to give news desks as much advance warning of an event as possible because they need to allocate resources and equipment and plan and script their coverage.

The media are always looking for exclusives so unless the story is so big that everyone is keen to run it, it is worth focusing on one publication or broadcaster at a time – making sure they all have their share over time.

Writing press releases

Councillors should make sure news releases contain news. The fact that they have spoken on issues at council is not generally enough. Human interest and topical local stories are usually welcome but councillors should always check before they pass constituents' details to the press.

The political group may also want to ensure councillors are not contradicting local party policy on any given issue.

Press releases are usually emailed direct for immediacy and posted to a website or blog. Printed press releases, floppy discs and similar data storage devices are rarely used these days, although data sticks remain popular. CDs and DVDs are used when large amounts of data are concerned and are useful for archiving casework and other important activities.

A good press release will concentrate on:

- who? – key people in the story
- what? – the main facts
- where? – somewhere in the local area
- when? – the story should be recent news
- why? – details of why the story is important.

A good press release is made even better by a good photograph or an idea for a photograph. Technically, a photograph for printing will need to be of a higher quality – that is, higher resolution – than one intended for a web page or publication.

Top tips Creating a blog



- Make sure your text can be read easily.
- Avoid jazzy backgrounds, or coloured text on a coloured background.
- Keep it simple and keep your entries short.
- Update your blog as regularly as possible and at the very least once a week use plain English.
- Publicise your blog – include your web address on your business card and emails.
- Do not mix council and personal matters..

If councillors are not confident about their writing skills it is better to send a series of bullet points setting out the facts rather than a rambling piece of prose. If councillors study the media they can see how they present their stories – the editorial style, tone of voice and so on – and learn how to present information in the same way.

Experienced press officers may write several versions of a press release to reflect the editorial stances of different media such as local press and radio, trade press, national press and so on.

Most councillors include quotes setting out their own opinions. Contact details are essential so that journalists can follow up stories.

The key question to ask when writing something is to ask whether a reader will think the issue you are writing about could happen to them. The more people the issue will affect the more likely it is to make the pages of a newspaper.

Radio and television

Local radio and television stations give councillors the opportunity to get their message across in an immediate and dynamic way. While controversies requiring political perspective and comment will arise from time to time broadcasters are mainly on the lookout for good human-interest stories with people to film and people to talk to.

Watch and listen to local news broadcasts and learn about the sort of stories they cover and how they cover them.

If radio or television news covers a local story it is likely that it will occupy just a few minutes of airtime. So it is important to make sure quotes are

clear and concise, getting the key information across in a way that cannot be misunderstood.

Although anger, outrage, joy and sadness are expressed in printed media, emotion is far more obvious and effective when heard or seen. Radio and television audiences are affected not only by the facts being given but also by the body language, tone of voice, confidence and other characteristics of the person giving them. Expressions of extreme emotion can be counter-productive.

The council and the press

As stated earlier, council press and communications officers represent the corporate affairs of the council and work primarily with lead councillors and officers.

However, if a councillor becomes aware of media interest in a particular aspect of council business that could be contentious, they should consider discussing the matter with their group leader with a view to briefing colleagues and the press office.

Some councils have protocols governing the issue of press releases. Councillors should check whether their authorities have them and follow them if they do. The leader of their political group will probably appreciate a copy of a release or briefing on any interview that has taken place.

When journalists follow up a story they are likely to call other people to support the points expressed or criticise them. It is therefore well worth letting fellow councillors, officers, or members of outside organisations who might be called, know what is going on.

more information:

The Local Government Group website contains information on communications for councils and councillors. It includes:

- 'Connecting with Communities' – a free resource, covering everything from how to put together a communications strategy to communications with residents, partners and staff.
- 'The Business Case for Communications: – a concise review of why investing in communications makes sense'. The publication can be downloaded from the Connecting with Communities Toolkit or can be ordered free by calling the Communities and Local Government free literature line on 0870 1226236.
- Five Years of Communications: – a MORI report about local government communications, with key issues and trends to focus on. The publication can be downloaded from the Connecting with Communities Toolkit or by calling the Communities and Local Government free literature line.

www.communities.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

Top tips

Forms of address



Salutations at all levels of society are much more relaxed and informal than they were 50 years ago but there will be occasions when councillors will wish to use the correct, traditional forms of address when meeting, greeting or writing to people who have titles or ceremonial roles and responsibilities.

Councillors who feel uncomfortable “kow-towing” to another person should bear in mind that both are usually representing their organisations or institutions and not acting in a personal capacity.

Using the correct form of address is a matter of mutual respect between holders of office and not a statement of inferiority or superiority.

Councillors will also find this information useful when briefing local residents.

On formal occasions councillors will address each other as “Councillor”.

Royal Family

There are no obligatory codes of behaviour when meeting The Queen or a member of the Royal Family but most people prefer to observe the traditional courtesies. For men this is a neck bow (from the head only) while women perform a small curtsy. Other people prefer simply to shake hands.

On presentation to The Queen, the correct formal address is ‘Your Majesty’ and subsequently ‘Ma’am’. For male members of the Royal Family the same rules apply, with the title used in the first instance being ‘Your Royal Highness’ and subsequently ‘Sir’. For other female members of the Royal Family the first address is conventionally ‘Your Royal Highness’ followed by ‘Ma’am’ in later conversation

The Mayor and Mayoress

A Mayor may be male or female.

A Mayoress is the wife of a Mayor.

The full correct description on letters and envelopes is: ‘The Worshipful the Mayor of X, Councillor John (or Jane) Smith’. In practice the more simple description of ‘The Mayor’ or ‘The Mayor of X’ is used. A letter should start with ‘Dear Mr Mayor’.

When greeting the Mayor it is correct to say, for example: Good evening Mr Mayor. In speeches, one would say, for example, ‘We are pleased to have with us (The Worshipful) the Mayor of X, Councillor John Smith.’ In the preamble to a speech being made one would say ‘Mr Mayor...’

If it is the host who is making the speech he would refer to the Mayor first in the preamble unless a member of the Royal Family is present when he would start for example: 'Your Royal Highness, Mr Mayor, My Lords...'

If it is not the host speaking he should be referred to by his title, such as 'Mr Chairman', immediately before 'Mr Mayor'.

Unless in the Chair, the Mayor should be seated on the immediate right of the Chairman or host at any local function.

The Mayoress should be addressed as Madam Mayoress. It is not necessary to refer to her specifically in the preamble to a speech although she might be mentioned during the speech when she is referred to as 'the Mayoress'

If the Deputy Mayor is present without the Mayor and is representing him he has the same precedence as the Mayor would have if he were present.

On a day-to-day basis, councillors will form relationships inside and outside the council and be on familiar first name terms with people from all walks of life.

Common sense will dictate when formal or informal forms of address are appropriate.

Councillors wishing to find out more about forms of address and protocol should visit www.chinet.com, which describes how to address everyone from a Duke to a Dowager Duchess, and has links to other websites.

3



3 Community leadership

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The Localism Bill

The Government refers often to its localist ambitions and to promoting decentralisation and democratic engagement, and the coalition agreement says: “It is time for a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people.”

The Localism Bill is a major piece of proposed legislation covering planning and housing issues, as well as community empowerment and other local government matters. For 12 English cities, there are proposals for referendums for directly elected mayors.

For other councils, the choice of reverting back to the traditional committee system will be back on the table as an alternative to the cabinet model of governance.

The bill is long and complex but the department of Communities and Local Government’s website at www.communities.gov.uk has a plain English guide, a context-setting essential guide, and a set of impact assessments.

Community empowerment

Government ambitions to hand down power are reflected in part four of the Localism Bill. This sets out a series of proposed community rights: measures designed to allow community groups, members of the public and, in some cases, local authority employees, to trigger certain actions or decisions. They include:

- a **community right to challenge** allowing the public, community groups, and councillors to request a non-binding referendum on any issue

- separate mechanisms for **council tax referendums**, where a council or police or fire authority propose a council tax or precept increase above a level fixed by the secretary of state
- a **community right to provide** through which community organisations or council employees can submit an expression of interest to take over a service
- a **community right to buy** designed to enable community groups to purchase buildings or land held by local authorities, for community or social use.

The measures proposed in the Localism Bill are part of a move to give councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their areas.

Public service reforms will enable charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality services.

At the same time, people will be encouraged to play a more active part in society.

more information:

Department of Communities and Local Government website at www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation

Cabinet Office website at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk



Case study: 21st century councillors

Local Government Leadership has supported a significant number of initiatives concerned with developing new approaches to political governance and leadership in local government under the umbrella programme '21st Century Councillor'.

The programme defines a 21st century councillor as one "who understands but can also transform their place. One who can think strategically, as well as be informed and inspired by their local roots".

This is underpinned by a 10-point manifesto outlining a blueprint for change within councils to embrace a new type of modern politics.

The programme has so far funded work in Walsall, Suffolk, Kirklees, Liverpool, Herefordshire, Sutton, Hackney, Leicestershire, Westminster, Swindon and Slough.

The work has covered many different topics but broadly speaking they are working with councillors in their political, scrutiny and community leadership roles and finding out how councils can recognise and maximise the effectiveness of these jobs.

In particular, the programme has helped define a national standard for induction, supporting regional networks in promoting relevant and up to date information for councillors.

more information:

Publications and videos can be found at www.21st.cc

The voluntary and community sector

Working with voluntary organisations and community and neighbourhood groups is a significant part of every councillor's role. These organisations can be important partners because:

- they deliver services and contribute to the quality of life in an area
- they can help service users and local residents to express their voice, preferences and priorities

- the social networks and community action they enable and generate can help build and sustain stronger more resilient communities.

Engaged communities

Active citizens and an engaged community are essential to the quality of life in an area.

The state of the public finances and the nature of some of the challenges that

society faces make it more important than ever that communities are involved in prioritising and making tough decisions about public services.

In fields such as climate change and the demands of an ageing society, there is a need to forge a new relationship with communities based on collaboration rather than doing things for people.

And as some services become increasingly less affordable, there is a need for increasingly strong and resilient communities who can do more things for themselves.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 placed on councils a duty to involve citizens and communities in decision-making. Voluntary and community groups can help councillors encourage citizens to participate by:

- providing opportunities for people to come together based on common interests or concerns
- providing links to some marginalised, disadvantaged or less often heard groups of residents
- building social and other networks that enable people to develop a sense of belonging and make them more likely to get involved, help each other and take responsibility for things that need doing locally.

Community groups can help new residents access local activities and support groups – such as sports clubs, environmental clean-ups, neighbourhood festivals and so on – which can encourage integration and cohesion between different groups in the community.

Volunteering is the bedrock of an engaged community and councillors can do much to support volunteering initiatives. Councillors can encourage groups in their area to develop.

Many councils are being encouraged through the localism agenda to devolve some decision-making and budgets to neighbourhood level, giving local people more influence over the places where they live. Alongside councillors, involved citizens can help to improve the accountability and responsiveness of services and re-engage people with local democracy.

Voluntary and community organisations can also usefully contribute to local government scrutiny processes.

Partners in delivery

Voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises can be very effective partners in local delivery and are being encouraged to take over the running of a wide range of services from libraries to parks through the localism agenda of a smaller state.

Voluntary and community groups can help to:

- identify local needs and represent service users
- improve access to services through advice and information activities, or signposting people to the right place to get help
- deliver services.

Councils and government bodies also fund capacity building within the voluntary and community sector to help organisations fulfil these roles.



Social enterprises – Social enterprise at work

Social enterprises are businesses that operate for a social purpose. There are many types of social enterprise, including community development trusts, housing associations, worker owned-co-operatives and leisure centres.

These types of businesses may take a number of different forms in terms of size and motivations, ranging from multinational organisations to local community groups.

Examples of local social enterprises include:

Bexley Community Media Association

BCMA runs a community radio station and offers media training to youth groups. The organisation also offers training programmes delivering practical media skills and after-school youth projects.

Greenwich Leisure Ltd

GLL is an employee-owned leisure trust, managing leisure centres across six London boroughs while reinvesting all profits into staff development and community health. GLL manages more than 60 leisure centres within the M25, employing more than 3,000 staff, with a projected turnover of £60million.

Hackney Community Transport (HCT)

HCT is a rapidly growing and commercially successful UK transport and learning provider that is one of the country's leading and most successful social enterprises. Its mission is to make public transport available to all. HCT employs around 450 people at seven sites in London and West Yorkshire and has a current turnover in the region of £17 million.

Sunderland Home Care Associates

A non-profit domestic care provider, this organisation employs 160 people and has a staff turnover of less than 3.5 per cent. It is major service operator for Sunderland City Councils social services department, providing personal care and domestic services to hundreds of people in need.

Voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises are significant providers of statutory services, contracted by councils, health services or other agencies. As providers they can bring additional benefits of knowledge and experience of working with specific client groups or those with complex needs. This can be particularly valuable where service users' trust in the provider is critical to successful outcomes of the service.

Voluntary and community organisations also provide other important local services, often on a voluntary or self-help basis, or funded from outside the area by trusts, the lottery and other income sources not accessible to public bodies. These services can make a big contribution locally and partnership working with this sector can help to ensure that this activity thrives and that it is co-ordinated and complementary to statutory service provision.

Funding and commissioning

Historically, most councils have given grants to a number of voluntary and community organisations in their area. Grant funding supports organisations either by covering core costs or particular aspects of an organisation's work.

Councils also commission some voluntary and community groups to deliver specific services where they have particular experience and expertise. Grant funding is more general in nature than a contract for a specific service and requires less detailed monitoring.

In recent years, financial pressures and the need to demonstrate value for public money mean that councils have been moving toward more commissioning.

When commissioning services councils need to be clear what they want from the service and how they will evaluate bids for delivering it.

Commissioning has four main stages:

1. Specifying the needs of the service.
2. Designing the service to meet the needs.
3. Delivering the service to secure the desired outcomes.
4. Quality assuring the service delivered to improve future development.

Voluntary and community organisations can bring skills, knowledge and experience to all four aspects of commissioning.

Good commissioning helps councils deliver on their political and service aspirations, improves quality and outcomes and builds social capital.

Many councils and their public sector partners are reviewing their funding and commissioning from the voluntary and community sector to ensure they are getting the relationship right.

A healthy local voluntary and community sector requires a range of different kinds of funding including small grants, which are essential to some local activities, especially those that bring benefits to social networks and community participation.

Councillors have an essential role to play in local funding and commissioning decisions, including input into the overarching commissioning strategy and approach to funding and commissioning voluntary and community groups.

The compact

All top tier authorities have a local compact – an agreement between the council and other local public bodies and the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

Local compacts mirror the national compact signed between the Government and the VCS in 1998. A ‘refreshed’ and much shorter national compact was launched in February 2010 and local areas may, if they choose, review their local compacts in the light of this.

Local compacts set out jointly agreed ways of working and undertakings on both sides about how the two sectors propose to work together.

Local compact undertakings relate to things like communication, consultation, funding, procurement and accountability and form the basis for constructive relationships between the council and the VCS.

Voluntary and community organisations representing diverse groups are part of the democratic life of the community and can strengthen a councillor’s role in achieving good results for local residents.

The negotiation and delivery of the commitments in local compacts helps build trust, better mutual understanding and a spirit of co-operation between partners.



Snapshot Third sector

The voluntary and community sector, comprising voluntary and community organisations, includes national and local charities – some of which are individual organisations and some of which are part of wider networks – as well as tenants and residents organisations and other community groups that are largely volunteer led.

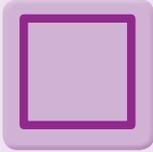
The wider government definition of the third sector includes all these organisations as well as housing associations, social enterprises and cooperatives that have the following characteristics:

- they are non-governmental
- they are value driven
- principally, they reinvest financial surpluses in further social, environmental or cultural objectives.

Partnerships

It makes sense for councils and other organisations to work together in providing and improving local services.

Historically, councils were required to work in local strategic partnerships (LSPs) with other service providers and while LSPs are no longer mandatory, many councils continue to use them to coordinate the work of local bodies.



Hot topic Social enterprises boom

- there are some 55,000 social enterprises in the UK, with an annual turnover of at least £27billion
- social enterprises account for five per cent of all businesses with employees and contribute £8.4billion per year to the UK economy – almost one per cent of annual GDP
- a recent YouGov poll revealed that more than 60 per cent of the British public would choose a social enterprise to run their local services.

According to Professor Ken Pattie, director of the Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society: “Government wants to empower people, and social enterprises fit very much into that. It... allows you to handle difficult problems without... a big cost to the public purse. Social enterprise is a very attractive alternative for other reasons. Should you make a profit, for example, out of caring for the elderly?”

www.brass.cf.ac.uk

www.socialenterprise.org.uk

www.socialenterpriseambassadors.org.uk

www.setas.co.uk

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

www.businesslink.gov.uk/socialenterprise

www.dta.org.uk

Three aspects of government policy offer new opportunities for integrated localism of the kind that many councils have been pursuing as part of their community leadership role:

1. The Department of Health’s agenda of radical reforms to the NHS includes elements that encourage integrated working across former primary care trust services, public health, and adult social care. More details are given in the section on

adult services. Proposals for the transfer to local government of public health services and for health and wellbeing boards as more powerful, statutory local authority bodies, build on work developed by many local strategic partnerships in recent years.

2. For the nine English regions, the government moved swiftly to abolish regional spatial strategies and regional development agencies, and to replace them with a framework

of sub-regional local enterprise partnerships. These bodies are still at the formation stage, with an intended 50/50 membership of business sector and local authority representatives. They will not have statutory status, and their access to government funding will be limited.

3. The work of several local strategic partnerships in trying to achieve a coherent overview of the totality of public spending in their area led the previous government to introduce its Total Place programme. This in turn was followed by community budgets pilots introduced by the present government as part of the October 2010 Spending Review. Sixteen parts of the country – some with several local authorities involved – are working with Whitehall departments to see if public funds can be better used when pooled at central level and allocated more intelligently via local partners. The pilot is focused on families with complex needs. Depending on the success of the pilots, similar funding principles could be applied to all local authorities from 2013/14 onwards.

Performance and Regulation

The whole framework of performance and regulation changed dramatically in 2010/11.

The reducing role of central government as a catalyst for change is one reason for an increased emphasis on improvement being driven by citizen and user needs and by local political and policy choice.

To facilitate this, the Government has

continued the previous government's drive to make timely and relevant information available to the public. The commitment to opening up data in national government was matched by a request for councils to publish information such as expenditure over £500, senior salaries, councillor allowances and other local data. This is to be backed up by a statutory code of practice on data transparency.

Making the information available is only part of the story, however. The information needs to have sufficient detail for people to be able to make sense of it. It should be available in formats that allow it to be made more useful, either on its own or by linking it to other data.

Providing information is only part of a wider process of reaching a wide range of people within the community and giving them opportunities for influence and input.

The councillor's role

The role of all councillors is vital if performance is to be managed well. Although they must take a strategic role rather than micromanage daily delivery, they must be hands-on with performance management to ensure their objectives are met.

Councillors should have a good understanding of their authority's performance and how it is managed. They should use this knowledge to set priorities and take part in service improvement. They should, to a greater or lesser extent, be involved in:

- setting or scrutinising the strategic direction, priorities and budget options for the council

- receiving concise performance reports that paint a clear picture of performance trends, perhaps through the use of colour and graphics, as well as qualitative information
- asking questions about current performance and improvement plans
- using local knowledge to draw out the larger pattern from complaints, ward surgeries and consultation events
- fashioning strategic solutions
- seeking assurance that adequate systems are in place to manage performance, risk and resources.

The scale of a councillor's involvement is likely to depend on their role – in executive cabinet, overview and scrutiny panel, or as local councillors – and the constitution of their council, such as leader and cabinet model, elected mayor or committee system.

Executive councillors are more likely to work with senior managers to monitor strategic objectives and ensure that there are plans for their achievement. In some councils, a cabinet member may also hold a portfolio for performance management or organisational development, which can be especially useful in raising its profile.

Some councils have developed coaching or training to ensure councillors have a good understanding of how performance management works and what their role is.

Leadership

Research and experience over a number of years has found that political leadership combined with supportive managerial leadership is a major factor in successful performance management.

As experience has developed and the requirements of reporting to government are reducing, the approach to performance management is becoming more sophisticated.

For many councils it was once a mechanical and sometimes bureaucratic process of collecting performance indicators and reporting them upwards. Sometimes the point of the process seemed to get lost.

Some of the ways in which it is developing are:

- a less mechanical approach and more flexibility to use different approaches as needed
- a greater emphasis on what difference is being made to people's lives with management of the service just a means to achieving that
- understanding the cost base to promote more efficient use of resources
- allowing for more bottom up as well as top down development of performance, recognising that there are important roles at different levels
- a more sparing use of targets – only used if it will make a difference
- performance indicators carefully selected to help manage the business locally, rather than relying on nationally prescribed indicators
- taking account of a wider range of financial, customer, demographic, consultation and other information
- a greater use of qualitative as well as quantitative information
- greater public involvement in setting direction and monitoring performance

- performance review used to understand what works and what does not.

Overview and scrutiny

Overview and scrutiny plays an important role in performance management that is often forgotten or sidelined. In fact, using such information in an effective way is another key to making scrutiny useful. Using performance information as a background to scrutiny investigations provides valuable evidence to support findings and recommendations.

It can help to reveal wider causes for concern.

Consideration of performance information needs to be carried out in conjunction with finance and risk data. Taken together, these provide an invaluable picture of the health and performance of a given service or the success that the council and/or its partners are having in tackling a particular issue.

The councils that do this best have developed systems to ensure that, by investigating performance issues, scrutiny does not duplicate the executive's own performance improvement methods. There are ways and means of ensuring scrutiny focuses on issues where it can really add value.

The role of overview and scrutiny panels could include:

- using performance, finance and risk data to influence wider scrutiny work on policy
- very occasionally undertaking reviews of the system as a whole
- looking closely at the contribution of partners in specific areas

- undertaking less frequent in-depth reviews of service or crosscutting areas of performance.

more information:

Department for Communities and Local Government website at www.communities.gov.uk

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk

Centre for Public Scrutiny publication 'Green Light' (2010) at www.cfps.org.uk

Overview and scrutiny

Overview and scrutiny it is at the heart of local accountability.

It is the principal, democratic means, between elections, of ensuring that decisions made by the council and its partners are held to account. It also provides a vital means of ensuring all councillors can take part in the development of council policy.

In a number of councils scrutiny has built up a reputation as a strong voice in the policy development process and a place where ideas for improvements can be debated and evaluated in an independent and objective manner.

Scrutiny also helps to open up local decision-making. By providing non-executive councillors with an opportunity to set the agenda in a forum that allows them actively to hold decision-makers to account, it is easier to demonstrate that transparency and accountability are enhanced.

Currently all councils must have at least one overview and scrutiny committee.

Councillor's viewpoint



Scrutiny and Me, Councillor Andrew Gravells

Gloucestershire County Council



I chair the health, community and care scrutiny committee on Gloucestershire County Council and our meetings are held all over Gloucestershire. We recently intervened to ask the local hospitals trust to put on hold its planned closure of 200 beds. The committee called for, and secured, the postponement of the closure plan.

The committee meets every other month, but hardly a day goes by without one of the NHS trusts asking for a steer from us. A fair bit of time is spent keeping up to speed on developments in the NHS, and, at my request, NHS South West runs a series of seminars for health scrutiny members and officers across the region.

I spend a fair bit of time travelling around the South West on other scrutiny work as well. A couple of years ago, it was decided to form a joint scrutiny committee across the part of the south west region which was covered by the Great Western ambulance service (GWAS), to enable members to look at the issues which the service had to deal with and face. I chair that committee too.

I do have a personal reason to be very grateful to the service as they literally saved my life when I suddenly developed a life-threatening heart rhythm condition. I was whisked into hospital in record time and ended up being fitted with an implantable cardiac defibrillator – hence my passion for swift response times and good outcomes for patients.

The joint overview and scrutiny committee meets across the parts of the south west that are covered by the GWAS, which enables us to meet in such great places as Bristol, Gloucester, Bath, Weston-super-Mare, and into Somerset, Wiltshire and South Gloucestershire.

I also spend a fair bit of time on work concerning the commissioning of regional and national specialised services. Again, more travelling on this important part of our work, work we're required to do by law – not an optional add-on.

I also sit on the Local Government Group's (LG Group) environment board. The board does some really good work and is very keen to see the LG Group target and direct technical and specialist information to the right cabinet member or scrutiny chair in each of its member authorities.



A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.



Case study Scrutiny in action

Review of prostitution strategy: Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Police Authority and Ipswich Borough Council (2008)

Following the murders of several sex workers in Ipswich in 2006, a plan was put in place, involving joint work between the council, police and others, to eliminate street prostitution in the city.

Some time later, scrutiny revisited the issue following concerns that momentum had been lost.

Some key recommendations to ensure that the funding was available to deliver the initial outcomes of the action plan and to carry out work into the off-street sex trade – a factor that was not highlighted in the original action plan – were made, accepted and implemented.

This work won the ‘Impact through Scrutiny’ award at the Centre for Public Scrutiny’s Good Scrutiny Awards 2009. It is a particularly good example of co-ordinated scrutiny, with county councillors, police authority members and borough councillors working together to examine an issue of common concern, sharing resources and making it more likely that recommendations to each of their organisations would be accepted.

www.cfps.org.uk

Many have a number of committees, which divide up relevant work between them.

The formal duties of scrutiny vary depending on the type of authority. In two-tier areas with counties with shire districts, only counties are responsible for scrutinising the health service, while the districts take on responsibility for crime and disorder scrutiny in their areas. Shire districts also have limited power to engage with partner organisations. Beyond these limitations, scrutiny has broad power to investigate issues of local importance, to discuss proposals and to make recommendations.

Scrutiny committee meetings might involve an oral evidence session with a cabinet member, a discussion of a forthcoming cabinet decision, a discussion of recent performance information or items on matters of particular public concern. Senior council officers and the council’s partners are often invited to give evidence at overview and scrutiny committees.

While committees are probably the most high profile places where scrutiny is carried out, in many authorities the bulk of meaningful scrutiny work is done by ‘task and finish groups’ – small groups of councillors, appointed by a committee to investigate a given issue before reporting back to the committee with recommendations for improvement.

This deliberative, evidence-based approach led to powerful recommendations in many authorities, resulting in significant changes and improvements as well as making savings.



Snapshot Scrutiny at work

Some local authorities allow members to invoke the 'call-in' procedure, whereby the executive can be required to reconsider its decision on policies made but not yet implemented. The public can make requests from members to invoke this procedure.

The average number of call-ins that result in an amended decision in an authority is 0.56, according to the Centre for Public Scrutiny's 2009 annual survey.

Some maintain pools of local co-optees, including parent governor and diocesan representatives in single and upper-tier councils, who take part in the work of their scrutiny and select committees. These additional members are usually provided with training and support, and given access to IT facilities to maximise their ability to participate.

Scrutiny committees undertake in-depth reviews of particular issues of relevance to local people and are intended to have a significant influence on future policies and decisions taken by the executive.

Scrutiny committee chairs delegate responsibility for specific pieces of work to other committee members, to ensure skills and interests are being actively engaged

As well as scrutiny's role being to hold the executive to account, recent legislation such as the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 grant scrutiny committees the power to hold external partners operating in their area – such as the NHS – to account.

Some people describe overview as policy development work, and scrutiny as critical friend based challenge of existing policy and practice. However, this distinction is not widespread and usually when people talk about scrutiny they are using it as shorthand for overview and scrutiny in general.

Getting it right

Some councils face cultural challenges in ensuring that scrutiny can play an important role. Often, a level of mutual distrust can build up between cabinet and scrutiny, which makes such work difficult. Good relationships between the executive and scrutiny are crucial to scrutiny working well.

This is best demonstrated by scrutiny carrying out timely, relevant and constructive work, and producing meaningful and realistic recommendations that contribute positively.

By demonstrating a commitment to improvement, scrutiny can become a partner of the executive – a critical and challenging partner that shares a commitment to make life better for local people.

more information:

The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) is a small charity that promotes the value of scrutiny and accountability in public services. It provides advice and guidance to councillors and officers with a scrutiny role, carries out research and delivers training and development to scrutiny practitioners.

www.cfps.org.uk

Sustainable development, climate change and energy

Sustainable development recognises that while people may be getting richer, society as a whole is becoming poorer and mankind is damaging the environment. The underlying principles of sustainable development are to make decisions that ensure the economy, environment and society will benefit. Any decision should not adversely affect one of these elements to the benefit of the other.

The most common applications of sustainable development principles for local government are within procurement planning and building control.

Climate change

Climate change is a phenomenon where global levels of greenhouse gases have been increasing as a result of the burning of fossil fuels. Greenhouse gases regulate the temperature of the Earth and an increase in the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere leads to increases in global temperature.

The UK government has set in statute its CO₂ reduction target of 80 per cent by 2050 in the Climate Change Act 2008. Accompanying this overarching ambition, the UK also has a target to provide 15 per cent of its energy use from renewable energy by 2020. To protect the more vulnerable in our society, the UK has also pledged to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016.

More than 90 per cent of councils have signed up to the Nottingham declaration. The Nottingham declaration was created by Nottingham City Council in 1990 as a way for local government to

demonstrate its concerns about climate change. The Nottingham declaration is due to be revised and is underpinning a new agreement between the Local Government Group and the Department of Energy and Climate Change on the role councils will play to mitigate climate change and reduce CO₂ emissions in the future.

Most councils now have a climate change strategy and have signed up to a range of targets, reflecting both national and local ambitions.

Energy use

Councils whose energy consumption is monitored by at least one half hourly electricity meter or councils that consume more than 6,000 megawatt hours a year are required to participate in the mandatory Carbon Reduction Commitment Energy Efficiency Scheme.

This scheme is regulated by the Environment Agency and places an additional charge on the energy consumption of the qualifying organisations. The scheme also features an annual performance league table the ranks participants on energy efficiency performance.

Energy generation

Councils are now allowed to sell electricity and can claim the full benefit of the new feed-in tariffs. The feed-in tariffs work by financially rewarding individuals and organisations that install renewable electricity technologies. This means putting a solar panel on a council building enables the council to claim a real cash benefit. The council will be paid for the energy it consumes from the solar panel and the excess energy it exports to the grid.

more information:

Department of Energy and Climate Change website at www.decc.gov.uk

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at www.defra.gov.uk

Top tips Saving energy



Leicestershire City Council has produced a sustainable procurement guide and North Yorkshire County Council has produced a sustainable energy-planning guide.

Kirklees Council has been running a successful programme to reduce energy use and CO₂ emissions in the homes of its residents by offering free home energy insulation packages. This saves the average home £300 a year on energy bills

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council has set out how they will be reducing CO₂ emissions from their own estate by 30 per cent in five years saving between £20 and £30,000.

Bristol City Council is hoping to generate around £1million a year for its local communities from two new wind turbines that the council will own and run.

Equality and cohesion

It is clear that councils put an understanding of equality and community cohesion at the heart of their approach to localism, productivity and service transformation.

They recognise the legal, inequality and cohesion risks of changing services without bringing local people with them. This demand is reflected in the work of the Local Government Group itself and how local government can self-regulate itself to meet its local challenges. This section outlines the new national context for equality and cohesion and the support available to meet the challenges.

The challenge

On 1 October 2010, 90 per cent of the Equality Act was implemented, simplifying, streamlining and strengthening nine separate pieces of existing legislation. At the heart of the act is the public sector equality duty. The aim of this duty is to embed equality considerations into the day-to-day work of all public bodies, so that they tackle discrimination and inequality and contribute to making society fairer.

Covering the characteristics that could describe any of us – age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation – the equality duty consists of a general duty which requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- advance equality of opportunity between different groups

- foster good relations between different groups.

Built on the principles of transparency and accountability to everyone in local communities, the general duty is supported by specific duties that require councils to publish:

- one or more equality objectives every four years.

Based on how ‘due regard’ has been demonstrated, the expectation is that by taking account of current equality performance, councils will decide on what is most relevant for the needs of local communities.

- information to demonstrate compliance with the duty annually.

This includes describing how equality issues have influenced the decisions reached by councils – as employers, policymakers, service providers, commissioners and procurers. It will be important to understand the effect of policies and practices by looking at evidence, engaging with people, staff, service users and others and considering the effect on the whole community.

- information on their employees and others affected by their policies and practices.

The Government has outlined its own commitment to empowering communities to enact change with equality underpinning the principles of freedom, fairness and responsibility. However this is not uncontroversial against the context of reducing the public deficit. It highlights how ‘knowing your community’ has to be at the heart of delivering on the Localism agenda as well as managing a reduction in resources.



Snapshot Equalities at work

The bedrock of support for councils is the equality framework for local government, available at www.local.gov.uk/equalityframeworks. This is a self-assessment method designed to help councils self-regulate their performance in five areas:

1. Knowing your communities and equality mapping.
2. Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment.
3. Community engagement and satisfaction.
4. Responsive services and customer care.
5. A modern and diverse workforce.

The framework is assessed at three levels – developing, achieving, excellent – and is supported by peer challenge from councillors, officers and partners.

In early 2010, 227 English councils reported that they used the framework. By March 2011, 60 councils, fire and rescue services and social housing providers had undertaken peer challenges to validate their work. For some they can prove a useful demonstration of a council's commitment to fairness when making some of the tough financial decisions now necessary. For others they have become ways to explore innovative practice that is value for money.

To help this work there are currently 32 councillors and 81 officers to draw on and the equality community of practice at www.local.gov.uk/communities has more than 1,200 members.

In April 2011 the Local Government Group introduced a further package of support that included:

- refreshed equality frameworks reflecting the current policy and service context
- guidance on how effective analysis of local community needs enables councils to deliver budget cuts and service transformation fairly and effectively
- support and guidance on delivering the public sector equality duty

Councillors will be expected to understand the impact of cutting budgets, mitigate potential negative outcomes especially the cumulative impact on specific equality groups. Getting this right will ensure fairness, equality of opportunity and not penalise the poor and disadvantaged.

By empowering all communities to hold service providers to account the Government believes that community cohesion will be an important outcome of fair, transparent and accountable local services.

The business case

At the heart of getting this right is the importance of councillors knowing their community, being confident about this knowledge and using it to develop effective policy and service delivery.

This is reflected in the eight organisations validated as 'excellent' against the equality framework – Brighton and Hove, Leicestershire County Council, Nottingham City, Rotherham and Tower Hamlets councils, Merseyside and West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Services, South Essex Homes – whose common characteristics are a passionate commitment to the people the organisation serves, embedded within values driven by strong leadership and understood by all staff eager to deliver good quality services.

When observed in practice this appears obvious but it remains a challenge for many organisations. There is evidence that knowing their community has been a driver for greater efficiency and is a key motivator for staff to work more enthusiastically in achieving greater value for money.



Case study Equality



Herefordshire

In Herefordshire we have taken a pragmatic and common sense approach to equality and diversity work to reflect the changes that we face as a county. Rejecting the 'politically correct' brand, we have tried to provide clear information to the public, colleagues, elected members and partner organisations about why the diversity agenda really matters to us here, and how having a good understanding of our communities is the key to delivering appropriate services.

Within our recently adopted Herefordshire equality and human rights charter, we define what we mean by community cohesion, along with reasons for our approach and we have set out our principles, ethos and commitment to this agenda. The charter is a partnership document that binds the county together and has been agreed by the council, NHS Herefordshire, and Hereford Hospitals Trust.

This is the 'new' business case for effective diversity and equality practice designed to help councils understand better all the people who live in their area, consider how they develop practices and services to tackle local inequalities efficiently and then use this to foster good relations between all sections of the community

Through this partnership approach we intend to ensure that we support the most vulnerable within our communities and provide responsive services to the diverse individuals within.

Our business case for equality and human rights is driven by four corporate aims:

- service improvement – using equality impact assessments to provide better services
- value for money – targeting resources at the right areas, in the right way to achieve outcomes
- customer Insight – understanding our communities and their different needs
- reputation – demonstrating to residents and partners our commitment to fairness for all.

Our challenge

Our citizens' panel didn't allow for analysis of feedback from minority communities such as black, Asian and minority ethnic residents or migrant workers, as the numbers were too low to be statistically viable. We needed a reliable and cost effective method to ensure that we gathered and documented reliable feedback that reflected the needs of our smaller, more marginalised communities.

Our solution

We developed a project called the 'Herefordshire 100' to provide a systematic mechanism to regularly consult with key minority groups in Herefordshire. This complemented the work of the Herefordshire Voice citizens' panel that has been in operation for a number of years. We established Herefordshire 100 as a group of volunteer community researchers who carry out research within their respective communities. We recruited them from a range of communities, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and then trained them as researchers. Through their own connections the researchers are able to get an insight into communities and to explore and record different views on behalf of the council.

The outcome of this approach has been that we have been able to build the capacity and skills of individuals within minority communities, while providing a channel for reliable qualitative information for the council, which has been used to inform decision-making.



It has become clear that getting equalities and cohesion practice right will be at the heart of tackling the public deficit effectively which is likely to be the central task for the public sector over the next few years. The challenge of getting this right has therefore only just begun.

more information:

Department for Communities and Local Government website at www.communities.gov.uk

Equality framework at www.local.gov.uk/equalityframeworks



Case study Equality



Merseyside

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) has a long history of involving our diverse communities, groups, organisations and stakeholders to make Merseyside safer, stronger and healthier. We are directly involved in a range of initiatives which continually challenge the notion of what a traditional fire service should do and contribute to positive outcomes in health, education and social issues that individuals and communities face across Merseyside.

Our focus on developing strong, meaningful partnerships with the full myriad of agencies including both the public and private sector agencies and also including community and voluntary sector agencies has allowed us to develop an excellent profile within the partnerships and within communities. Our strategic work nationally has also enabled us to drive improvements nationally on methodology and practice developed by and through MFRS.

An example of this is our work in partnership with Wirral Youth Services. We have converted spare capacity within Wallasey community fire station to create a youth hub for the community.

This places Wallasey fire station at the centre of youth activity for the area and provides the opportunity for the FRS

to become fully engaged with young people. Local young people were consulted about what they wanted and the project initially centred on diversionary activities that included a café and meeting place.

We agreed to meet the revenue costs of operating the hub as our contribution to the partnership. This resulted in a reduction in local anti-social behaviour, a reduction in call outs to fires and false alarms, an improvement in the health and wellbeing of young people and improved engagement with young people.

A further example of our innovative engagement work has been through the Jamie Oliver Ministry of Food 'pass it on' campaign.

This initiative was centred on the south Sefton region. There are nine wards in Sefton that are in the top 10 per cent of the most deprived in the country. One per cent of England's most deprived neighbourhoods are located in south Sefton's deprivation hotspots. Eating habits had been identified as a contributory factor to child and adult obesity, which relate to other health issues and kitchen fire safety.

We worked in partnership with social landlords, local NHS, Sainsbury's, Tesco, local primary schools and the local further education college to deliver a number of educational cooking courses across the region.

These courses, delivered by our staff, educate residents in basic cooking skills, food hygiene, food nutrition and home fire safety. Successful outcomes included the scheme extending to other areas, and five students deciding to act as mentors and set up a scheme at their centre to teach others their recently acquired knowledge.

MFRS has a pool of community advocates who play a crucial role in supporting our work on prevention. Our advocates come from a range of backgrounds and target their work in engaging with some of the most vulnerable individuals and communities across Merseyside.

The service's robust risk methodology takes account of specific risks and needs of each community and our advocates with the skills to engage people of Somali, Yemeni, Chinese and Bangladeshi communities are a crucial tool in allowing us to engage with these communities.

Our bilingual and deaf advocates play a central role in reaching out to communities who often feel they are not included and engaged with service providers.

Through our deaf advocates we have identified the needs of our deaf communities and gone beyond our tradition role and supported individuals through providing them with environmental equipment such

as flashing doorbell light or amplifier phones for example.

We work in partnership and make referrals to Merseyside's Society for Deaf People environmental aids departments to carry out assessments and provide individuals with the equipment they need in their home.

We have also recruited advocates with specialist mental health knowledge and contacts to work in partnership with the local mental health agencies. The joint work with clinical practitioner nurses and social workers further allows us to build good working relationships with the most vulnerable members of the community.

This knowledge helps to reduce the fire related deaths or injuries associated with those suffering a mental health illness.

The fire service is now firmly integrated with the mental health community and the rapport the advocates have developed has ensured the correct equipment is being provided to assist individuals to live independently and safe from fire. Also, the sign posting to partner agencies has ensured that people receive the best possible care available.





Case study Equality



South Essex Homes

South Essex Homes is the arm's length management organisation (ALMO) set up to manage and maintain Southend Borough Council's housing stock of 6,713 homes and deliver its decent homes programme. At the time the ALMO was created it was recognised by all stakeholders that the service was significantly underperforming in key areas.

Since then a clear focus on providing better services for all of our customers has seen South Essex Homes grow from being rated by the Audit Commission as poor with uncertain prospects for improvement in 2006 to receiving two stars with promising prospects following an inspection in 2008. We have undertaken an important journey and continue to do so as we strive to achieve excellence. The most significant lesson we have learnt is that understanding the diverse needs and aspirations of our customers is fundamental to providing top quality housing services and continually improving.

Through our journey we understand that customer care, resident engagement and awareness and appreciation of our increasingly vibrant, diverse customer base are intrinsically linked. It is this knowledge that underpins how we do things at South Essex Homes.

At our last Inspection we were set a challenging target of achieving 80 per cent collection of our resident profile data by October 2007, which we met, and we have now reached 88 per cent. This compares very favourably with other housing organisations and is invaluable in giving us a more comprehensive understanding of our customers' needs, and being able to target our resources where they are most needed.

Our challenge

While we had been successful in collating resident profile information, South Essex Homes continued to experience a disproportionately high level of abandoned tenancies and repossessions. There was also an issue with repeat homelessness claims for the local authority.

Each failed tenancy costs approximately £3,000, and so there was a real need to address this both in terms of our financial efficiency as an organisation and our responsibility to our tenants.

Our solution

To enable us to improve the quality of resident data that we hold, our vulnerability strategy and vulnerability needs assessment ensures that we are able to detect resident support needs on sign up. This means tenancy sustainment work can be targeted to working with the most vulnerable residents in a preventative, focused

way and has brought about a reduction in failed tenancies since the strategy was introduced in 2008.

The information collected from the assessment is then added to initial profile data held and made available through the housing management system.

We have also developed a tenancy sustainment course, which is run in partnership with Southend Adult Community College and the tenancy sustainment team. The course is accredited and run on a six-month rolling basis. It aims to assist vulnerable residents to sustain their tenancy.

Residents who are identified as vulnerable or live within the care leaving and homeless units are asked to attend as part of their support plan. The course has been designed in partnership with former residents and South Essex Homes staff has received training to deliver elements of the course along with some of our contractors.

The 'what next?' module is aimed at encouraging residents to go on to attend further education. In addition to the course, Tenancy sustainment officers provide support to 130 residents on an outreach basis to ensure residents who are unable to physically attend the course can receive training on a one to one basis.

The outcome of these initiatives is a contribution towards the 4.8 per cent rise in residents who sustain their tenancies after a 12-month period.

This has led to an evolved programme of training for our residents and we are now working with the college to deliver a series of 'plus training' courses available to all of our residents.



more information:

Equality community of practice website at www.communities.local.gov.uk

Children's services

The role that councils play in education and children's services is moving away from central government control and statutory targets. In their place will come local decision-making and control and the setting of local priorities, with more emphasis on commissioning external suppliers instead of council-run services.

In future, local areas will agree on their own arrangements, although it is likely that many will continue with existing systems such as children's trusts and children and young people's plans.

Many performance targets have been scrapped and the management of children's services at a strategic level is to change with the introduction of new health and wellbeing boards, which will have statutory status.

Early intervention and prevention continues to be a priority in promoting children's wellbeing. With significant reductions in public sector funding it becomes imperative for councils to intervene early with families, to improve the prospects of better results and avoid high cost services.

There are a number of national initiatives supporting this work and several reviews that give great emphasis to it. The Government has shown its commitment with the launch of an early intervention fund for local areas and community budget pilot schemes looking at families with multiple disadvantages.

Professor Eileen Munro's review of child protection, 'The Child's Journey', published in April 2011 as part of a national drive to improve the quality of child protection services, is at www.education.gov.uk

Social work practice is expected to change as a result of this report.

Education

Significant change is also coming to education. The Schools White Paper, 'The importance of teaching', sets out a radical reform programme for the schools system. Key elements are:

- powers for teachers to improve discipline, and a new approach to exclusions
- a transformed school curriculum supported by rigorous assessment and qualifications
- more academies and free schools and a strong strategic role for local authorities
- changes to school performance tables, Ofsted inspections and governance
- a fairer funding system including a pupil premium to channel more money to the most deprived children
- school-led school improvement replacing top-down initiatives.

All young people will continue in education or training to the age of 17 from 2013 and to 18 from 2015. This will be the first time in nearly 40 years that the education leaving age has been raised. Increasing options for further education has been a priority both for this government and the last, with an emphasis on providing more workplace opportunities, such as apprenticeships.

more information:

Department of Health
at www.dh.gov.uk

Department of Education
at www.education.gov.uk

Association of Directors
of Children's Services
at www.adcs.org.uk

Adult social care

Demographic pressures will have a key impact on adult social care locally. By 2030, people over 50 will comprise almost a third of the workforce and almost half the adult population. In 20 years' time, 1.7 million more adults in England will have a care and support need.

Currently, about 1.75 million people across England rely on the care arranged for them by their council.

The majority of councils commission services from the private or voluntary sector, rather than providing them directly themselves. Each council sets the level of need that establishes whether a person is eligible to receive their care and a financial assessment then decides how much a person will need to contribute to the cost of it. Many of those who receive care locally will be 'self-funders' – people who are given money directly to choose the support that suits them best.

Personalisation

The delivery of adult social care is being transformed to be more responsive to people's needs and wishes. This more personalised support offered to people who use services and their carers aims to help them retain or regain their independence.

The publication 'A Vision for Adult Social Care: Capable communities and active citizens' (Department of Health, 2010), makes it clear that personalisation is one of the principles that should underlie the future direction of social care. Further reform is on the way, with a White Paper on social care expected in 2011.

Councillors can ensure that expenditure on services is considered when deciding how resources are deployed in the future. The shift to a proactive and preventative way of working requires a cross-council response, as many of the relevant interventions will be the responsibilities of other council departments, such as housing, community and leisure services. It also means ensuring universal services, including information, advice and advocacy, are easy to find and available to everyone.

The Government has established an independent commission on the future funding of care and support, which is due to report in summer 2011.

Integration with health

Closer partnership between health and social services is another priority in Government policy. The NHS White Paper of July 2010 emphasises the need for closer working, with further legislation intended to facilitate greater integration. There has been a breaking down of

barriers between health and social care funding to encourage preventative action and create efficiencies.

Inspection and regulation

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) regulates the quality of health, mental health and adult social care in England. The Government has indicated that the CQC will in future play a lesser role in assessing councils, with its annual assessment of councils being replaced by 'local accounts'. However, if the CQC has concerns that a commissioner or provider of care is not meeting standards of quality and safety, it has a wide range of powers to act quickly to protect service users.

Local Government Improvement and Development – together with a range of partners – is working through the implications of this, together with the design and delivery arrangements for sector-led improvement and self-assessment for adult social care.

All councillors share a responsibility in safeguarding adults whose circumstances make them vulnerable. As well as the key role of the lead member for adult social care, other councillors, such as scrutiny members, members working on community safety or community cohesion, and other cabinet members and frontline councillors also have important roles to play.

more information:

Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) website at www.adass.org.uk

Care Quality Commission website at www.cqc.org.uk

Commission on Funding of Care and Support website at www.dilnotcommission.dh.gov.uk

Department of Health website at www.dh.gov.uk

Law Commission website at www.lawcom.gov.uk

Social Care Institute for Excellence website at www.scie.org.uk

Department of Work and Pensions website at www.dwp.gov.uk

Local Government and Health

Councils have always had a key role to play in improving health and wellbeing. This has been recognised by the current government, which proposes to transfer many public health responsibilities back to local authorities.

The White Paper 'Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS' and the Public Health White Paper 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People' describe how, over the next two years, responsibilities for improving health and tackling health inequalities will be transferred from local primary care trusts (PCTs) to councils, prior to the abolition of PCTs and regional strategic health authorities.

Many councils and PCTs already have jointly appointed directors of public health and in future these appointments will be made jointly by local authorities and a new public health service – Public Health England. These joint posts will be

in place everywhere, although smaller councils in the same area can decide to share a director of public health.

Building on the power of councils to promote local wellbeing, new statutory arrangements will be put in place in the form of health and wellbeing boards to connect the key areas of commissioning across health, adult social care, and the wider range of council activities.

Local authorities are to be given responsibility to join up commissioning for these areas of activity. This will include promoting integration and partnership working, leading joint strategic needs assessments, and mobilising partnerships to identify priorities for change and improvement. There will be a duty to work in partnership for the other participating organisations

This is one part of much wider set of proposals that will put the majority of the NHS budget into primary care commissioning consortia. Led by GPs, these will obtain services for their patients through contracting arrangements with a range of health providers in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

Information and choice will be expanded in a plan to build health services around patients and their families. Local involvement networks will be replaced by Health Watch, managed nationally through the Care Quality Commission and locally by councils. Health Watch will engage patients and the public in decision-making about health services in their area. Health Watch will also link with local overview and scrutiny arrangements.

There is an obvious social and moral case for councils' involvement in improving health and wellbeing and also a sound business case too. Improving health is a good investment, not only in terms of saving healthcare costs now and in the future, but also in ensuring a healthier and a more productive workforce and communities.

The councillor's role

The changes in the way health and wellbeing services are organised are bringing councils, the NHS and the voluntary sector closer together than ever. The development of health and wellbeing boards, GP commissioning consortia and Joint strategic needs assessments involve all these key players along with other public and private services and creates a focus on improved health outcomes for individuals, families and local communities.

Councillors have a vital strategic role in securing the provision of all services for the areas they represent. Many councillors will occupy key positions on the new health and wellbeing boards. Some are already non-executive directors on the boards of, mental health, community and acute trusts as well as local community and voluntary organisations.

In addition, their roles as the elected representatives of local people and local 'place shapers' mean that councillors will be uniquely and strategically placed to address the so-called 'democratic deficit' that has existed in local health services in the recent past.



Case studies

London Borough of Richmond innovating personalisation of adult social care

Richmond was quick to look for new ways of making self-directed support and personal budgets work.

Using the impetus of the 'Putting People First' policy and as a leader in the field of direct payments – particularly among older people – the council achieved its target of 30 per cent of personal budget for eligible service users two years ahead of schedule.

Now more than 80 per cent of the borough's service users have had their social care needs assessed and have been allocated personal budgets, allowing them more choice and control over how their social care is delivered and organised.

The user-led Richmond Users Independent Living Service provides mechanisms for support planning, brokerage and user feedback and design.

Despite the financial uncertainty of the past few years, adult social care has been within the approved budget for several years and innovations to service delivery have contributed nearly £2million in efficiency savings, with £3million more planned by 2012.

Building on this base, the council is currently redesigning its social care and business processes to ensure they are ready for the personalisation demanded by the recent changes in social care, public health commissioning and spending cuts.

The first phase establishes a 'front door' access team of social workers and occupational therapists. As the first point of contact, telephone staff provide information and advice and access to other help.

A second phase expands on this by rolling out an existing but highly successful rehabilitation programme for people coming out of hospital and new residents asking the council for help. Up to six weeks of support are provided by specialist rehabilitation experts.

At the end of this period, people need less or no ongoing support from the council for their long-term care. This is at least a third cheaper than if they went straight back into the community with standard packages of care.

The council and NHS Richmond have a joint equipment service with a streamlined ordering service, ready for GP commissioning.

Staffordshire County Council working together to change lives

In common with many councils, Staffordshire was faced with an increasingly ageing population and finite resources. Over the next 25 years Staffordshire expects to see the number of people over the age of 65 grow by 104,700 – a 76 per cent

increase. The number of people over 85 years old is expected to increase by 30,000 to 46,200 in the same period. Accompanying this will be an increase in the proportion of people living with long-term conditions.

The council wanted to make a fundamental shift away from 'screening out' through eligibility criteria to 'screening in' through prevention and wellbeing at lower levels of need.

Staffordshire saw its role as a community leader, coordinating a range of improved health, wellbeing and independence measures for vulnerable adults and communities.

Preventative services would be provided in and by local communities.

This goes beyond the usual assumptions of ageing being equated with people's increased dependency and need for care. The planning of homes, neighbourhoods and the economy would be designed to enable independence and wellbeing well into the later years of life.

Over the last three years, a major vision and modernisation programme called 'Changing Lives' was implemented. The aim was to move care provision away from increasingly expensive and limited residential care. Instead, early intervention, preventative and layered services would be provided by a more diverse range of suppliers. The process included working with councillors and the wider county council, helping them understand the reason, rationale and practicalities for change in the vision.

Vital to this partnership approach was the involvement of local people and service users in the design of services. Staffordshire has broadened its approach with more innovative ways of listening to local people's views, including through the work and reports of its adult care panel.

Staffordshire's social care and health directorate also took the lead on independent living, people with learning disabilities in employment, supporting carers, helping to support voluntary and charity organisations in the provision of preventative and low-level wellbeing services for vulnerable adults and communities. Local health partners are leading on the more traditional public health priorities such as smoking, obesity, alcohol misuse and cardiovascular disease.

Building up the voluntary sector has been a major plank in Staffordshire's strategy. Many voluntary groups existed previously but the council tended to overlook them and let them do their own thing. Now, a pan-Staffordshire organisation has been created, part-funded by Staffordshire County Council. Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Community Infrastructure Organisation aims to coordinate the efforts of voluntary groups and align them with local and national priorities.

As a result, older people and the vulnerable now have greater choice and independence. Many choose to continue to live at home, taking advantage of a range of new services offered according to need.

North Yorkshire County Council telecare improves quality of life

For the foreseeable future changes in demography and developments in policy will continue to transform the way services are delivered in North Yorkshire. North Yorkshire is England's largest rural county with a population of 599,000 covering 3,000 square miles. Population projections predict that by 2015, the population will be 607,000. Of these, 44.9 per cent, will be over 50 and 3.2 per cent will be over 85.

If things continue as they are, by 2020 the council will need to provide 50 per cent more services including:

- 3,420 more home care packages
- 1,817 additional places in care homes
- a cost increase of £43 million a year in real terms.

North Yorkshire County Council is a member of 'Planning for Older Age', the North Yorkshire and York multi-organisation agency for people aged 50 and over. All stakeholders strive to work beyond traditional organisational boundaries, structures and systems.

North Yorkshire has recognised the potential of telecare and has already tested it early in two areas. Today, telecare is available for all individuals needing adult and community services support.

During the trial period, care managers looked at what the traditional care package would have been if telecare had not been available and what the telecare-enhanced packages of care were. They found that 46 per cent of

the traditional packages would have been residential, elderly, mentally infirm or nursing, while the rest would have been at home.

Those who would have had more than 10 hours home care saw a reduction in the number of hours needed. The trend for those who would have received seven hours or less was a reduction in the number of hours, with some people needing no further support.

A satisfaction survey in 2009 showed:

- 95 per cent of respondents said telecare equipment had given them more confidence and or peace of mind
- 95 per cent said telecare equipment had helped them to feel safer
- 94 per cent were happy with the installation
- 91 per cent rated telecare excellent or very good overall
- 87 per cent said telecare had helped them carry on living at home.

Analysis of the trial results showed a net average annual efficiency saving per person of between £12,246 and £1,756 per area, averaging at £3,654 countywide – a 38 per cent reduction in care package costs.

When the figures were applied to current telecare users, they predicted savings of £1,108,609. Telecare is now part of North Yorkshire's innovative approach to social care.

Tameside Council helping older people

The UK now has more people aged over 60 years than those aged under 16. The aim of Tameside Council is to provide support and information that will enable older people to continue to lead active lives and contribute to the community.

The Tameside Older People's Partnership is dedicated to improving the lives of older people through a quality-of-life strategy. Its action plan focuses on seven key areas, information, security, housing, healthy lifestyle, income, getting around and learning. The partnership is a multi-agency approach, bringing together officers from across the council and setting out tasks, targets and deadlines.

Throughout its work to improve services Tameside Council has involved the over-60s in their development, delivery and design. The council believes that the availability of information allows older people to make informed choices and keep control of their lives. Information services have been developed, which can be accessed through a variety of methods, such as the internet, booklets, drop-in shops and specialist advisory services, which provide information to people in their own homes.

Work with specific communities has also been undertaken where there is a need to improve awareness and uptake. This has included a social care information project that targets black and minority ethnic communities and the direct payments broker.

Improving health and challenging health inequalities

In England today population health, as measured by life expectancy, continues to improve and infant mortality rates are at an all-time low. Death rates from cardiovascular disease and cancer have fallen rapidly for all parts of the population in the last ten years, including the most disadvantaged groups. Yet health inequalities – the overall gap between the healthiest and the least healthy in our society – is now wider than in 2000. There is a seven-year gap in life expectancy and a 17-year gap in disability-free life expectancy between the best and worst off localities.

Health inequalities stem from inequalities in people's early life experience, their education and occupational status, exposure to lifestyle and the environmental risks and diseases to which their life predisposes them. People in disadvantaged groups and areas tend to experience the poorest health but health inequalities exist across the population as a whole and in all local authority areas in England.

Social determinants of health

Social, economic and environmental conditions influence the health of individuals and populations. They include the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age and the structural influences upon them. They determine the extent to which a person has the right physical, social and personal resources to achieve their goals, meet needs and deal with changes to their circumstances.

The Marmot Report, a strategic review of health inequalities in England, published in 2010, proposed an evidence based strategy to address the social determinants of health. The report identified local government as a pivotal partner in addressing the social determinants of health inequalities.

Central to the review is the recognition that disadvantage starts before birth and accumulates throughout life. This is reflected in the six policy objectives and to the highest priority being given to the first objective:

1. Giving every child the best start in life.
2. Enabling all children, young people and adults to maximize their capabilities and have control over their lives.
3. Creating fair employment and good work for all.
4. Ensuring a healthy standard of living for all.
5. Creating and developing sustainable places and communities.
6. Strengthening the role and impact of ill-health prevention.

The recent Health and Social Care Bill and white papers, which embrace these objectives, will completely reform the NHS and the way healthcare is commissioned and delivered locally

Sir Michael Marmot, who conducted the review, asserted that national policies will not work without effective local delivery systems and that these require effective participatory decision-making at local level. This can only happen by empowering individuals and local communities and councillors have

a key role to play as leaders of local communities. The incoming NHS and public health reforms will be integral to realising these ambitions.

Overview and scrutiny

Health overview and scrutiny is seen as a lever to improve the health of local people, ensuring that their aspirations and needs are considered as an integral part of the delivery and development of health services. It is one of the most important ways that local authorities can respond to the concerns of their residents about their health and wellbeing.

It is a means of enabling councillors to scrutinise how local needs are being addressed, how health services are run and how they can be improved. It also provides an opportunity for local councillors to offer practical solutions or ways forward. Health OSCs are encouraged to build on the community leadership role of local government, to promote the social, environmental and economic wellbeing of their area.

OSCs have the difficult task of attempting to hold to account their local NHS and the health services it commissions and provides, while at the same time holding to account all those local organisations, including their own council, that have an impact on the wider determinants of health.

Despite this enormous remit and despite pressures to spend much of their time reviewing health services, many health overview and scrutiny committees have used their powers to challenge health inequalities and to make recommendations to local and national agencies on how their work can be improved.

It is still early to assess how effective OSCs are in bringing about change to improve health and reduce health inequalities in their areas, since the social determinants of health have long-term effects. However, there is evidence that at the very least, the agencies to which scrutiny committees make recommendations feel obliged to show how they are addressing the issues under scrutiny.

Councils directly or indirectly influence many of the big building blocks and social determinants of health such as spatial planning and design; housing; transport; education; leisure, culture and sport; and adult social care.

They also have an impact on individuals, families and communities – directly through tobacco control, licensing and work on crime and disorder, and less directly by helping to shape local norms.

Their work in recent years in relation to health overview and scrutiny has helped to hold the local NHS to account and allowed councils to consider what can be done to improve local health.

As people are asked to take on more responsibility for their own health, the encouragement and support of their councils will be even more important in creating the conditions where good health can flourish and inequalities in health challenged.



Case studies

London Borough of Greenwich

'Feeling Good About Where We Live' is an initiative by the London Borough of Greenwich, focusing on improving people's environment and living space with the aim of improved mental health among residents. This three-year project, developed by Greenwich Council and the Primary Care Trust (PCT), focuses on two estates in deprived areas of Greenwich. One is a control where no interventions will take place. Both are in the bottom 10 per cent of the index of multiple deprivation. The first half of the project will involve consulting residents and implementing changes. People will then be questioned six and 18 months later about the changes. After that the project will assess any improvements to residents' mental health.

The project has six main themes:

1. Home comfort.
2. Peace and quiet.
3. Room to move.
4. Feeling safe.
5. What's on?
6. Liking where you live.

It also has a set of 13 related factors in the physical environment that can be used as predictors of poor mental health.

For the past two years, Greenwich PCT has funded the engineering and consultancy firm Arup to explore what small-scale physical and social changes might make a difference. For example, there is evidence that wildflower planting can help people to enjoy their immediate surroundings more. This is one of 13 factors identified by the project.

Other interventions may focus on specific dwellings, for example, installing bunk or desk spaces in bedrooms so that young people have a space to study at home. There will also be interventions designed to get people together, such as events on the estate, to help meet some of the social aims of the project.

Significantly, the project intends to work within mainstream budgets and adjust them where necessary. The department of neighbourhood services at Greenwich Council is keen to test different uses of mainstream resources to see if this makes a difference to people's sense of wellbeing.

South Tyneside Council

South Tyneside's local development framework (LDF) shows how the integration of physical planning with economic and social regeneration strategies can enhance the impact of both. Like many former industrial centres, South Tyneside displays many of the usual indicators of disadvantage: high crime and anti-social behaviour, poor health indicators and low educational achievement.

In tandem with the sustainable community strategy, the regeneration strategy focuses on a programme of investment – in schools, business parks, health centres, transport, housing, town centres, the riverside and the environment.

As part of the process of developing the LDF, the development team listed all the objectives in the community strategy. Using a traffic light system, it identified those with land use or other physical development implications. This included many of the interventions identified in the regeneration strategy. Consultation with the public involved a range of techniques and capacity-building activities.

The physical development continues to address economic, social and cohesion objectives, as the council believes that developments that exclude sectors of the community place themselves at an immediate disadvantage in terms of either their long-term sustainability or their ability to be accepted by the whole community. In a similar spirit, the borough's spatial vision for the area sets out the aim that "all those within the borough can access the opportunities that are available, with reliable public transport, efficient road network and above all, focusing on delivering accessibility rather than relying on mobility."

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is one of the worst areas in the country for overcrowded housing and one of the highest rates of tuberculosis. There are high rates of overcrowding among lone parents and large households, and in the black, Asian and minority ethnic community.

One of the strands of the council's housing strategy is to increase the overall supply of housing, including affordable family housing. It plans to do this by:

- an initial pilot to build 61 units of family-sized housing with a preferred development partner on small plots of council land
- new council housing – the council plans to start its own house building programme to build 17 units, housing 86 people over five sites on three council estates
- buying back ex-council three-bed plus 'right-to-buy' properties – around 100 are planned
- increasing housing supply by at least 9,000 units by 2012
- tackling under-occupation through incentives and a package of support to increase social housing stock
- promoting low cost home ownership products to overcrowded households
- re-housing 19 Gypsy and Traveller families and seeking additional pitches on a new site.

Cumbria County Council

The 2009 joint strategic needs assessment for Cumbria has a chapter on living conditions and health inequalities, using maps and statistics to give an overview of relative deprivation and wealth across the county. It shows where the most deprived populations are concentrated but notes that the majority of people in relative poverty – 56 per cent – live outside these deprived areas.

The assessment also shows the correlation between deprivation, poor health and life expectancy. The strategy considers what is being done locally to impact on four major areas that affect people's health:

1. Services to support mothers and children.
2. The education system.
3. Creating the conditions for decent employment opportunities.
4. Access to quality housing.

This information enables health and social care specialists to make the links with policy and service areas well beyond their own specialities.

It also enables those working in areas outside health and social care to understand better the impact of their own work on health, and fosters an integrated and coherent approach to tackling the social determinants of health.



Hot topic Sector self-regulation and improvement

While it was lobbying for a reduction in government regulation, the Local Government Group consulted extensively on alternative arrangements for self-regulation.

The consultations led to the publication of 'Taking the Lead' in February 2011 with implementation from April 2011. The approach is a voluntary one since councils were clear that they did not want a prescriptive framework that replicated the previous regime. www.local.gov.uk/taking-the-lead

However, it is expected that councils will enhance how they are held accountable locally and will continue to support each other. Underlying the approach are the principles that councils are:

- responsible for their own performance and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for their area
- accountable to their local communities.

The seven key features of the offer are:

1. Local accountability tools to be made available including online guidance, a new local assessment tool and support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny.
2. Peer challenge offered to all councils, free of charge in the three-year period from April 2011.

3. An offer of up to five days free member peer support for all councils undergoing a change of control.
4. The Knowledge Hub, launching in 2011, to provide a new web-based service creating a single window to improvement.
5. Data and transparency, enhanced by providing the LG Inform service within the Knowledge Hub, to post, access and compare performance information.
6. Leadership support for the development of political and managerial leaders, including one subsidised place for every council for each of the next three years.
7. Learning and support networks of officers and councillors nationally and sub-nationally, working with others, to share good practice and provide timely support.

In addition, the Local Government Group, through its member programme boards will maintain an overview of the performance of the sector, to share good practice and identify where things might be starting to go wrong.

This information will be used in discussions with individual councils about their improvement needs.

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