

The effective ward councillor

Councillor workbook



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

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected councillors. It makes no judgement about whether you have been a councillor 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 that make for an effective ward councillor - it may even challenge you to reconsider how you have approached aspects of the role to date.

Those councillors 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 ward councillor 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 can be used as a stand-alone learning aid or as an adjunct to other material you may cover. It offers few firm rules for councillors as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to use and develop their influencing skills, based on individual preference and confidence. As such, 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 in influencing other people - 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 ward councillor role. 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 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.

The effective ward councillor

The role of the ward councillor

Councillors have broad leadership responsibilities. These can embrace:

- Leading the development of strategies and plans for the area, balancing different needs, identifying priorities and targeting resources in a time of fiscal constraint.
- Providing democratic accountability for public services and ensuring that service providers are accountable to service users in delivering quality and value for money.
- Operating as ‘social entrepreneurs’, bringing together individuals and agencies in the area - and across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors – to tackle social, economic and environmental challenges.
- Carrying out specific regulatory duties and ensuring sufficient scrutiny of council plans, policies, decisions and spending plans.
- Acting as community leaders in facilitating resident participation in all aspects of decision making and the shaping of services.

A significant part of these responsibilities is the work that you do at a neighbourhood level – what is often referred to as the ‘ward councillor role’. You represent the ward and the people who live in it and have a responsibility to communicate council policies and decisions to them.



The demands of the 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.”

Councillor’s Guide, LG Group, 2011

There is good evidence that councillors who stamp out a good reputation in their ward earn the respect of the electorate, who - in turn - repay them at the ballot box. In itself, this is a compelling reason for taking the role of the ward councillor seriously.

But the need to be effective as a ward councillor is about much more than this. Dealing with the people in your community, understanding the issues and concerns they face and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action and make a difference is the most important role you undertake as a councillor. Significantly, it is also often the role that local people value most – more than your function in attending committee meetings.



Effective ward councillors

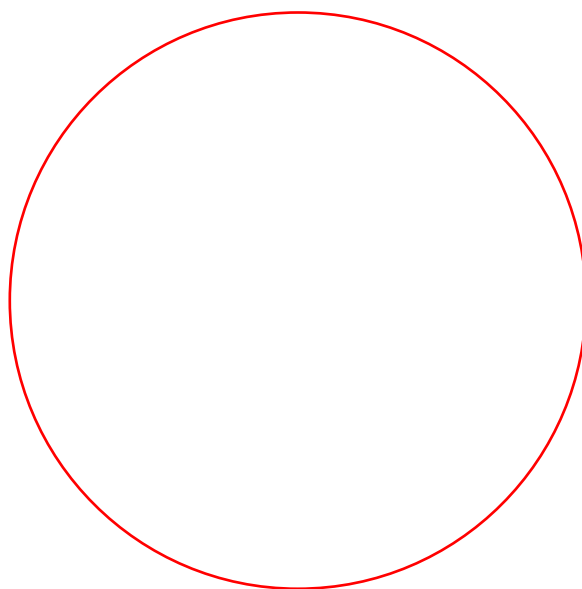
In all aspects of their role, effective ward councillors are likely to be:

- Visible, accessible and accountable.
- People who live locally - understanding the local community and standing up for it.
- Individuals who are proactive – listening to, and available to local people.



Exercise 1 – planning your time

Think about the time you spend on all your council duties in a typical month, eg attending meetings, meeting local people, writing to constituents, reading council information etc. Using the pie chart below, apportion the time you spend on each activity to build up a picture of how you are fulfilling your role as a ward member:



Reflect on your results in relation to what was said earlier. Are you spending sufficient time on the activities that local people value most? If not, why not? Does the analysis suggest to you that you might need to change your approach in any way?

Community leadership

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

Community leadership is at the heart of modern and effective local government and councils are taking on new responsibilities for working in partnership with other agencies - including those in civil society - to deliver services and improve the quality of life of citizens.

An important element of this is the work that councillors undertake at ward level, enabling local people to face issues, deal with problems and realise aspirations in the most effective way. The effective ward councillor therefore has a number of important duties in being a good community leader. In summary, these are:

- **Understanding your ward** – the demographics, the key issues facing local people and the way that services are being delivered.
- **Representing local voices** – being a channel of communication between the communities you serve and the council, representing the views of others and speaking up for the unheard, eg younger, older or disabled people.
- **Communicating and influencing** – ensuring 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.

- **Managing casework** – listening to and responding to requests from individuals and groups in the community, resolving problems and identifying failures in service delivery.

The remainder of this workbook will look at each of these in turn.



Exercise 2 – how much do you really know about your ward?

Think about the area covered by your ward – the different communities who live there, the industries and workplaces and the infrastructure that exists to serve and support local people. Write down what you know about the following:

How many different languages are spoken in your ward?

What proportion of local people are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities?

How many disabled people live in your ward?

How many people living in your ward claim housing benefit?

How many people commute into the area each day to work?

What were the most recent educational results for the schools in your ward area?

What did the most recent crime statistics reveal about offending behaviour in the ward?

How many affordable homes are being built in the ward?

Reflect on your responses to the questions above. How well do you feel you know your ward now? Could you learn more? Would you feel comfortable to be asked any of these questions by one of your constituents or the local media?

Understanding your ward

The role of representing a group of several thousand local people is complex because of the patterns of change in social and political life in recent decades. Communities are increasingly diverse and in some areas there can be frequent movement of people in and out of the community.

Understanding the very nature of your ward is not always as easy as it seems. You may have lived in the area for many years. But the chances are that you will not know all of the communities who live there or all of their issues and problems.

If you are a new councillor, it is essential that you get to know your ward. The people who come to you looking for help can tell you quite a lot about the area, but you will need to find other ways of getting to know the ward.

Speaking to other local community leaders may help, eg ward councillor colleagues, community volunteers, the local police commander, teachers or senior managers within the council. Some councillors programme a monthly walk or drive around different parts of their ward, focusing on particular 'trouble spots' or areas subject to rapid social, economic or environmental change.

It is also important to build up a good network of contacts – a list of names, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for people from a range of organisations that operate in your ward.

Good networking can enable you to respond effectively to any local issues which arise, eg you may need to be proactive in consulting local people and organisations on relevant issues before council decisions are taken. To do this you need to scrutinise the council's agendas in order to spot issues likely to be of interest to your ward. Keeping in close contact with senior managers of the council should also enable you to establish an 'early warning system' to find out about issues that concern the ward but do not make it onto committee agendas.

Your council will hold a wealth of information analysed at ward level. This data can be useful in helping you to formulate and review policies and services in your ward. It should also help you to understand your ward's community needs.

In doing so, you should recognise that there may be mixed views on what is right for the area and how people might view any proposed changes, eg while some local residents may favour the construction of a bypass, to remove traffic noise, congestion and pollution from a town centre, such a development may cause damage to the surrounding countryside and could divert trade away from some local businesses. Understanding the needs of your ward may not always be as clear-cut as it seems.



Exercise 3 – who would you contact?

Imagine you are faced with the following developments in your ward. Who would you contact?

You have received calls from residents complaining of ongoing problems with youth disorder around a suburban convenience store, resulting in vehicle theft and residents feeling disempowered to act for fear of reprisals.

A community group asks for your support in seeking some funding as part of redevelopment and restoration in a multiple deprivation area in your ward.

You have been approached by the youth service to represent and support a project plan for local youngsters that is designed to promote green spaces, sports and encourage skills development.

Look at the answers you have given. Do you have all of the contact details for these organisations and individuals? If not, what can you do to get hold of this information?



Ward walks in Castle Point

Members at Castle Point Borough Council in Essex undertook a series of ward walks as part of a development programme. One of the members who took part said of the experience:

“I was initially very sceptical about the whole thing...I thought nobody could know my ward better than I do. But I had to eat my words! 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...”

Adapted from the Councillor's Guide, LG Group, 2011

Representing local voices

The task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals is a complex one. After all, some groups can be very hard to engage. But generally speaking, the broader your range of approaches to community contact, the more people you are likely to reach.

In addition to representing individual voters, you 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 young people, or those who are occasionally described as 'hard to reach' or 'seldom heard' groups, eg under-represented BME communities.

The council is required to represent the interests of the whole community. Discovering the needs of different groups in the community is an important part of your role. Occasionally there will be conflicts of interest requiring sensitive judgment, eg dog owners, parents of young children and walkers might disagree about the use of a local leisure park. Representing these different views in an open and reasoned way is a crucial part of your role.

In doing so, you will often need to act for both individuals and neighbourhood groups. This will require skills in:

Listening – actively finding out what people think and want. This can be done by knocking on doors or walking around estates, or by seeking out groups that you may not know well, eg mother and toddler groups. You may prefer to use organised surgeries to meet people face to face and discuss the issues that keep them awake at night.

Questioning – sympathetic questioning to get to the 'heart of an issue', to generate thoughts and ideas and to challenge extreme views, uninformed opinions and misleading information.

Advocacy – ensuring that local voices are heard when issues are debated and decisions are taken. This can often involve speaking up for those people whose views are under-represented, unspoken or frequently ignored.

Facilitating – helping individuals and groups to come together to discuss issues affecting the ward, to debate different points of view and to reach consensus on solutions that may meet local needs.

Giving information – talking to people and providing information in Plain English to enable them to understand local government services and processes, eg avoiding the use of council jargon and technical or legalistic language.



Conversations not communications

‘Councillors want their residents to be as informed and involved as possible in the decisions that make a difference in their lives.

They have already developed innovative ways to help local people influence decisions, and hear from a wider range of residents...’

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



Local campaigns

As part of your ward work you may become involved in, or lead, local campaigns. This could involve anything from campaigning for a zebra crossing to starting a credit union. In supporting a local campaign, you should consider:

- Carrying out some consultation to find out how widespread support for the idea is.
- Helping to organise a campaign group that brings together people who can assist.
- Organising petitions or public meetings.
- Helping people to make presentations to, or ask questions at, committees.
- Bringing different groups together to negotiate solutions.
- Engaging the local media and publicising the campaign on your website or blog.



Possible tensions and challenges in your ward role

- Ward interests versus wider council interests.
- Getting things done versus consulting widely.
- Strategic needs versus local objections.
- Balanced views versus single interest politics.
- Asking for views versus avoiding tokenism.



Exercise 4 – community engagement: whose voice is it anyway?

Imagine the council has asked you to represent the views of your constituents in the following situations. How would you seek views in these situations and who would you speak to?

Gathering user views on a pilot scheme of recently-introduced wheeled bins for the recycling of home compost.

Identifying how well local leisure services are meeting the needs of the community.

Identifying what support there is for a local skateboard park for young people.

Consider the answers you have given above. How many times have you actually consulted people in this way? How often do you give your thoughts on people's likely views without taking the trouble to canvas their opinions?

Communicating and influencing

Understanding fully the nature and needs of your ward and making the effort to truly represent local people should provide you with a strong mandate for action. For example, you can:

- Speak with confidence on behalf of your community when issues affecting your ward are debated or decisions need to be taken.
- Assess whether there is general satisfaction with council services - and those of other partner agencies - in the ward and whether local people believe they are getting best value from the money being spent.
- Support community action and promote self-help among your constituents by understanding their aims, aspirations, views and tactics.
- Promote partnership working between statutory bodies, private sector firms and civil society organisations in response to community needs.

For many people, it is this satisfaction of acting on behalf of their local community that encourages them to become an elected councillor. But the biggest challenge for ward councillors is often in getting the council or an outside body to take local views into account when making decisions – a challenge that will require you to develop your communication and influencing skills.

In influencing decision makers you will need to use your skills and judgement, but should always adhere to the following ground rules:

- Prepare for meetings by studying the agenda and making sure you are properly informed and fully prepared about the issues to be discussed. Do not 'hijack' a meeting and raise issues that are pertinent to you but irrelevant to the debate.
- Play an active part in the debate and form sound conclusions based on what is best for the community – and then abide by any majority decisions.
- Ensure, with other councillors, that the council's deliberations and decision-making procedures are properly managed – be robust in your scrutiny.
- Represent the whole electorate and not just those who voted for you; listen, and then represent the views of the community when discussing council business and working with outside bodies.
- Maintain proper standards of ethical behaviour as an elected representative of the people.



Key influencing skills

- Social skills – the ability to interact successfully with other people in most given situations.
- Information skills – the ability to have data relevant to the debate, knowing what the issue is and understanding the context in which it occurs.
- Judgement – an ability to assess all aspects of the information content and social skills experience in communicating with people.

Another key feature of your communicating and influencing role is the impact that you have in the local media. In a democracy the media is a vital mechanism for ensuring that the transparency of local political decision-making and for holding councils and elected councillors to account. There is a generally held assumption that local government gets a 'bad press', but evidence suggests that local media, in particular, are willing to present local government in a positive light, if handled in the right way.

Some councils have protocols governing the issuing of press releases and speaking to the local media – if you are not sure whether your council has such procedures you should check before taking any action.

At the end of the day local press, television and radio journalists want a story to cover. These may often be the main source of information on local government for both interested and disinterested citizens and you will need to use your communication and influencing skills to ensure that a balanced and accurate account is given to the media in the first instance.



Some tips for handling the media

Don't respond to press calls out of the blue – ask for the context and deadline first.

Identify key messages and good, punchy quotations that can be presented.

Don't blame, complain or consistently say 'no comment' – you may get a reputation.

Build a long-term relationship, eg write features and suggest news stories.

Don't use jargon, council-speak or inflammatory words – they're likely to backfire.

Act quickly and have a consistent approach – be honest, concise and helpful.



Consultation ideas

- **Surveys** – can be paper-based or sent by email.
- **Focus groups** – get a selection of people together to debate an issue.
- **Roadshows** – take your campaign out in the ward and ask for views.
- **Newsletters** – produce a local newsletter and ask for feedback.
- **Blogging** – share your thoughts and invite responses.

Managing casework

Some councillors find casework the best part of being a councillor – the opportunity to sort out problems for people who find the council ‘an impossible nightmare’. For other councillors casework is the impossible nightmare.

Your casework can come from a variety of sources:

- letters, telephone calls, e-mails and social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.)
- surgeries, advice sessions and doorstep calls
- campaigning and other political activity.

A specific and complementary workbook in this series on Handling Casework can provide you with detailed guidance on how best to manage the casework you receive. In summary, the general steps you will need to consider are:

- Identifying what the problem is – establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. Identify whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past. Avoid promising to sort out every problem, but do offer a sympathetic ear at all times.

- Referring the problem to the appropriate council department – you may want to put your concern in writing to a council officer, although most councillors find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or e-mail is quicker and easier in sorting out casework problems. Get in the habit of taking copies of all correspondence.
- Providing feedback – after you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.
- Considering the wider issues – reflect on the issues raised by the casework and let your co-councillors know. A number of similar concerns raised with councillors may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. Where you have had a success, it is worth letting your fellow ward councillors know in case they face a similar situation. Always try and publicise your success to local residents through leaflets and newsletters.



“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...”

Councillor Barry Coppinger, Middlesbrough Council, 2011

Dealing with casework will require you to develop your own simple, but effective, ways of managing both the information and paper flow. Good note-keeping and diary management will help, as well as an efficient filing system. It is also worth reviewing your casework files from time to time to enable you to monitor and assess your own performance.

The amount of casework you receive will clearly depend on the nature of the ward you represent, although research has suggested that the higher the level of deprivation in an area, the more casework there is likely to be.

Casework – some examples

Direct query - a neighbour asks if you could find out what progress has been made in processing her application for a renovation grant.

Indirect query - a daughter, ringing up on behalf of her frail, elderly parent, asks if her mother is entitled to claim council tax benefit.

Complaint - a local housing tenant e-mails you to complain about the repeated vandalism to her council property.

Service request - a shopkeeper asks if you could arrange for an extra trade waste collection at his premises.

Community issue - a group of parents lobby you to prompt the council to remove a burnt out vehicle from a nearby park.

Source: Handling Casework, Councillor Workbook, LGA, 2012.



Monitoring your casework

How many people contacted you with problems in the last year?

Who were these people – gender, ethnicity, age, class, employment status?

How did people contact you?

How many cases were you able to resolve satisfactorily and how does this compare with previous years?

What was the profile of the problem, e.g. housing, planning, benefits etc?

How does your casework load and type compare to that of other members?

Do your answers to the questions above suggest any improvements you could make?



Exercise 6 – are you being served?

Consider the following examples of casework. Write down the steps you would take to resolve the issues presented:

A council tenant complaining about the noise, bad language, music, banging and car repair 'business' being conducted by the new tenants next door.

A neighbour of a wheelchair-bound resident complaining that the recently introduced recycling service is not taking into account the needs of such residents who have to rely on neighbours to help them out.

Is this typical of the casework you face? How often do you review your casework performance? Are you sure that the number of problems brought to you adequately reflects the issues and concerns that individuals may have in the area?

Final summary

No one has a more crucial role than the ward councillor in ensuring that local democracy works and is believed in by residents.

You are the lynchpin between the community and the council. It has often been said that the job of an elected councillor is not to be the council's advocate in the community, but to be the community's advocate in the council. While this is true, the role of an effective ward councillor stretches much further than simple advocacy as this workbook has tried to demonstrate.



“If part of the challenge in creating local society is to empower communities and individuals with a sense of civic pride for their place, local councillors are in an excellent position to be the enablers of this. There is a need to build this capacity of councillors locally, place by place for local societies to be stronger and to fundamentally shift the relationship between the citizen and the state. A large part of this is councils making the shift from communication to communities, to conversations with communities and councillors are central to this...”

Joe Simpson, Director of Politics and Partnerships, LG Leadership, 2011



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 to improve your effectiveness as a ward member, 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, e.g. further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix

Sources of further information and support

Printed publications

Councillor's Guide (2011/12), Local Government Group, 2011.

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

Useful websites

www.info4local.gov.uk

Provides an online, one-stop gateway for local authorities to get quick and easy access to local government-related information that is published on the web sites of central government departments and agencies.

www.local.gov.uk and www.idea.gov.uk

The Local Government Association's websites are invaluable sources of help and advice for all those in local government and contains guidance and case studies on all aspects of the councillor role.

www.upmystreet.com

Type in the relevant postcode for a wealth of social and economic information by neighbourhood.



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