

Neighbourhood and community engagement

Councillor workbook



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This councillor workbook includes references to materials published by the Local Government Group (LG Group), now the Local Government Association (LGA).

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgement about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics involved in neighbourhood and community engagement – it may even challenge you to reconsider how you have approached aspects of the role to date.

Those members who are new to local government will recognise that they have much to learn. The workbook will help you to get up to speed on the main areas of the neighbourhood and community engagement role that require focus and attention. In effect, it should provide you with some pointers on how to develop a style and approach that you are comfortable with, and that enables you to be most effective in your day to day duties.

The workbook offers few firm rules for ward members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to approach the role. This will be influenced by the other commitments in your life, the type of ward you represent and the methods and approaches that suit you best. There is no presumption about ‘typical wards’ or ‘typical members’ and the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map. In practical terms, the document will take between **two to three hours** to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The

key requirement is to think about your own approach to neighbourhood and community engagement – how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the issues surrounding the development of neighbourhood and community engagement. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are ‘pen pictures’ of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendix to the workbook.

Communities and councillors

A new localism

The Localism Act 2011 aims to give effect to the government's ambitions to decentralise power away from Whitehall and back into the hands of local councils, communities and individuals, enabling them to act on local priorities.

The government has said that it wants to replace what it calls the 'big state' with a 'big society' and reverse generations of centralisation and dependency on government. Democratic local government shares that ambition and is at the heart of making it happen – transferring power, assets, resources and decision-making down to grass roots communities.



Localism in action

“...councils are no longer hiding behind the walls of the town hall. They are actively seeking ways to involve more people and groups in service delivery...”

“...In the years ahead we will have to do more together to shape services around communities, to save costs and meet public expectations.”

Doing Something Big: Building a Better Society Together, LG Group, 2011

Ward members, as democratically-elected leaders representing their communities, have a unique role to play in enabling the

local engagement which will drive the big society – what we sometimes refer to as 'neighbourhood and community engagement'.

For many members, this is a welcome opportunity to reshape their role away from bureaucratically-driven, paper-heavy meetings and processes, to much more creative roles leading and energising their local communities and encouraging self-organised groups to be ambitious.

Against this backdrop, there are three compelling reasons why councils have to get better at engaging with their communities:

- They have a primary responsibility to consult and involve their stakeholders – the essence of the Localism Act is about giving more say and power to local communities.
- It can help to improve their reputation and build trust among their residents – in an era of tight fiscal constraint, councils need to do all they can to demonstrate that they are delivering value for money by keeping their residents well informed.
- It is fundamental in building the capacity of communities to solve their own problems without the need for costly statutory sector provision or intervention. This is not just about the need to save money – although that is undoubtedly a driving force – but is about the need to recognise that society is changing with a more connected population demanding greater participation in shaping the lives of their own communities.



The Localism Act – some aspects relevant to community engagement

General power of competence – this new power replaces the previous duty of well-being and gives councils the same broad powers as an individual to do anything unless it is prohibited by statute. Councils have the freedom to be creative and entrepreneurial, acting directly in the interest of their communities and in their own financial interest.

Predetermination – provisions have been introduced to clarify the principle of predetermination in local government, allowing members to engage in an open and rigorous debate with their local communities about council business.

Community right to challenge – under these provisions, a broad range of alternative service providers will be able to submit expressions of interest to run services, with the potential to trigger a council procurement exercise.

Community right to bid – these provisions allow parish councils and local voluntary and community groups to prepare bids to purchase listed community assets should a local authority choose to dispose of them.

Understanding neighbourhoods and communities

In the context of this workbook, the terms 'neighbourhood' and 'community' are used in a broad sense to mean one or more of the following:

- general or specific geographical areas that are defined as workplaces or categorised by their residential nature, eg an area with a defined population size, a single housing estate, a block of streets within a ward area
- groups of people defined by the areas they live or work in, eg ward constituents or the 'community' of individual towns and villages
- groups of people defined by something other than their residential or workplace environments, ie communities defined on the grounds of race, colour, age, class, faith, disability or sexuality.

Every neighbourhood or community is made up of different individuals and groups, whose particular views, interests and ambitions may often be at odds and may not always be reconcilable. This is not a reason for ignoring the importance of neighbourhood and community engagement, but is the very real challenge which you will face in getting people more actively involved in the issues which affect them.

Ward members are in the front line of neighbourhood and community engagement. As a community leader, you are best placed to understand the particular challenges faced by your constituents. And working with a wide range of individuals and organisations in the area, you can help them to decide how best to respond.

It is only at a local level that problems such as access to social housing, crime, deprivation and anti-social behaviour can be understood and addressed. Few other community leaders have the mandate to co-ordinate different interests, reconcile diverse views and encourage open debate and dialogue in the way that you can.



“Our first priority is localism...

...And our second priority is also localism.

Can you guess what our third priority is?”

Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for The Department of communities and Local Government, June 2010

The particular strengths and knowledge that you bring to this engagement process are:

- an understanding of your ward – the demographics, the key issues facing local people and the way that services are being delivered
- the representation of local voices – you are a channel of communication between the communities you serve and the council, representing the views of others and speaking up for the ‘hard to reach’ or ‘seldom heard’
- communicating and influencing skills – you can help to ensure that the views of local people are taken into account when decisions are made by the council or outside bodies and matters are reported in the media.

All of this provides you with a strong basis on which to act for and in support of local people. For example, you can:

- assess whether there is general satisfaction with council services – or those run locally by other agencies – and whether local people believe they are getting value for money from what is being spent
- speak with confidence on behalf of your neighbourhoods or communities when issues affecting them are debated or decisions need to be taken
- promote partnership working between public, private and civil society organisations in response to recognised community needs
- support community calls for action and promote self-help among your constituents by understanding their aims, aspirations, views and tactics.

However, as part of the new localism agenda, you need to do more than just represent the views of local people. You will need to encourage people to play a more active role themselves in the decision making processes of the council.



Exercise 1 – engagement: who are you talking about?

Think about your specific ward area. What neighbourhoods and communities are you serving as a community leader?

General or specific geographical areas:

Groups of people defined by the area in which they live or work:

Groups of people defined by something other than their residential or workplace environments:

Look again at your list. Have you included any 'seldom heard' or 'hard to reach' groups, eg particular groups of older, younger or disabled people or specific minority ethnic groups? What about transitory or newly arriving communities, eg commuters, travellers, migrant workers, refugees or asylum seekers?

Ways that members can encourage greater engagement

In your day to day role as a ward member you may already carry out lots of activities that help to encourage citizens and communities to get more involved in the decision making processes of your council, eg providing information through the press or media, holding meetings with community groups or raising awareness of relevant issues through posters or leaflets.

You may also conduct advice surgeries or make use of information and communications technology to ensure that opportunities for engaging with local people are maximised, eg the use of social media (Facebook or Twitter) or a weblog, or 'blog' – as an online journal – to let people know essential information and to solicit responses email and online surveys.

Innovation in engagement

Members are the lynchpin in representing what local people think and in communicating council information to them.

They are also critical in leading the way in using social media and other tools to broaden their options for talking to constituents.

Tools such as Tweety Hall – which gathers members' Twitter feeds together so that residents can find their councillor more easily – can help members and local people to connect more easily.

www.tweetyhall.co.uk

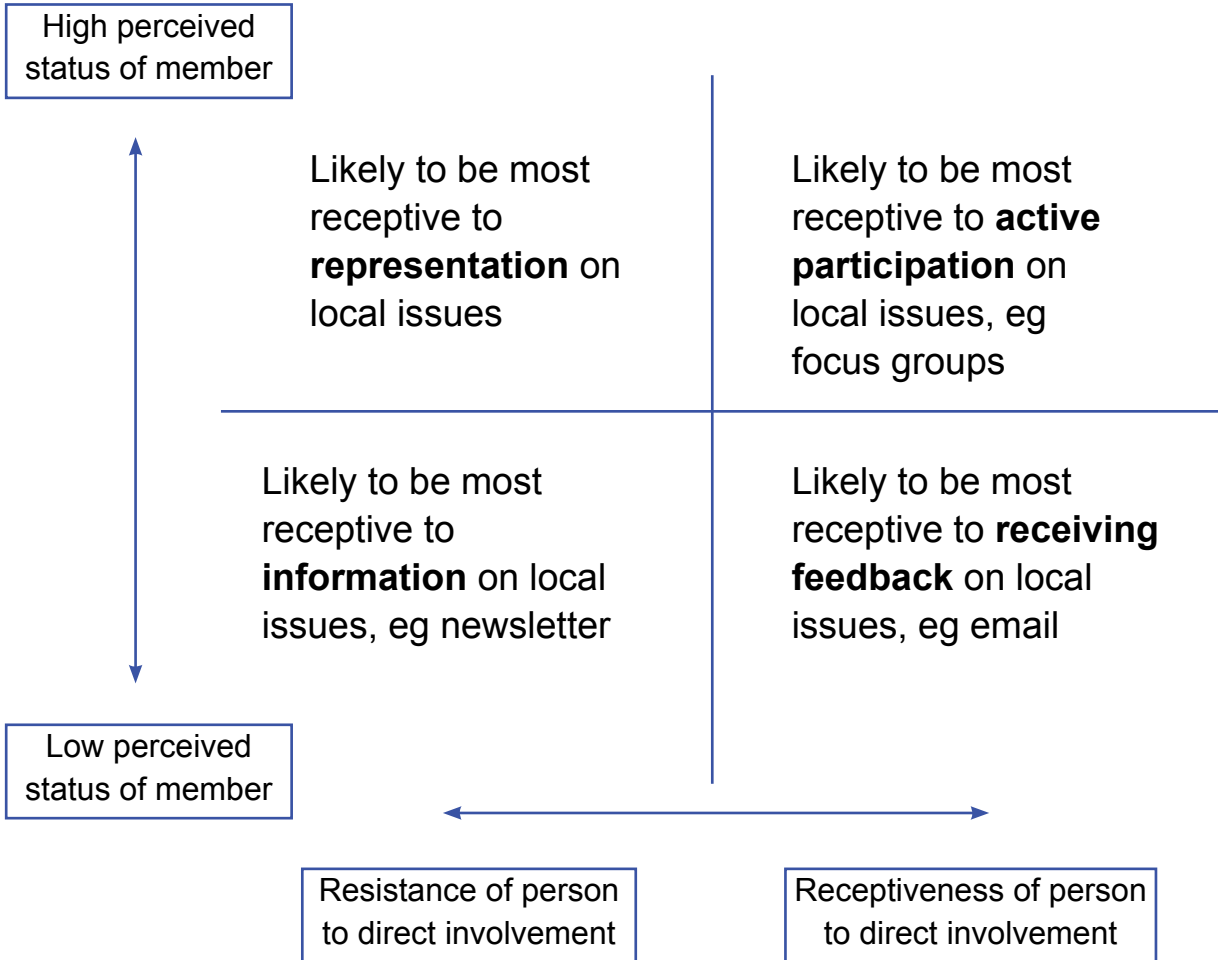
However, not everyone will want to participate to the same extent. While some people will want to engage with you and actively participate in a dialogue about their issues and concerns, others will be content to let you represent their interests or just keep them informed about what is going on locally. Much of this will depend on each person's perception of 'authority' figures generally, and their receptiveness to direct engagement (see the 'participation matrix').

This means you will have to adopt a range of approaches to suit the issue and the perceptions of the local community. The other factors that you will need to consider in encouraging greater engagement from citizens and communities are:

- Who best to engage with, ie all constituents, or targeted groups that have a particular interest or stake in the issues concerned? As part of this, you may also need to consider the risks involved in not engaging with some community groups.
- The usefulness and applicability of different engagement techniques given the individuals or communities concerned, eg using a postal questionnaire survey may not be the best way to solicit responses from some communities that are distrustful or fearful of officialdom.
- The ease of accessibility and cost justification for engaging with the community concerned. Any engagement activity should be economic, efficient and effective, but also user-friendly, and any costs involved should be commensurate with the resources at stake in any decision making process.



The participation matrix





Engagement in Epsom and Ewell

“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.”

Councillor Julie Morris, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, 2011

www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk



Exercise 2 – your role in encouraging people to get involved

Imagine that a particular community of people in your ward has been very hostile about council plans to grant fund the installation of wind generators by a number of community groups to reduce the ‘carbon footprint’ of the area. You know that the concerns being raised by the community are unfounded and based on some erroneous information being circulated by a local protest group. You are keen to get people to come forward and support the council’s plans. What ideas do you have for raising the matter locally and trying to begin a dialogue on the pros and cons of the grant funding plans?

Towards community engagement

The benefits of neighbourhood and community engagement

Increasing the engagement and participation of citizens and communities in local government planning and decision making can produce benefits for all concerned. This is illustrated in the table below:



The benefits of neighbourhood and community engagement

Council	Community	Citizens
Can help to ensure better congruence between the council's 'vision' and what happens in practice.	Can help to improve the democratic accountability of councils.	Should engender a sense of involvement and participation in decision making.
Decision making should be based on representative views – engagement can help to supply this.	Increases representation and can help to identify community leaders.	Can help to ensure representation for groups which are often marginalised or unheard.
Can help to reduce the influence of pressure groups and single issue politics.	Can help to improve the community's understanding of the business of local government.	Can help to empower stakeholders and increase citizen control of local affairs.
Can help to improve feedback on strategic proposals and generate new ideas for consideration by the council.	Can help to ensure that strategies and plans take account of local social, economic and environmental factors.	Can help to engage citizens in the resolution of their own problems and the allocation of resources to address these.
Increases participatory democracy and can help to improve the reputation of members as legitimate community leaders.	Can help to foster the development of consensus and community competence.	Can help individuals to better understand the nature of local government.

A move towards neighbourhood and community governance

In the last decade, there has been a move to encourage more participatory democracy in local government, ie local councils using their role to inform, consult and involve local people in working towards community clarity and consensus on needs, problems and desired strategies. Some proponents of this have suggested that one measure of a community's competence is the extent to which various groups of citizens share in these decision making processes.



Engagement in action

“Westminster City Council has introduced dedicated £50,000 ward budgets to address local priorities in all areas of the city. Local ward councillors are working with local residents and community groups to allocate the budgets.”

Doing Something Big: Building a Better Society Together, LG Group, 2011



Participatory budgeting

Dulverton is a town in West Somerset served by nine different public authorities. As part of a participatory budgeting (PB) exercise, four of the authorities agreed to give a total of £15,000 – with four others providing support in kind – for local residents to decide how these budgets were to be spent. The aim of the PB exercise was to help create a more effective use of resources available to the town, rather than to provide excess money.

The event, ‘Sensible Spending’, attracted 60 local people, who prioritised and voted on 18 funding bids. A group voting system was employed which led to the amalgamation of some bids, and gifts to less popular applications. Projects funded include road salting in winter, a fortnightly cinema and the refurbishment of local squash courts.

At further public events, 430 residents voted to increase their precept by 50 per cent to mitigate other authorities’ cuts, formed four action groups of 70 volunteers and allocated further funding to play equipment, projects aimed at young people and underground cables. The process provided residents with the opportunity to engage proactively in community affairs.

Adapted from Localism in Practice, National Association of Local Councils, 2011



Exercise 3 – engagement in your area

It is likely that there is a wide range of neighbourhood and community engagement schemes and projects operating in your council area. Using your local knowledge, write down as many examples as you can think of:

Take this list and spend some time looking through your 'full council' minutes for the last year or searching the council's website using the words 'community', 'neighbourhood', 'participation', 'engagement', 'survey' and 'consultation'. You are likely to discover a lot more council-funded schemes than you have on your list!

Many councils have sought to take the idea of participatory democracy further, by encouraging some element of neighbourhood and community management or governance. For example:

- Area or ward committees, often with co-opted stakeholder representatives, which consider plans and proposals for the local area and may have delegated budgets for commissioning projects and services.
- Various forms of participatory budgeting, which allow local people to come together and make decisions about how public sector resources are spent in meeting their needs.
- Place-based working, where local partner agencies work with individuals and groups in the community to share knowledge, resources and assets in tackling community concerns. Within this, local authorities will often adopt a 'place-shaping' role, providing support to enable individuals and community groups to solve their own problems.
- Formal community based groups, which govern or manage aspects of public service delivery, eg tenant management organisations, which give housing tenants more control over their homes and neighbourhoods.

There are a huge variety of these neighbourhood working models which are used in one or more of the following areas: consultation, advocacy, service delivery or design, networking, needs assessment, capacity building or performance monitoring. And with the freedoms and flexibilities enshrined within the Localism Act, it is likely that this rich diversity of community-focused and community-led approaches will only increase.

The future for neighbourhoods and communities

The Localism Act has set in place a programme of reform which builds on many of the themes already well-established in local government, ie community leadership, democratic accountability, effective partnership working and the empowerment of citizens to have a bigger say in the public services they receive and the places they live.

In support of this, councils need to continue to use a range of different approaches to community engagement (see diagram).

Namely, to:

- inform – through newsletters, websites, texting, press releases etc
- consult – via surveys, focus groups etc
- involve – by co-opting local people onto decision-making bodies so they have a bigger say or – by full devolution – so they have the say in decision making, eg participatory budgeting or the management of a community asset.

Effective members want their constituents to be as informed and involved as possible in the decisions that make a difference to their lives. Many have already developed innovative ways to help local people influence decisions, and to hear from a wider range of residents. They recognise that any further changes which result from the localism agenda can only strengthen their role as community leaders, able to engage more effectively with local people.

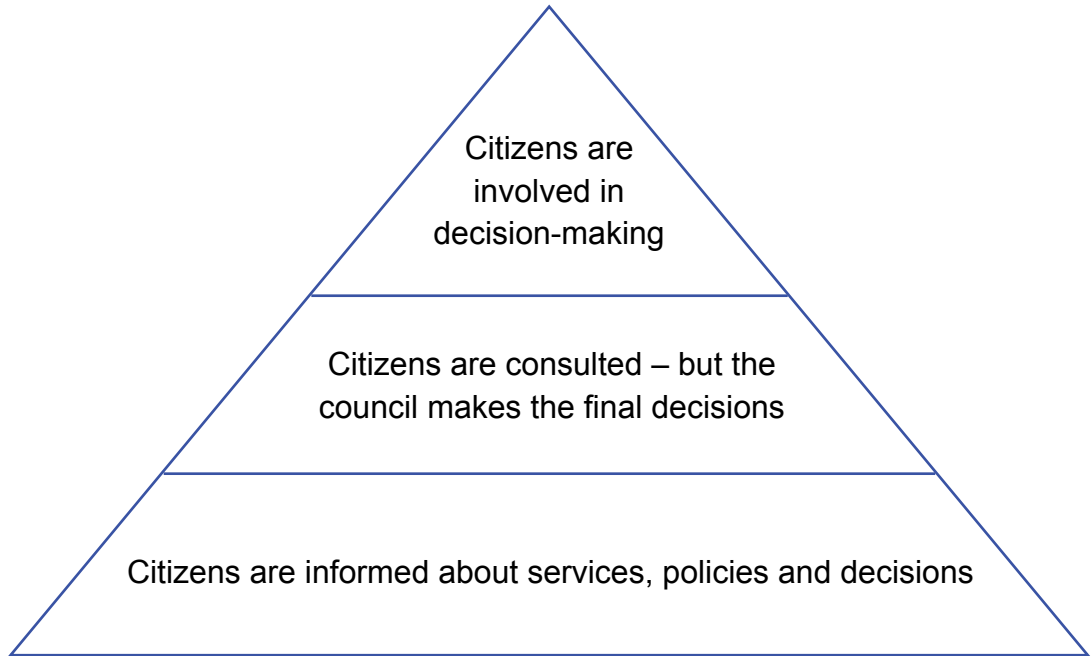


Neighbourhood engagement continuum

Devolution



Council control



Final summary

No one has a more crucial role than ward members in ensuring that local democracy works and is believed in by residents. It is important to recognise that there are two essential strands to this:

- **Representative democracy** – in which council members are elected to represent their local communities.
- **Participative democracy** – in which councils seek to engage and involve local communities in the decisions that affect them most closely.

Representative and participatory democracy are not in competition with each other and there is a compelling need for better links between elected and community representatives. In their role, ward members are well placed to encourage and channel this neighbourhood and community engagement and to champion both a local voice and greater local choice.

Neighbourhood and community engagement has a rightful place as one of the key processes involved in planning and decision making. As such, it should not be viewed as an additional task, but as a core part of the business of local government. It is not a resource burden, but a way of ensuring that scarce resources are better targeted in meeting community needs. And it does not challenge the authority of members, but provides a useful way of enhancing their role, strengthening democratic legitimacy and encouraging community development – something that many councils and members are already doing as part of the localism agenda.



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

- (a) What key action points can you identify in relation to your role in neighbourhood and community engagement, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?
- (b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

'Councillor's Guide (2012/13)', Local Government Group, 2012.

'Doing Something Big: Building a Better Society Together', Local Government Group, 2011.

'Essential Localism', Local Government Group, 2011.

'Localism in Practice', National Association of Local Councils, 2011.

'People, Places, Power: How Localism and Strategic Planning Can Work Together', Local Government Information Unit, 2010.

Useful websites

www.local.gov.uk

The Local Government Association's website is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government and contains guidance and case studies on all aspects of neighbourhood and community engagement within its 'Connecting with Communities' section.

www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk

Provides information on participatory budgeting schemes involving local people.



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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