

2



Civic Life

30 Representing the ward

- 30.....People's champion
 - 30.....Representation
 - 31.....Services and contacts
 - 31.....Understanding the ward
 - 31.....Ward walk
 - 31.....Getting to know people
 - 33.....Working with other councillors
 - 33.....Parish and town councils
-

33 Community involvement

- 33.....Area offices
 - 33.....Community development officers
 - 33.....Area committees and community forums
 - 33.....Local campaigns
-

35 Surgeries and casework

- 35.....Surgeries
 - 35.....Premises and safety
 - 36.....Conflict
 - 36.....Feedback
-

38 Planning and fettered discretion

39 Standards and ethics

- 39.....General obligations
 - 39.....Disclosure of confidential information
-

40 Freedom of information

40 Data protection

41 Local government ombudsman

41 Strategy and policy

43 Finance and the budget

- 43.....Expenditure
- 46.....Income
- 46.....The budget
- 46.....The budget cycle

47 Overview and scrutiny

- 47.....Why does scrutiny matter?
- 47.....What is scrutiny?
- 47.....How can we get it right?

48 Performance and regulation

- 48.....Targets regime
- 48.....Performance indicators
- 49.....Local area agreements

49 Comprehensive area assessment

- 50.....Who's who in CAA?

50 Councillors and communications

- 51.....Who needs to know?
- 52.....Communications tools
- 52.....Local media
- 54.....Communications planning
- 54.....Writing press releases
- 55.....The council and the press

Civic life

Representing the ward

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

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

People's champion

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

Generally speaking, the wider their range of approaches to community contact, the more people councillors will reach.

In addition to representing individual voters, councillors should try to keep in touch with:

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

- groups that are differentiated by age such as the young and the elderly
- hard-to-reach groups, people with disabilities, members of under-represented minority ethnic communities and the silent majority who do not seek active community involvement.

Representation

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

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

will often be able to empower individuals or groups through: - listening carefully to the issues involved - providing relevant contacts in local government or other services - helping to develop a range of achievable solutions to problems - facilitating meetings, petitions, surveys and so on - offering an overview of a situation - encouraging negotiation and compromise between different groups

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

Services and contacts

Frequently, residents either don't know which organisation or which council department is responsible for a particular service – or don't know how to contact them. Councillors can make information like this available and easily accessible to their constituents and some produce and deliver short lists of key local contacts.

Understanding the ward

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

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

Ward walk

Councillors should go for a walk, cycle or drive around their ward or division – even if they have lived in the area for years – looking at roads, pavements, play areas, open spaces and other community facilities.

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

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

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

Getting to know people

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

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

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

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

Frontline councillors should also be aware of council property in the wards such as housing, leisure facilities, parks and open spaces, depots, libraries, community centres and so on. It is also worth knowing the main employers in the immediate area and whether a particular type of industry or business is a major employer of local people.

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

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

Working with other councillors

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

Councillors from the same political party, or fellow independents, are a valuable resource and may be able to agree a degree of workload sharing. Assuming they are not also newly elected, other councillors will already have a good idea of the main issues in the ward and should have contact with key groups and individuals.

They can show new councillors the ropes and introduce them to useful people, but all councillors need to develop their own perspective on things and not rely on the opinions of others.

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

Parish and town councils

Councillors should get to know the local parish or town councillors if such councils exist in their areas and attend some of their meetings, which often have a slot for public participation. They may also be able to help parish councillors access services in a higher authority.

Councillors representing the same area on different councils can work together to resolve local issues.

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

The NALC publishes its own guide.



Councillor's viewpoint: Ward walks

Councillors at Castle Point BC in Essex undertook a series of ward walks as part of an IDeA-led programme to improve the council's 'poor' CPA rating.

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

The member peers were great – they pointed out things I'd never even noticed before. We used to have a forum for residents to express their concerns, but ward visits really do give a much better picture of what local people want. At the forums the same people would come every time, wanting to raise the same issues.

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

David Marchant, the council's chief executive, decided to take part in the walk too. 'I wanted to take part so I could get to grips with some of the issues facing the council on the ground,' he says. 'However, the process really helped give me a better picture of the issues facing members and I've been able to take early action on some problems that were causing frustration.

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

David Logan, one of the member peers who took part, says: 'One of the great things about ward visits is that you get to see the physical environment up close. The environment always has a great effect on the psychology of the people who live there. Physical isolation is a common problem for many authorities, and it can lead to a parochial attitude that adversely affects corporate performance. In Castle Point's case I was very impressed by the members' local knowledge and their relationships with residents. The problem lay in their ability to get things done at a corporate level. This is often the case with ward walks – they expose corporate weakness in the council as a whole, rather than in individual councillors. They can give a much broader perspective on things than you would expect.'

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

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



Community involvement

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

Some have developed community involvement by:

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

See also chapter three

Area offices

Area offices are usually one-stop shops where people can register any matter they want the council to deal with. They help to co-ordinate local service delivery.

Residents may also be able to access services electronically, make payments and gather information at these offices.

Community development officers

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

Area committees and community forums

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

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

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

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

Local campaigns

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

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

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

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

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

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



Councillor's viewpoint: Campaigning for local people

Councillor David Winskill, London Borough of Haringey



I am one of the three Crouch End councillors. We represent very vocal, highly motivated, articulate residents who can get a campaign up and running on the Internet in 48 hours. I see my role as an enabling one. I help to inform my constituents to find out what is happening. I am working with them rather than leading them.

I have helped them to get the Victorian back alleys behind the shops in Crouch End cleaned up. They were used as toilets and for drug dealing. Getting the alleys cleaned up required a multi-agency approach, sitting down with lighting, refuse, and the parks departments and the local police.

Although we are in opposition, we are, however, united with other councillors on the future of the old Hornsey Town Hall, which is in my ward. Since I became a councillor in 2002, the future of the much-loved grade II listed building has been a high-profile issue around here.

There has been a campaign by local residents for the council to hand it over to a local trust. The local residents had to convince the controlling group that the town hall had fantastic potential to be used as a performing arts centre for the whole area.

I sat on the Town Hall Community Partnership Board which was set up to develop a new vision for the hall in partnership with council officers. It has come up with feasibility and design options, in conjunction with the architects, which ensures any development is in keeping with the historic and architectural significance of the site, and it has made plans for a trust to be set up to safeguard community interest in the site.

I've now handed over my role to another councillor with stronger business skills as we're trying to find a development partner. We need to find £15m to make the arts centre happen. In four and a half years I'm very proud that we've got this far. I believe that local residents and councillors have turned around the town hall's fortunes.

I got into local government by trying to moderate a supermarket and housing development. I set up HIPE – Hornsey Information and Planning Exchange. Lyn Featherstone, who is now our local MP, was heavily involved in the campaign as a local councillor and she asked me if I'd be interested in standing as a councillor.

I was working as a freelance communications consultant, but being a councillor takes over your life. It is the most rewarding thing that most people will ever do.

There are dark moments when there is too much to do and the world feels as if it is caving in. But then a little old lady says thank you for something you've done for her and she gives you a slice of cake and you know that you've succeeded in breaking the log jam somewhere in the bureaucracy. First published in *Frontline Councillor – how local politicians make a difference in their communities*, IDeA, 2007. Available at www.idea.gov.uk



Surgeries and casework

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

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

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

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

Surgeries

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

- meet their constituents
- solve people's problems
- gain support for their work and ideas
- discuss the impact of council policies on the area
- raise their profile

- be an effective advocate for the people and communities they represent.

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

Traditional surgeries

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

Advantages of a traditional surgery

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

Disadvantages

- the location of the surgery will be more convenient for some constituents than for others. Councillors can get around this to some extent by moving the location around the ward but this minimises the benefit of having a fixed time and place for the surgery

- only a small minority of constituents will come to a surgery so the time might be spent more effectively by getting out and meeting people.

Premises and safety

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

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

The building chosen should have lavatories, somewhere that could be used as a waiting room, an interview room and, perhaps, tea and coffee making facilities. Councillors wishing to use laptop computers may wish to check the availability of wired or wireless internet access.

Councillors must consider their own safety and shouldn't go to their surgeries alone. If they are not sharing the surgery with other councillors or agencies they should try to take someone who can act as a receptionist.

They should try to avoid rooms with only one exit and, if they do have such a room, should position themselves between the door and the table to avoid the risk of being trapped.

Street surgeries

One alternative to holding traditional surgeries is to run street surgeries, where the councillor knocks on doors to solicit casework. When conducting a street surgery it's useful to take someone to hold files and be prepared to act as a 'minder' if necessary.

Advantages of street surgeries

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

Disadvantages

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

Publicity for street surgeries

Councillors can obviously use all the communications discussed earlier but it's a good idea to send out a street letter too. By distributing leaflets a few days beforehand, they can tell people when they will be in the area. It can be helpful to mark streets

visited on a map to keep a geographical balance around the ward. Councillors shouldn't just turn up unannounced – people need time to formulate their thoughts.

Conflict

People who come to see councillors about serious or intractable problems are often stressed and may be angry. If someone becomes aggressive councillors should: offer whatever help and advice they can but not promise more than they can deliver just to calm people down. This will only make the situation worse in the long run.

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

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

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

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

Feedback

After you have made initial inquiries you should keep the constituent up-to-date with progress. They won't know what's going on unless they are told. key message Be an advocate but don't take it personally.

Seek to influence better decisions for your constituents, but know when to say 'no'. 'I understand and I'll discuss your case with the housing officer. I'll ring you next week to let you know what's happening.'

Councillors should avoid taking personal responsibility for a problem because the focus of blame or hostility will shift on to them. It's better for the constituent to feel that the councillor is working in partnership with them rather than as their agent.

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

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



Top tips: Managing casework

1. install a dedicated telephone land line or mobile

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

2. know the system – work the system

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

3. getting the balance right with casework

- 'It's the system'
- many cases will be about the 'system being wrong' or claims that it has been administered wrongly. You need to ask the right questions and make judgments about the rights and wrongs of a case
- use your advocacy skills – you can change someone's life for the better
- you could influence changes in policy and improvement in service delivery
- look for solutions, not someone to blame
- 'I know my rights!'
- some cases will be about constituents 'banging their heads against a brick wall' because they are not getting what they want. You will frequently discover that a policy decision or system is correct and has found against your constituent correctly – but they refuse to accept it
- be honest but firm about what you can and cannot do for your constituent.

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

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

Planning and fettered discretion

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

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

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

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

If a councillor is seen to have decided how to vote in advance of a planning meeting, either by their stated support for a particular outcome or by their participation in lobbying, they are said to have 'fettered their discretion' and should play no part in the decision on the application concerned. To avoid prejudicing their objectivity, councillors must have a full picture of the facts and will need to listen to opposing arguments.

They should consider the planning officers' comments and recommendations before making a decision. In practice this means councillors:



Snapshot: Nolan report principles

selflessness – holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends

integrity – holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties

objectivity – in carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit

accountability – holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office

openness – holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands

honesty – holders of public interest have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any arising conflicts in a way that protects the public interest

leadership – holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

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

For information on planning visit the Planning Advisory Service at www.pas.gov.uk



Snapshot: In touch

Chelmsford Borough Council keeps its councillors informed about what's going on via a specially designed portal called the Member's Zone

.....
information about the London Borough of Islington's four area committees is available through the Areas On Line section of the borough's website, which features discussion boards that gather opinions on local issues

.....
for South Norfolk District Council, getting closer to the people means connecting parish councils to the district and the county. Connecting them to the internet has provided community resources in more than 100 separate parishes

.....
consultation is a way of life for councils. Bristol City Council has made it easy for residents to find out what consultations are happening and how they influence council decisions

.....
Basildon District Council has encouraged its young citizens to design their own website through which to voice their opinions

.....
citizens in the London Borough of Camden can watch and listen to councillors in council meetings via live webcasting from the council chamber.

Standards and ethics

Confidence in local democracy is essential to an open and inclusive society. This can only be achieved when those serving their communities adhere to – and can be held accountable for – the high standards expected of them.

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

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

General obligations

Under the code of conduct, councillors must:

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

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

Disclosure of confidential information

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

- they have the consent of the person authorised to give it
- they are required by law to do so
- the disclosure is made to a third party for the purposes of obtaining professional advice provided that person agrees not to disclose the information to any other person
- the disclosure is reasonable and in the public interest, made in good faith and does not breach any reasonable requirements of the authority.

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

Councillors should not disclose confidential information on the assumption that the disclosure is in the public interest without first raising their concerns with the appropriate channels prior to making any disclosure.

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

more information:
www.standardsboard.gov.uk

Freedom of information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives people rights of access to the information held by councils and other public authorities. This should lead to better public understanding of how public authorities carry out their duties, why they make the decisions they do and how they spend public money.

The Act creates two principal obligations for councils, from which other obligations stem:

1. all councils must adopt and maintain a publication scheme, setting out details of information they will routinely make available, how the information can be obtained and whether there is any charge for it
2. all councils must comply with requests for the information they hold unless an exemption from disclosure applies. Councils

normally have a maximum of 20 working days to respond to a request but there are circumstances when this time limit can be extended.

more information:
www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk

Data protection

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

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

It is a complex subject and councillors seeking more information should visit the IDeA website or go to www.hmsso.gov.uk/acts to read the Act in full.

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

When holding and processing personal data about individuals in the course of council business, councillors are covered by the council's notification. If the data is to be used for other purposes – for political activity for example – councillors are required to notify the commissioner. Notification costs £35 a year.

Some councils have paid for notifications for all their councillors.

Councillors using personal data must keep it secure and misuse of data is a punishable offence. The council's notification will include details of the information it will make available to councillors. This encourages disclosure of information that councillors need to do their job properly.

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

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

- the data subject has given consent to the processing
- the processing is necessary for a contract
- the processing is necessary to protect the data subject's interests
- the processing is necessary – a) for the administration of justice, b) for the exercise of any functions conferred on any person by or under any enactment, and c) for the exercise of any other functions of a public nature exercised in the public interest by any person
- it is necessary for legitimate interests of the councillor or the data subject or if the Secretary of State makes a particular order.

more information:
www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk



Snapshot:

Data protection – key principles

Personal data must be:

processed fairly and lawfully and at least one of the conditions in Schedules Two or Three of the Act must also be met

obtained for one or more specified and lawful purposes and must not be used in other ways

adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purpose or purposes for which they are used

accurate and, where necessary, kept up-to-date

kept for no longer than is necessary for the purpose or purposes it was obtained

processed in accordance with the rights of data subjects.

Local government ombudsman

The LGO's (Local Government Ombudsman) main role is to investigate complaints from the public about the administrative actions of councils and some other bodies, including school admissions appeal panels. It is a free service. The LGO's job is to investigate complaints in a fair and independent way – they do not take sides.

Constituents may ask their councillors for help in making complaints. Councils will have their own systems for handling complaints, and will want to resolve

them locally if possible. But, if a constituent is not satisfied with a council's response, they may ask a councillor what to do next.

Whether councillors agree with the complaints or not, they should tell constituents how to complain to the LGO. If asked to do so, councillors can refer the complaints on behalf of their constituents, and the LGO value's the councillors' comments on the matter.

The LGO does not regulate councils or overturn properly taken council decisions. Its job is to examine the administrative processes involved and, where things have gone wrong, obtain redress for members of the public who have suffered injustice as a result. Where they find flaws, they also ask councils to review procedures to avoid similar complaints arising. In this way, complaints to the Ombudsman can help a council improve its services.

more information:

www.lgo.org.uk

Strategy and policy

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

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

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

Strategies should explain how the council intends to achieve its vision.

Policies should explain the actions that will be taken in different circumstances to do this.

Councillors are at the heart of this.

They determine what the council should be trying to achieve and are ultimately responsible for making it happen.

The executive – or cabinet – is responsible for developing strategy and for the overall policy approach of the council. In district councils that have adopted fourth option structures, this responsibility may rest with full Council or be delegated to a policy committee.

Frontline councillors also contribute to the development of strategy and corresponding policy through their involvement in overview and scrutiny.

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

Councils usually do this by forming LSPs (local strategic partnerships) with other local bodies to help develop and implement the strategy. In areas with significant deprivation, councils must establish LSPs to tackle neighbourhood renewal.

LSPs provide a mechanism for ensuring councils and other public bodies adopt a common and co-ordinated approach to meeting local needs. Councils' leadership role through LSPs has been enhanced by the introduction of LAAs (local area agreements).



Case study: The ombudsman

The Local Government Ombudsman can consider complaints about most council activities. Here are examples of a few common types of complaint:

Housing benefit

Mr W, a private tenant, made a claim for housing benefit and council tax benefit. The council took six months longer than it should have done to make a decision on the claim. In the meantime Mr W had to borrow money from friends and family to pay his rent. After the LGO took up his complaint, the council paid the benefit due, apologised for the delay, and paid him compensation of £150.

Housing repairs

Mr R complained that the council had failed to repair a leaking drainpipe outside his flat that had caused damage to his internal decorations and some of his possessions. It had not compensated him and had ignored his complaints. The council carried out the repair; paid compensation of £300 for the delay in carrying out the repair; paid £300 towards the cost of washing, repairing or replacing Mr R's damaged possessions and gave him a decoration allowance so that he could redecorate the affected room. It also reviewed the way it monitored complaints and their outcome.

Council tax

Ms Y set up a standing order to pay her council tax. As there was no council tax reference number on the standing order form, payments she made were not allocated to her account. Although the council realised the mistake early on, and Ms Y provided proof of payment several times, it took six years for the council to resolve the problem. In the meantime the council continued to take legal action against her for money she did not owe. The LGO asked the council to pay Ms Y £1,800 compensation for the many summonses, liability orders and bailiffs letters she had received and for her efforts in pursuing her complaint over a long period. The council also agreed to make changes to its system for dealing with missing payments.

Planning applications

Ms A complained about a planning application for a development of three houses behind her home. She said that they would have an unacceptable impact on her property. The LGO found that the council had failed to notify Ms A and so she did not have a chance to object. But, in granting permission, the LGO found that the planning committee had properly considered the likely effect of the proposed development on neighbouring properties and had visited the site. The LGO's view was that, even if Ms A had been given the chance to make her objections known, it was unlikely to have made a difference to the decision. The council apologised to Ms A for its error and updated its records to make sure that the same problem did not occur again. The LGO decided that the council had done enough to put matters right and did not ask for any compensation.

Through the LAAs, councils, their partners and central government agree targets – achieving a balance between national and local priorities – and how resources may be used more flexibly to achieve common objectives. See chapter three.

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

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

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

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

Councils should have a rigorous approach to policy development, with competing options fully evaluated on the basis of robust evidence, before decisions are finalised.

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

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

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

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

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

It is insufficient to simply develop and approve strategies and policies. They need to be implemented with vigour. Councillors need to check that action is being taken and the desired results are being achieved through performance monitoring.

If they are not, they should consider what else needs to be done and performance-manage delivery.

more information:
IDeA website

Finance and the budget

The revenue and capital budgets of a local authority represent two of the ways in which councillors can make their policies and strategies come alive. For both revenue and capital, income is received from a variety of sources and spent on services that benefit local people, but each is subject to different rules.

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

New councillors will usually join the council after the revenue and capital budgets for the year have been agreed but there is a

role for councillors in their first year in monitoring the budgets and ensuring they are spent on delivering the council's policies and strategies.

Revenue and capital budgets cover all the resources of the council – money, employees, services, assets and so on.

Budgets are among the many tools councillors have for carrying out the policies of the council. The starting point is for councils to look closely at what they are trying to do. The budget process concerns choices that may be:

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

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

Expenditure

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

Capital expenditure is money spent on the:

- acquisition, reclamation, enhancement or laying out of land
- acquisition, construction, preparation, enhancement or replacement of roads, buildings and other structures



Case study: Finance – what does it mean?

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

Asset Rentals: See Capital Charges.

Business Rates: Business rates are collected by the council from local business premises and paid over to the national pool. This is redistributed to all authorities on a population basis.

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

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

Capital Expenditure: Expenditure on capital assets.

Capital Receipts: Receipts from the sale of capital assets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Floor Damping Block: In order to give every authority a minimum grant increase, grant increases to other authorities in the same class are scaled back to bring all authorities up to the appropriate floor increase. For example, for 2009/10 this is 1.75 per cent for authorities responsible for children's services and social care

General Fund: The fund to which all the council's revenue expenditure is charged. The Housing Revenue Account is a 'ring fenced' part of the General Fund. Net expenditure on the General Fund is met from the Council Tax and the Government's Formula Grant.

Housing Revenue Account: A statutory account that deals with matters relating to council housing, the cost of which is borne by the tenants and government subsidy.

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

National Non Domestic Rates: See Business Rates.

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

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

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

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

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

- acquisition, installation or replacement of movable or unmovable plant, machinery, apparatus, vehicles and vessels.

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

Income

Most revenue comes from:

- general government grant, which councils can spend as they wish as long as the expenditure is lawful
- area based grant, which is not ring-fenced and which is in support of the goals agreed by the council and partners in its Local area agreement
- specific government grants, some of which, such as the Dedicated Schools Grant, are ring fenced, that must be spent for the purpose they are given
- charges the council sets for some of the services it provides, like leisure facilities
- council tax
- business rates that are set nationally, collected locally, but then redistributed by central government to councils as part of formula grant.

Formula grant

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

Formula Grant is based on the idea of equalisation, that is, taking account of relative spending needs and the resources that can be raised locally.

Councils with particularly high needs or a low tax base receive more in central support than councils with relatively lower needs or a larger tax base. However, in practice this is limited by damping rules.

A government- determined formula decides how much each council receives from these grants.

Capital grant

Capital income comes principally from capital grants, support for local authority borrowing and sales of assets.

Central government

Central government plans public spending on a three- year basis. From 1998 to 2007 this was reviewed every two years.

Comprehensive Spending Review of 2007 determined the amounts of public spending for the financial years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

The sum total of grants to local authorities is known as Total Aggregate External Finance. In 2009/10 this will be £73.1bn, rising to £76.7bn in 2010/11.

The budget

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

after taking advice from relevant officers. The council must be clear about what it is trying to do. It must have a broad strategy that sets down what it is trying to achieve.

The budget enables councillors to:

- review spending priorities
- monitor actual spending
- control spending by service departments and budget holders
- enable redirection of resources
- plan ahead.
- Budgets can also be used to:
 - identify gaps in provision
 - forecast future demands
 - identify financial options.

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

The budget cycle

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

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

- planning and setting the budget – what does the council want to achieve?
- scrutinising the proposed budget – does the budget comply with the policies of the council?
- monitoring the budget throughout the year – is the budget over or under-spent?
- reviewing the budget – did the budgets allocated achieve the desired type and level of service?

The revenue budget and the council tax level must be approved by a statutory date. For county councils, fire and police authorities and the Greater London Authority this is 1 March each year. For district councils, unitary authorities and Metropolitan and London boroughs it is 11 March each year.

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

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

Overview and scrutiny

Overview and scrutiny in local government is an essential part of the councillor's role as a representative of the people. The majority of councillors have been engaged in overview and scrutiny since councils changed their system of governance following the Local Government Act 2000 (fourth option councils retained the old governance structures).

The overview and scrutiny function is a statutory power and a duty. It enables non-executive councillors to hold the executive to account and requires them to review policies and services on behalf of the public.

Recent legislation has begun the process of extending overview and scrutiny's remit to take account of public service performance across an area, not just that

of the Council. It is the most effective way for councillors to examine the executive and all those who are responsible for the delivery of services – to fulfil the council's responsibility for ensuring community well-being.

Why does scrutiny matter?

Good local government is connected government. Council policy and the provision of public services must reflect the needs of citizens and councils have community-planning processes to ensure the priorities of the council reflect the priorities of the wider local community.

Scrutiny matters because it provides checks and balances on the decisions and actions of the executive. Increasingly, it also provides public assurance and accountability for decision-making and service delivery that is undertaken in partnership with other public bodies through, for example, a local strategic partnership.

At a time when fewer and fewer councillors are executive members, the majority who fulfil the scrutiny function should be supported in making an effective contribution, learning from good practice elsewhere.

Scrutiny also matters because it can assess the performance and delivery of services from the perspective of citizens – and provide a direct way for members of the public to voice their comments and concerns.

What is scrutiny?

Scrutiny is the mechanism by which public accountability is exercised. Councils and other public bodies make decisions on behalf of the public and spend public money. They make decisions about the future management of public services such as health, education and transport that affect the daily lives of local people.

Public scrutiny is what representation really means: holding executives to account for decisions taken on behalf of the public and in the public interest – and, of course, playing a part developing policy and evaluating the council's and its partners' long term plans.

How can we get it right?

The Centre for Public Scrutiny has adopted the slogan 'better scrutiny for better government' and suggests four principles for effective scrutiny:

- scrutiny should provide a 'critical friend' challenge to executives as well as external authorities and agencies. This raises questions for party political groupings, although politics is not necessarily a bad thing in scrutiny. Opposition groups should neither oppose for the sake of it nor should party loyalties prevent constructive scrutiny.



Snapshot: Finance

BIDS (Business Improvement Districts)

This scheme empowers councils and local businesses in an area to work together to establish a BIDS scheme that agrees an addition to the business rate. The funds generated by BIDS are available to spend on agreed items within the area generating the funds.

LABGI (Local Authority Business Growth Incentive)

This scheme enables councils to retain some of the proceeds from growth in non-domestic taxes to reward economic development activities.

Efficiency

During the 2004 Spending Review period, covering the financial years 2004-05 to 2007-08 inclusive, councils in England were required to submit Annual Efficiency Statements to report their progress on the achievement of efficiency gains. Since 2008/09, councils now report this through NI179 (National Indicator 179), as part of the new NIS (National Indicator Set).

- scrutiny should reflect the voices and concerns of the people and communities as users of public services as well as electors.
- scrutiny should take the lead and own the scrutiny process

on behalf of the public and it is vital that councillors act as champions for the value and potential of effective scrutiny, actively promoting its status and credibility throughout the organisation and among external organisation.

- scrutiny should make an impact on the delivery of public services – to do this effectively, councillors should develop an understanding of scrutiny's position within the corporate planning cycle, timing interventions to have maximum impact on key decisions such as budget setting and service planning.

Scrutiny also plays an important role in assuring the quality of services by monitoring performance management systems, questioning the appropriateness of targets and the adequacy of resources. New legislation has given scrutiny a specific role to challenge and monitor local improvement targets that are negotiated as part of a Local area agreement.

Councillors involved in scrutiny do not make decisions but do have a powerful political tool that can be used effectively for the public good. If their conclusions are robust and evidence based, they provide a prima facie reason for recommendations to be implemented.

more information:
www.cfps.org.uk

Performance and regulation

A new performance framework for monitoring and regulating local government has been implemented through the Local Government

and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and various pieces of guidance.

Key elements of the new framework include:

- a new targets regime of PSAs (public service agreements)
- a national indicator set of 198 performance indicators
- LAAs (local area agreements)
- the new CAA (comprehensive area assessment), including proposals for local government sector-led challenge and support of improvement.

Targets regime

In the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007, the Government announced 30 PSAs. These are cross-government national priority outcomes to be achieved in the spending review period of 2008–11. These national priority areas form the basis of up to 35 targets to be agreed by central government – through government offices – and local areas through LAAs.

There are also 16 DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) statutory targets. Local areas also set their own local targets as well, when drawing up local area agreements.

Performance indicators

A single set of 198 national indicators was announced as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007.

The Government promised that the national indicators will:

- be the only measures on which central government will performance manage outcomes



Snapshot: Scrutiny at work

some local authorities allow members of the public to invoke the 'call-in' procedure, whereby the executive can be required to reconsider its decision on the matter in hand. In one instance this has led to the final decision being amended as a result of public intervention

.....
some maintain pools of local co-optees who take part in the work of their scrutiny and select committees. These additional members are usually provided with training and support, and given access to IT facilities to maximise their ability to participate

.....
local authority overview and scrutiny committees have made important contributions to self-assessment

.....
in some local authorities, scrutiny committee chairs delegate responsibility for specific pieces of work to other committee members, to ensure skills and interests are being actively engaged.

delivered by local government working alone or in partnership

- replace all other existing sets of indicators including best value performance indicators and performance assessment framework indicators
- be reported by all areas from April 2008.

The 2007 Act also removed the requirement to undertake best value reviews and collect and publish best value performance indicators. The duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way councils function remains.

Local area agreements

An LAA is a three-year agreement between a local area and central government. The LAA describes how local priorities will be met by delivering local solutions. It also contributes to national priorities set out by the Government.

LAAs have replaced the multiple national performance frameworks under which local authorities previously operated.

The new arrangements are based on a stronger role for local authorities to lead their communities, shape their areas and, with other local service providers, to innovate and respond to local needs.

For more on LAAs see chapter three.

Comprehensive area assessment

A new way of assessing the future risks and prospects for local areas, and the performance of councils and other public bodies, was introduced in April 2009. Previously, a process known as comprehensive performance assessment was used to gauge how well a council was doing. Now, CAA (comprehensive area assessment) has been brought in to assess the performance of a council and its partner organisations.

CAA will assess whether these partnerships are achieving their aims for their area. It will focus on:

- joint working between councils and their partners in delivering the area's local priorities, including the LAA (local area agreement) and sustainable community strategies
- how the quality of people's lives is improved.

Local public organisations will be collectively accountable for the outcomes they deliver for an area. CAA will consider how partnerships are working to address challenges facing communities and deliver better outcomes. It will seek to highlight best practice and innovation, but also identify any barriers to improvement.

CAA will also provide information to local people about their local services. This is intended to increase their awareness of the services available to them and empower them to make better decisions and get value for money.

CAA will consist of two assessments: area assessment and organisational assessment.

Area assessment

Area assessment will assess the extent to which councils and their partners are delivering improvements on the issues that matter to people within the local area. It will consider whether the priorities set in the area reflect those of the people who live there. Area assessment will also look at how effectively the improvements are being delivered, and will assess the future prospects for improvement.



Case study: Nottingham: how the city council could better support the LSP

In 2004, the Nottingham LSP (local strategic partnership) had been having problems. The board suspended itself and a 'fresh start' process commenced.

One of the overview and scrutiny committees had started a review of partnership work and it prioritised looking at how the city council could better support the LSP.

The members wanted to identify how scrutiny could make a positive contribution to improvement. This included looking at how it could improve the involvement of various stakeholders including the voluntary sector.

Witnesses with whom this was discussed included the Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service, a representative from the Liverpool LSP, the leader of the council, the deputy chief executive, and a representative from the Government Office for the East Midlands.

Recommendations were made on strengthening the council's role, clearer communication from the LSP, improved definition of the priorities of the partnership, and performance management.

After a positive response to the report from the leader of the council, the report went to the new LSP board, which agreed to take forward many of the recommendations. The work helped councillors to understand the LSP better and helped the council see where to target resources.

First published in *A Wider Conversation – effective scrutiny of local strategic partnerships*, Jo Dungey, IDeA/LGIU, 2007. Copies are available via the IDeA website.

Organisational assessment

Organisational assessment will focus on the individual public bodies within an area, to make sure they are accountable for quality and impact. It will involve two assessments: managing performance, and use of resources – managing finances, governing the business and managing resources.

Who's who in CAA?

Seven inspectorates have been working in partnership to develop CAA. These are:

- Audit Commission
- Commission for Social Care Inspection
- Healthcare Commission
- HM Inspectorate of Constabulary

- HM Inspectorate of Prisons
- HM Inspectorate of Probation
- Office for Standards in Education.

Through CAA, these partners will make a joint assessment of the outcomes for people in local areas and the future prospects of sustainable improvement for those areas.

The first set of CAA results is due to be published in November 2009.

Councillors and communications

Modern communications for councils and councillors increasingly reflect the approaches taken by commercial organisations.

This means that everything a council or councillor does is believed to affect the way the public perceives them. Some call it PR or reputation management, some call it marcoms, an abbreviation of marketing communications, and some call it corporate branding.

Whatever the name, it means that the council's and councillors' reputations will be affected by citizens' perceptions of just about everything including:

- delivery of key services
- media coverage
- responding to citizens' needs
- civic signage
- maintenance of civic sites and buildings

- litter and graffiti
- safety on the streets
- low crime rates
- good healthcare, education and transport
- sport and entertainment facilities
- flourishing neighbourhoods
- their place in the community

... and so on.

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

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

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

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

Strict guidelines set out the roles and responsibilities of council press

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

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

The code of practice for local government publications is at www.communities.gov.uk

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

Who needs to know?

The different groups councillors need to communicate with include:

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

Different audiences may need to be approached and addressed in different ways. For example, if there is a major change in housing policy, the things staff will need to know will be different from the information the media will be interested in.

This is known as taking a different angle on a story, but it doesn't mean changing the facts.

Similarly, some councillors will be communicating with audiences whose first language is not English, so they will have to consider translating their messages into different languages and using different vehicles of communication.



Top tips: Support

The IDeA and LGA have developed guidance to assist partnerships in developing a self evaluation of their locality:

- locality self evaluation guidance for partnerships is available on the IDeA website
- the IDeA also offers a range of support for councils, including peer support. There is a network of regional associates that act as the first point of contact locally
- the Policy and Performance Community of Practice can be joined via the IDeA website.

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

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

Communications tools

Email

Councillors use email to share information directly with residents interested in a particular issue, leaders of community organisations and groups of residents who have set up a newsgroup or email list.

Email is direct and two-way and allows councillors to be seen to be in touch, share information and offer support to local people.

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

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

Websites

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

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

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

Weblogs

Weblogs, or blogs, are becoming increasingly popular with councillors as simple, cheap and effective means of communicating with their audiences. A blog is a personal online journal that looks like a website. People usually publish them as diaries and newsletters and visitors are able to comment on each entry.

The blog address should be on all printed and electronic communications.

Social websites

Social websites are increasingly popular and if councillors decide to communicate via sites such as YouTube or Facebook they should make a clear distinction between their personal and civic lives. Some sites allow visitors to add or edit text so entries need to be monitored on a regular basis.

Newsletters

Councillors should get to know the local community newsletters and contact their editors to see whether they would be willing to publish contributions, either on a regular or an occasional basis.

As long as a column is used to let people know what's going on locally and the content is kept free of party politics, many editors will be happy to help.

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

Councillors should talk to the lead officer if they think they have items worthy of inclusion. It's worth bearing in mind that these publications represent the council as a whole and invariably report on council policy, proposals, activity and results, so individual Frontline councillors are unlikely to get regular exposure.

Many councillors produce and deliver their own newsletters to update people about their work on local issues. Their political party, if they belong to one, may also produce regular communications.

These days, newsletters are published in printed form, as emails, on web pages or blogs, and as internet downloads.

Local media

It is well worth making contact with the local media and getting in touch before there is a story for them, arranging a time to meet key reporters.



Hot topic: self evaluation of your area

The IDeA and the Local Government Association worked closely with 14 LSPs (local strategic partnerships) to develop a new approach to locality self-evaluation. Each undertook a locality self-evaluation for their area. The approach is supported by the inspectorates and developed within the overall context of CAA. Most importantly, it is an improvement tool in its own right.. Over two phases of trialling, 14 councils tested and helped to develop the final approach.

They say: 'CAA will draw as far as possible on the information used by the council and its partners to manage performance and deliver improvements set out in the local area agreement and sustainable community strategies. This should minimise the administrative burden imposed by CAA and will make optimum use of self-evaluation.'

The main purpose of locality self-evaluation is to facilitate a shared assessment of:

- local needs and the translation of these into local priorities
- the extent of improvements and outcomes achieved
- what gaps need to be addressed and future improvement planning.

This should allow the partnership to take stock and take action where necessary to ensure it is on course to achieving outcomes for local citizens. It should also provide a framework for external challenge by inspectorates to assess the risks to delivery.

The 14 councils that took part in the trial are:

- Barking and Dagenham
- Buckinghamshire
- Enfield
- Hambleton
- Malvern Hills
- Richmond upon Thames
- Rotherham
- Salford
- St Helens
- Stockport
- Suffolk
- Sunderland
- Trafford
- Wirral

Their case studies can be found on the IDeA website.

The golden rule is to get to know them before you need them, and build up a trust so that you can talk confidently both on and off the record.

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

- on the record – the journalist can report and quote what an individual is saying and may attribute it to them by name
- off the record – the journalist may not report what they are being told although it may indirectly help them put a story into context. If the same information is repeated by another source, on the record, they may report it but must not name the original source
- attributable – the journalist names the source of the information or quote
- non-attributable – the journalist may use the information or quote but cannot name the source.

The media usually attribute this information to 'insiders' or 'friends'. Make sure the journalist concerned understands the basis on which you are talking and If in doubt, say nothing.

Councillors who have a good relationship with the local media find that the reporters come to them for news and views. They should be honest and forthright about the council's successes and failures and make a point of contacting journalists when newsworthy items come up.

This way, councillors will come to be viewed as valuable and credible sources of news.

Communications planning

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

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

They know because the organisations tell them.

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

These plans can be very simple – just a few notes on the calendar will serve to remind councillors what to do and when.

They can update local media diaries via news editors on a monthly basis and schedule the production of newsletters and other materials, allowing time for design and print.

Good communications reflect achievement and signal intent.

Writing press releases

Councillors should make sure news releases contain news. The fact that they have spoken on issues at council is not generally enough. Human interest and topical local

stories are usually welcome but councillors should always check before they pass constituents' details to the press.

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

Press releases can be mailed in printed form, posted to a website or blog, or emailed.

Floppy discs and similar data storage devices are rarely used these days, although data sticks remain popular. CDs and DVDs are used when large amounts of data are concerned and are useful for archiving casework and other important activities.

A good press release will concentrate on:

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

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

If councillors are not confident about their writing skills it is better to send a series of bullet points setting out the facts rather than a rambling piece of prose.



Top tips:

Creating a successful blog

make sure your text can be read easily, avoid jazzy backgrounds or coloured text on a coloured background

keep it simple and keep your entries short

update your blog as regularly as possible and at the very least once a week – there's nothing more likely to stop people reading your blog than stale information

use plain English but consider creating a version in a different language too

publicise your blog – include your web address on your business card, email.

Useful sites

- www.blogger.com
- www.typepad.com
- www.sixapart.com/movabletype
- www.pcmag.com

Launched by the Local Government Association, www.councillor.info shows councillors how to manage their blogs and there is more on blogs on the IDeA website too.

If councillors study the media they can see how they present their stories – the editorial style, tone of voice and so on – and learn how to present information in the same way.



Councillor's viewpoint: Getting the message across

Councillor Julie Morris Epsom and Ewell Borough Council



It may seem easier to represent your residents when your party is in control but there is plenty that can be done for them in opposition. When you challenge majority party policies, you have to make sure that your arguments are clear and truly representative of residents' views.

Keep residents up-to-date on issues that may affect them and let them know you are at their service. The methods we use to keep our residents informed and engaged are tried and tested. We publish a regular newsletter, liaise with the local press, keep our website up- to-date, and hold surgeries and consultations.

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

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

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



www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk

The leader of their political group will probably appreciate a copy of a release or briefing on any interview that has taken place. When journalists follow up a story they are likely to call other people to support the points expressed or criticise them. It is therefore well worth letting fellow councillors, officers, or members of outside organisations who might be called, know what is going on.

more information:

The IDeA website contains more information on communications for councils and councillors.

It includes:

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

Experienced press officers write several versions of a press release to reflect the editorial stances of different media.

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

The council and the press

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

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

Some councils have protocols governing the issue of press releases. Councillors should check whether their authorities have them and follow them if they do.



Snapshot: Communities of practice for local government

Social networking sites such as Facebook feature heavily in the news with their focus on communicating regularly in a shared online environment. The IDeA's CoPs (communities of practice) collaboration platform offers a similar resource, but with a clear professional perspective and range of additional advantages.

This resource, as well as being free of charge, provides a secure environment for its members to share experiences, ideas and solutions. It also acts as a workspace to store and share documents and the means of finding others doing similar work or with similar concerns.

John Hayes, the IDeA's director of services, describes it as: 'A local government networking club with more than 28,000 members, expanding so rapidly that around 80 new people sign up every day. 'Imagine a resource that offers a 24-hour policy and reference library, along with instant access to best practice from around the country. Imagine being able to access all this at the click of a mouse without having to leave your desk, and you have the IDeA's CoPs.' According to Councillor Sally Newton of Hertfordshire County Council: 'The content is good and informative and has helped confirm that my council is on a similar track.'

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

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

There are active members working across a diverse range of communities, from customer service to community cohesion. There has also been a series of online conferences run on the communities of practice platform, including the national councillor online conference – adult social care, specifically for councillors to discuss adult social care issues, and councillors connected: the social media online conference. These online conferences – or 'copferences' – work as normal conferences, with speakers, discussion, questions, and answers, but operate within the online environment, thus being more convenient, and saving time and money.

Many of these are run by local authorities, such as Kent and Daventry; others by national organisations such as the Department for Work and Pensions; and a number are specifically aimed at councillors, including neighbourhoods – the role of frontline councillors, and the national member development community, which has more than 350 registered users.

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

'The national member development community provides members with a unique resource, including a series of councillor work books aimed at specific councillors,' says Chas Leslie, facilitator of the community. 'It gives them a secure environment where they can discuss their development and councillor needs.'

To join more than 200 elected members and have the choice of more than 700 communities that cover relevant local government issues, go to **www.communities.idea.gov.uk** Membership is free.



Top tips: Forms of address

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

Councillors who feel uncomfortable 'kow-towing' to another person should bear in mind that both are usually representing their organisations or institutions and not acting in a personal capacity. Using the correct form of address is a matter of mutual respect between holders of office and not a statement of inferiority or superiority. Councillors will also find this information useful when briefing local residents. On formal occasions, Councillors will address each other as 'Councillor'.

Royal Family

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

On presentation to The Queen, the correct formal address is 'Your Majesty' and subsequently 'Ma'am'. For male members of the Royal Family the same rules apply, with the title used in the first instance being 'Your Royal Highness' and subsequently 'Sir'.

For other female members of the Royal Family the first address is conventionally 'Your Royal Highness' followed by 'Ma'am' in later conversation

The Mayor and Mayoress

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

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

If it is the host who is making the speech he would refer to the Mayor first in the preamble unless a member of the Royal Family is present when he would start for example: 'Your Royal Highness, Mr Mayor, My Lords...' If it is not the host speaking he should be referred to by his title, such as 'Mr Chairman', immediately before 'Mr Mayor'.

Unless in the Chair, the Mayor should be seated on the immediate right of the Chairman or host at any local function. The Mayoress should be addressed as Madam Mayoress. It is not necessary to refer to her specifically in the preamble to a speech although she might be mentioned during the speech when she is referred to as 'the Mayoress'. If the Deputy Mayor is present without the Mayor and is representing him he has the same precedence as the Mayor would have if he were present.

On a day-to-day basis, councillors will form relationships inside and outside the council and be on familiar first name terms with people from all walks of life. Common sense will dictate when formal or informal forms of address are appropriate. Councillors wishing to find out more about forms of address and protocol should visit www.chinet.com, which describes how to address everyone from a Duke to a Dowager Duchess, and has links to other websites.

