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# Being a councillor

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# Being a Councillor

## Getting Started

The Councillor's Guide is an introduction to the world of local government. It covers the main themes new councillors need to know about. Whether you have a few hours to spare (that won't last long!) or just 10 minutes, you can dip into this guide to find information about the key areas in which you will become involved.

This chapter sets the scene for your role as a councillor and has been written with the newly elected member in mind.

## The world of local government

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 structure for elections.

## Elections

Councillors are elected for a four-year term unless they are elected at a by-election, in which case they must stand again at the next election.

County councils are divided into electoral divisions, with one county councillor representing each division. Elections are held once every four years for all the seats on the council.



## Councillor's viewpoint

Councillor Darren Hughes, Rotherham MBC



Being elected for the first time and becoming a councillor is nothing like you'd expect. Remember being asked to stand and told you will only need to attend one or two meetings a month? Well initially it's quite a shock! On election night after being told I'd been elected everything else was quite a blur.

A mixture of euphoria and fear at not knowing what I'd let myself in for.

All I remember is being asked to sign a form and smile for the cameras. You've gone from weeks of campaigning telling everyone what a good job you'll do, to the realisation that you've had no training or preparation for what will be expected of you.

This is where the member development team of our authority proved invaluable. The cross party group of councillors and officers had prepared a programme of events tailored to meet the needs of newly elected members that would explain the basics of the council and where to get advice and support. After completing the induction I felt less like a fish out of water and more like a fish in the sea.

Armed with this newfound knowledge I felt prepared to deal with my first council meeting. Although I had been told the basics I still found it quite formal. 'All stand for his worship the Mayor!!' cried the macebearer, requiring all the members of the council to stand on the Mayor's arrival and again on departure. I still had some doubts about what to expect or how to behave and lacked the experience to have a complete understanding of what was going on but nevertheless I managed to get through it.

Well, several council meetings later I've put numerous questions and motions successfully before the council. I've found my weekly surgeries in the community well attended, giving me lots to sink my teeth into. The combination of initial and ongoing training and experience means I can manage my casework affectively, have the practical skills I need to reach my potential whilst ensuring I can do the job properly and therefore deliver on the promises I made to the community when I stood for election a year ago.



Metropolitan districts are divided into wards, each usually represented by three councillors. One third of the seats – one per ward – are up for election each year in three years out of four.

New unitary authorities in England have a choice concerning the election cycle. The year in which councillors will have to face the electorate again will depend on when restructuring took place and

the method of election chosen by the council.

District councils in county and district structures are divided into wards and also have a choice concerning their election cycle. They may adopt either the metropolitan district system or all the seats in the council can be contested once every four years.

London boroughs are divided into wards and elections are held once every four years, but follow a different cycle from the rest of the country.

### **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 and will need to take advice on what actions they are able to take.

For example, the Local Government Act 2000 introduces a general power of ‘well-being’ in relation to economic, environmental and social issues. This has a significant impact on the community leadership roles of councils and councillors.

Statutes will not stop councillors making important policy decisions and there is often scope for discretion in individual cases.

Central government controls many of the activities of local government. Councils are bound by ministerial directives and regulations and many decisions councillors take require the approval of a government minister or civil servant. Many of the services they run are inspected and audited by the Audit Commission and other inspectorates.

Some of the decisions they 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.

## **Local government in England**

### **Recent changes**

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 recognised that local government in some areas faced challenges that made it harder for them to achieve strong leadership and clear accountability. As a result, the district councils in Cornwall, Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire and Wiltshire, and the district and county councils in Cheshire, were wound up and dissolved on 1 April 2009 and their functions, assets and liabilities transferred to new unitary councils.

### **Structures**

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.

Following restructuring, which came into effect in April 2009, England now 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 tourism – 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.
- 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.

### 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

## Regional support

### Regional improvement and efficiency partnerships

RIEPs are member-led networks of councils, fire authorities and other local services working together at a regional level. They coordinate and support improvement, innovation and efficiency work at a regional, and often at a sub-regional, level.

RIEPs help councils and their partners deliver their LAAs (local area agreements) by supporting them in their efforts to become more efficient, innovative and engaged with citizens.

Each of the nine English regions has a RIEP and they are funded by a £185million package for 2008-11 from the department of Communities and Local Government.

They were created following the publication of the NIES (national improvement and efficiency strategy), which recognised that ongoing improvement of local public services is best led by councils working in partnership with other public service providers.

Each RIEP supports the key themes within the strategy of efficiency, support for economic development, empowerment, innovation and ambitious LAAs. Each RIEP has a RIES (regional improvement and efficiency strategy) developed in consultation with authorities and partners in their region. Each RIES refers to the national priorities identified in the NIES and, crucially, sets out the improvement and efficiency priorities specific to the region.

RIEPs give feedback to regional and national stakeholders in a number of ways as well as publishing annual reports.

RIEPs are councillor-led partnerships of local authorities working together to support improvement in their regions. Each RIEP has developed robust governance structures involving councillors from the region. Councillors make key decisions about the allocation of RIEP resources and play a crucial role in championing and raising awareness of the work of the RIEP in their own authorities and further a field.

### more information and contacts in each region:

[www.idea.gov.uk/rieps](http://www.idea.gov.uk/rieps)

### Regional development agencies

The government created RDAs (regional development agencies) to co-ordinate economic regeneration strategies for each region. Each RDA has a board of 12 members



## Councillor's viewpoint

Councillor David Parsons CBE  
RIEPs

“ We should be rightly proud of our track record in delivering for our communities. Local government is the highest performing part of the public sector. However, I know all councillors recognise the need for continuous improvement in the delivery of excellent public services.

This is ever more important in a challenging environment, with tightening budgets, the need to accelerate efficiency savings and growing customer expectations. RIEPs are a key tool in helping you achieve this goal.

At the end of their first year, RIEPs are successfully supporting local authorities and their partners in delivering on LAA targets, facilitating collaboration and developing procurement tools to enhance efficiencies; sharing best practice across the region and offering support to councils to improve performance.

A flavour of their achievements to date:

- East Midlands RIEP supports the Midlands Highways Alliance, partnership of 10 authorities – with projected efficiencies of around £11million by 2011
- development of the London efficiency peer challenge to help councils assess how efficient they are and identify further savings
- creation of the West Midlands Regional Children's Forum coordinating children's services improvement across the region's partners.

Councils and their partners are best placed to drive improvement at the local level. However, RIEPs are only as effective as the councils that comprise them.

I strongly encourage you to speak to your RIEP lead member and get involved.



Councillor Parsons is chairman of the LGA Improvement Board, chair of the RIEP Member Forum (which comprises the lead elected member from each RIEP and lead members from the LGA), and Leader of Leicestershire County Council.

appointed by the Secretary of State. Three members are drawn from local government.

Additionally, each region has a regional assembly of councillors nominated by local authorities across the region.

There are also 10 government regional offices, staffed by civil servants. They act as the local representatives of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform.

They have a broad remit to work in partnership with local people and organisations to maximise the competitiveness, prosperity and quality of life in their regions.

## 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.

See the section on representing the ward.

### 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:



## Councillor's viewpoint

Councillor Richard Kemp, Liverpool City Council



I first got elected in 1974 but things haven't changed much. The first big brown envelopes start to arrive through the door and you are determined to read everything. The first meetings schedule comes through the post and you are determined to attend everything. The invites to church and community do's start to arrive and you are determined to go to everything. You are determined to hold two advice centres a week and, of course, you said that you would personally call at every home in the ward every year. – Then you have a heart attack!

The most important lesson that a new councillor must learn is that of time management. You must learn how to split your time between your councillor role and the other important ones in your life. The roles of being a family member, politician and employee are every bit as important and far more important in the long run.

So don't read everything – read those things that are important to your role in the council. Share work in your ward with your colleagues. There really is no need to attend everything. People know that you have another life as well. Split council work with party colleagues – 100 per cent attendance is not necessary for everything you are invited to. But make sure you go to everything when the Chief Whip says you should be there!

Pace your ward work. Be out and doing things when you can but you and your constituents must remember that this is not your full-time job.

Don't make it your full-time job. Too many people get enticed by the lure of the town hall and lose contact with everything else. You will be a better councillor if you keep a grip on reality and bring outside experience back to the town hall with you.

And if you can do all that come and tell me how you did it because I have never quite managed it myself!



- 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### Decision-making and 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. Traditionally, full council received recommendations from various committees, which it accepted, rejected or amended.

The Local Government Act 2000 changed this for most authorities, introducing a system that separated 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 and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, requires councils to adopt one of two political management arrangements, leader and cabinet executive or mayor and cabinet executive. District councils in areas where the population is less than 85,000 are able to continue with a modified committee system with a requirement for overview and scrutiny.

It means that a council's executive decision-making arrangements can come under one single party. The executive mayor or cabinet is responsible for:

- agreeing new policy and 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.

When a decision has been taken by an individual executive member or mayor, a record must also be kept and made public. All council meetings and committees are open to members of the public unless there are legal reasons to exclude them.

The Local Government Act 2000 included a number of mandatory provisions concerning the nature of cabinet meetings, the availability of information about them and the relationships between cabinets and overview and scrutiny committees.

A new category, 'key decisions', was identified. These are decisions 'which will involve significant expenditure or savings, or will have a substantial impact on all or significant parts of the authority'. In addition, 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 a potentially 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, removing 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 try to articulate 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.

### **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.

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.



### Top tips

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.

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. 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.

### Support for councillors

Councillors make many different types of decisions and recommendations that have far-reaching consequences for the communities they represent and on council staff. They also have a leadership role that requires them to engage with and advocate on behalf of local people.



## 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.

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.
- 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.

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:

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

IT (information technology) 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 own 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 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.

Other 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.



## Case study: Keeping in touch

The extent to which councillors can engage citizens through the web 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](http://www.councillor.info/sandwell/bpiper)

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 the 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.

## Member development and the charter

It is obviously important for councillors to keep up-to-date with developments and initiatives in the public arena and to improve their knowledge and skills through experience, 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. Sometimes these are run in partnership with the IDeA.

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.

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 IDeA offers development opportunities through its Leadership Academy programmes and Local Leadership Academy and information is on the IDeA website.



### Snapshot

The SEEMP (South East Employers Organisation) requires councils that are signed up to its 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.

When a local authority can demonstrate it has achieved the charter standard, a small, trained team of councillors and officers carries out an on-site assessment on behalf of SEEMP. If the council meets the standard it is awarded charter status.

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 IiP (Investors In People): '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.

### The charter

The Charter for Member Development and the underpinning good practice guidelines, developed by the IDeA and the nine regional

employers' organisations, helps councils build their councillors' skill and expertise.

All regions now have their own charters.

## Local Government Association

The LGA (Local Government Association) acts as the voice of the local government sector, advocating on the issues that matter most to councils. As part of the wider LGA Group the association works with councils to:

- lobby government for changes in policy and legislation
- build a strong and positive reputation for local government nationally and with the public
- support them and their partnerships to continuously improve and be innovative.

As a lobbying and campaigning organisation, the LGA's business is to change minds – the minds of citizens, councils, partners and government – and persuade them that everything it does, with and on behalf of councils, will improve the lives of citizens and communities. It does this by:

- working closely with member councils, ensuring that everything is grounded in their real experiences and reflects the issues that matter most to them
- campaigning for change in the areas that matter most to councils
- generating positive stories about local government in the national and specialist media and working to rebut negative stories
- initiating policy and debate about policy, based on the real experiences of councils and the communities they serve
- working with government to influence the legislative agenda and support a shared vision – and challenging them where it is right to do so

- maintaining a presence in Brussels to influence EU legislation and policy
  - commissioning research to provide evidence in support of LGA policy lines and to anticipate future developments that will impact on councils and the services they provide
  - delivering a comprehensive programme of conferences and events to enable members and member councils to engage in all aspects of our work and to keep them informed of new and forthcoming developments.
- [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

## The LGA Group

The LGA Group comprises the LGA, the Public Private Partnerships Programme, Local Government Employers, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Leadership Centre for Local Government, and the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services.

The individual partners have a distinct role and specific expertise. They work together to offer comprehensive, innovative and affordable programmes to help build local government capacity and address the challenge of improvement.

## 4ps (Public Private Partnerships Programme)

4ps is local government's project delivery specialist. 4ps has a significant and growing impact on the success of PFI, PPP and large-scale projects in the public sector, and its work has a direct impact on providing improved public services and infrastructure. It provides local

authorities with focused, intensive and comprehensive support to the development, procurement and implementation of projects. 4ps:

- works with local authorities to improve public services through partnerships by providing expert project advisory and transaction support and gateway reviews
  - facilitates the development of the local government PPP and PFI market by providing strategic and programme support to central government sponsoring departments and HM Treasury
  - helps improve the procurement of local government PFI and PPP schemes by developing practical know-how and guidance
  - builds local authority capacity to deliver large complex procurements and strategic partnerships
  - equips local authorities with strategic and governance skills to achieve key efficiency agenda and value-for-money targets.
- [www.4ps.gov.uk](http://www.4ps.gov.uk)

## LGE (Local Government Employers)

Local Government Employers works in partnership with local authorities, regional employers and other bodies, to lead and create solutions on pay, pensions and the employment contract, to ensure the provision of excellent and affordable local services.

LGE has three main goals, to:

- modernise the pay and conditions agreements in England and Wales to provide affordable, sustainable and flexible employment frameworks
- provide effective representation

for local authorities and other stakeholders seeking to modernise their pay and conditions agreements, pension schemes and the employment contract

- offer practical guidance and solutions on pay, pensions and the employment contract to local authorities and other stakeholders. LGE will create close connections and collaborations with local authorities, regional employers' organisations and other stakeholders.

[www.lge.gov.uk](http://www.lge.gov.uk)

### **IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency)**

Please see inside front cover

[www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)

### **Leadership Centre for Local Government**

#### **great leaders great places**

Great places require visionary leadership that paints a picture of the locality, inspiring and carrying with it the local residents' hopes and happiness.

Today's local leaders are at the heart of their communities – it is up to them to provide the imagination and inspiration to create a community out of a place.

The Leadership Centre supports local government leaders to create the future by enhancing the political process and building effective and efficient partnerships, improving the lives of local people.



### **Top tips: How the IDeA can help**

The IDeA, as a member of the LGA 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

Local Leadership Academy development modules for all councillors, covering a wide range of topics and provided in the council's own offices

the Leadership Academy for leading members and portfolio holders plus black and minority ethnic councillors and councillors under 35 years of age

support and advice on specific challenges and issues

councillor mentoring including ward walks with peers from other councils

personal development planning

seminars for new leaders, and for those who are chairing overview and scrutiny committees

dedicated pages for councillors on the IDeA website

Communities of Practice offer 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 IDeA website. This includes the National Member Development Community of Practice.

councillor workbooks – available from the National Member Development Community of Practice, on topics ranging from chairing skills, and community engagement to financial scrutiny, community safety and local area agreements.

Visit [www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do](http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do)

a range of toolkits and resources, including sample role profiles and leaflets to promote the role of the councillor is also available via the IDeA website.

Place is a contested space for local government leaders, so our work focuses on the unique realities of the people and relationships involved to help local government leaders and chief executives to lead beyond their authority – literally – so they can shape their places through engaging the voters.

[www.localleadership.gov.uk](http://www.localleadership.gov.uk)

### **LACORS (Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services)**

LACORS supports and promotes the work of local authority regulatory services throughout the United Kingdom. Its work covers a variety of council services, principally trading standards, food safety and hygiene, alcohol and public entertainment licensing, gambling reform, civil registration, health and safety at work, environmental protection in relation to land, air, water and noise pollution, private sector housing and animal health and welfare.

LACORS is currently scoping future support needs of councils for three new policy areas: emergency planning, environmental crime and taxi licensing.

It provides comprehensive policy advice, guidance and good practice to councils and partners through its website and email bulletins.

LACORS promotes initiatives that support the well-being agenda through effective regulatory service delivery. It is seeking to work with councillors and senior managers to help raise the profile of regulatory services, reflect

the important contribution they make to the local economy and quality of life of the communities they serve and help them drive improvement through quality service delivery.

[www.lacors.gov.uk](http://www.lacors.gov.uk)

A number of organisations also have more information about the topics covered in this chapter.

They are listed at the back of this guide.

