



COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATION 2023

THE ROLE OF MEMBERS IN THEIR WARDS/COMMUNITIES

1. Introduction

This discussion paper focuses on the support we provide (or should provide) for our councillors. Do we do enough to support councillors in their wards and communities? Elected councillors have an important electoral mandate. They provide crucial two-way links between local councils and their communities. They carry into the council the views of the public and explain the decisions of the council to the public. We need to ensure that councillors have the tools to work effectively in their community and help them to be more visible and accessible in their locality, but how? What can Democratic Services do to help?

2. Councillor Commission – ‘The Voice of the Councillor’

2.1 In 2017, De Montfort University’s Local Governance Research Unit and the Municipal Journal published the results of a year long commission exploring the work of councillors across England. The final report of the Commission – ‘The Voice of the Councillor’ – confirmed that now more than ever we need to support our councillors in the work they undertake in representing and governing their communities and in engaging with the public. With a greater focus on place-based working being the key to unlocking many of the big issues councils and their partners are facing, the role of the local councillor as a catalyst for change within their communities is becoming evermore important. We are still very much getting our local democracy on the cheap. Even among many councillors there is reluctance to spend public money on ensuring they have the support and resources they need. Such reluctance, in times of austerity, may appear very reasonable, win votes and play well in the press. But the Councillor Commission’s findings tell us that it is time for local government to be bolder and braver in standing up for, and supporting its councillors.

2.2. The Commission’s report argues that three things are needed:

- Councils must recognise the legitimate role all councillors have in governing their communities and provide the resources and support for them to carry out that task. Support for councillors must not be confined to the Leader and Cabinet alone, but available to all members. All councillors have a vital role to play in enabling, co-ordinating and bringing communities together around the issues that matter most to people.



- Second, Westminster and Whitehall – the Government and the Civil Service - must see and treat councillors as a vital part of the governing fabric of the country, rather than dismiss the office as some quaint hang-over from the Victorian times. Councillors are elected officials; they have a legitimacy and an immediacy to communities that MPs and MEPs can only dream about, rather than replicate. Devolution therefore, must recognise the democratic mandate of the localities and see governing power, not just more functions and tasks, passed to our councillors.
- Third, the Commission's research revealed that councillors are spending more and more time interacting in complex, multi-layered networks of public and private agencies whose goals differ from the elected council. Their territorial area may be greater than the council and whose service and policy focus is on a single or one or two service areas. There are a myriad of organisations that spend public money, develop public policy and impact on the well being of communities but all of whom lack the unique feature of our councillors: an electoral mandate for what they do. Local government across the country must organise itself to support its councillors in these processes as it is through negotiations, compromises and interactions with external agencies that local government can govern and achieve the best results for the communities they serve.

Discussion Points

1. What do you think about the above views of the Councillor Commission and how would member support in your authority need to change to comply with the first and third recommendations above?
2. What can Democratic Services do to facilitate such changes?
3. Has the situation changed since the Commission reported?

3. Member Surgeries

How many members hold surgeries? Can we assist them in finding suitable venues, and by providing some basic publicity materials? Some councils produce a resource pack for councillors to take out with them to meetings with residents. This might include fact cards about ward demographics, council services and performance; an A - Z of services, plus contact details for the main public services provided by county, district and parish councils;



information about current projects; and a pull up stand listing facts about 'what the council has done well' that acts as a mini-exhibition.

4. Ward Walking

As an example, some councils organise regular walkabouts with county and district councillors to identify problems, meet people, and provide information. Details of problems and resolutions are posted onto councillors' websites for information. One uses a 'mobile unit' which travels around the county (staffed by officers and councillors) and provides members of the public with an opportunity to meet councillors face to face and raise concerns with them.

5. Area and Neighbourhood Committees

Area and neighbourhood committees can also help increase contact between councillors and the people they represent, by providing a mechanism for more local issues to be raised. The evidence is that local committees can provide an important role for ward members to promote the interests of their neighbourhood. How many councils are however now cutting back on these committees for budgetary and other reasons?

6. Devolved Budgets

6.1 In a number of authorities budgets have been devolved to ward councillors. Typically, for larger authorities' budgets might amount to £10,000 per member. The council agrees the budget allocations annually.

6.2 In some cases, this is tied to the role of area or neighbourhood committees which comprise councillors for the wards in the area who may use their budget allocations to support local initiatives. Where these arrangements exist councillors cannot sign cheques as such but may propose how 'their' budget is spent within rules and criteria agreed by the council. The rules may allow councillors to bring forward proposals for approval by the area committee, and they may choose to combine budgets with those of other local councillors. Such arrangements need a fine balance between creativity and flexibility versus transparent but proportionate governance arrangements.

7. Scrutiny

Scrutiny has also been used to engage with local people, including special meetings to capture the views of people affected by policy proposals, visits by members to a range of venues during their scrutiny work, co-opting school children and young people onto scrutiny working groups, inviting responses from members of the public in regard to key lines of scrutiny



enquiry, and engaging with service users. Ward members have their ears closest to the ground in their localities so can play a very influential role in informing scrutiny of 'hot' topics impacting on local people.

8. Promoting Local Democracy

Some councils have been successful in encouraging citizenship and promoting local democracy; a number of them have a 'Local Democracy Week' programme that brings together elected politicians with future generations of electors. Others may have a youth council; citizenship links with local schools, colleges, and universities; or open days at community events, aimed at encouraging people to become future community leaders.

9. Members' IT

Many authorities have now rolled out IT to their members as part of moves towards paperlight/paperless working. Some of this was planned, some in response to the Covid lockdowns and remote meetings. Many Councils now serve the agenda summons on members by email/weblinks instead of by post, provided that members have given their consent. Committee management systems have an app for paperless/light meetings which enables members to navigate their way around agenda and reports on an iPad, bookmark particular issues and copy and paste text to email messages – all electronically. This offers huge potential to promote new and more efficient ways of working.

10. Individual Member's Web Pages and Blogs

Members want to show people that they are working actively on their behalf using whatever media are at their disposal. In some authorities, members have a dedicated web-page as part of the council's website. A Members' webpage or information portal is an area on the intranet dedicated to information specifically for councillors - directly accessed off the internet home page. Councils can also support a blog or the use of twitter provided the content relates to members' work as councillors. Where web pages are already established, we can always do more to help members to make much more dynamic use of the content by including their blogs and discussion forums.

11. Leader's Blog

Some councils also have an 'Ask the Leader' web page with links to the Leader's blog; another means of keeping backbench councillors and the community well informed.



12. Ward-Based Information/E Mail Alerts

Most members will want this. Do we deliver it and if so how?

13. Tips on Search and Retrieval

Officers need to give members the tools to do the job. Does your authority offer briefing sessions on access to the internet, the basic search techniques, the key websites eg LGA and other national sources of parliamentary and local government advice, how to highlight favourites, how to download documents etc? This helps members connect with their communities.