

# local leadership academy

An abstract graphic consisting of several white, curved, parallel lines that sweep across the lower half of the page. The lines are set against a solid green background. The lines vary in thickness and are arranged in a way that suggests movement and flow, starting from the left and curving towards the right.

handling casework

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# foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgment about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that will enable you to handle your casework more effectively.

For members who are new to local government, the workbook provides essential guidance on the nature of casework and some tried and tested methods for handling the queries, problems and challenges presented to you by your constituents.

The workbook can be used as a stand-alone learning aid or as an adjunct to other material you may cover. It offers few firm rules for members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to use and develop their influencing skills, based on individual preference and confidence. As such, the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

In practical terms, the document will take between two to three hours to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach in influencing other people - how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

# introduction

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the role of an effective ward member. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



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



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



**case studies** – these are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by members elsewhere to illustrate how others have tackled casework.



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



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

# handling casework

## what is casework?

Dealing with the people in your community, understanding the issues and concerns they face, and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action in response to their queries, is an important and valued role for any ward member. The problems and issues local people raise with members are often referred to as 'casework'.

Casework can 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 an individual problem.

## where does your casework come from?

Casework will often be picked up by members through their day to day activities as an elected representative of the area, i.e. through letters, telephone calls, e-mails and door knocking. The period before, during and after an election is likely to be a particularly popular time for people to raise issues or concerns.

The amount of casework you receive can vary considerably and it is probably true to say that the higher the level of deprivation in your area, the more casework you are likely to face. But if the casework in your in-tray is consistently sparse, ask yourself the crucial question – is this because you represent a very self-sufficient community, or is it because your profile is too low?

It may be that you need to do more than just sitting back waiting for the casework to come to you.

‘Never, ever think casework does not matter. You can make a huge difference to the quality of life for local people by doing it well. It would be one of the few things I would miss if I was not a councillor’.  
**Councillor Paul Sample,**  
**Wiltshire County Council**

### casework – some examples

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

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

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

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

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

## ? your recent casework

Think about the nature of any casework you have dealt with in recent months. Briefly describe any examples you can think of under the headings below and summarise any action you took to tackle the queries or concerns raised:

Direct query

Action taken

Indirect query

Action taken

Complaint

Action taken

Service request

Action taken

Community Issue

Action taken

Reflect on the examples you have given. Do you feel comfortable that you did everything you could to resolve these matters? To what extent were your constituents satisfied with your help and advice? Have you made any efforts to check whether the matters raised affect other local people who may not have approached you for help?

## raising your profile – prompting others to get in touch

Raising your profile is not just about being honest enough to admit that many people in your ward will not know who you are and may be even less likely to recognise that you are their local member.

Taking steps to make yourself known, and available, to local people should help you to ensure that the bulk of the casework you deal with represents the issues of greatest concern to local constituents.

It is likely that you will have tried some of the more traditional ways of raising your profile in the community, e.g. media and press coverage, meetings with community groups, posters or leaflet drops. But are you also using, or considering, other, more interactive, approaches to prompt others to get in touch? For example:

**Advice surgeries** – these enable you to meet constituents, discuss their concerns and build an understanding of what can be done to tackle the issues raised. In a traditional advice surgery, members advertise a time and place when they will be available to speak to constituents, e.g. perhaps a couple of hours on a Saturday in a local library or village hall. An alternative is to run a street surgery, where members knock on doors to solicit casework. Both approaches require careful planning and good advertising to ensure that opportunities for engaging with local people are maximised.

The IDeA's publication, 'A Councillor's Guide', can provide you with detailed guidance on setting up and advertising advice surgeries and the comparative benefits of using both the traditional and street surgery approach. If you are not already using them, surgeries can be an effective way to raise your profile and generate casework.

✦ 'Deliver regular ward newsletters telling people what you have been up to locally. Provide a form that allows them to tell you what they think is important. Make it easy for people to contact you. Give out your e-mail address and telephone number on leaflets and newsletters.

Run regular surgeries to build up your reputation - and don't give up if at first hardly anyone comes. It will take a while for people to realise that you are there, willing to help and can be effective'

**Councillor Judi Billing,  
North Hertfordshire District  
Council**

**Blogging** – a weblog, or ‘blog’, is an online journal, updated on a regular basis, like a diary. Visually it looks just like a website, but usually has a simpler design and fewer pages. A growing number of ward members are now using blogs to publish reports of their activities on the web and to solicit responses from their constituents via e-mail and online surveys. Blogging can help to prompt local people to raise issues of concern and can enable others to give their views on any matters identified.

The use of information and communications technology can also assist members by enabling constituents to send electronic documents and photographic evidence relevant to some casework situations, e.g. it is not uncommon for constituents to send members digital photographs of potholes in the road or community sites that have been blighted by vandalism.

While blogging and e-mailing may not be every member’s preferred route for generating casework, it is likely that some people who might be unwilling or unable to attend an advice surgery may prefer the ease and comfort of corresponding with their ward member from their own home and at a time that suits them.

The IDeA’s website ([www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)) can provide you with guidance on how to set up your own weblog and contains some good case study examples of members who have tried this approach to raise their profile and generate casework.

As community leaders, ward members must do what they can to represent the voices of all sections of the community. This may include championing the interests of people who often find it difficult or uncomfortable to articulate their issues or concerns, e.g. some younger, older or disabled citizens or some people from minority ethnic groups. A proportion of your casework is therefore likely to be concerned with ‘speaking for the unheard’.

But don’t imagine that everyone will want to come to you with their casework queries. While some people will want to engage with you and actively participate in a dialogue about their issues and concerns, others will be content to let you represent their interests or just keep them informed about what is going on locally. Much of this will depend on each person’s perception of ‘authority’ figures generally, and their receptiveness to direct engagement.

The participation matrix on the next page shows levels of participation that constituents like. For example, if one constituent has a high opinion of the councillor but is resistant to direct involvement then they will prefer to receive information about local issues rather than direct feedback. It is worth considering this when you are in your ward.


## blogging - High Peak Borough Council

‘I believe my website is helping to get things done only because they have been posted in the public eye...a recent example is a proposal of a pelican crossing on the High Street in East Glossop. By taking photos of the proposed area and offering photos of an alternative area where the local residents wanted it, I helped the local residents’ association get the crossing cancelled’

**Councillor Ivan Bell**

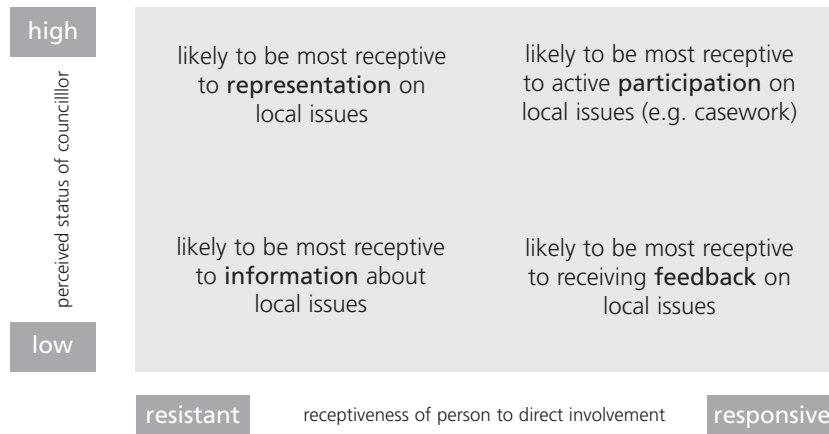
## Councillor Creasy’s blog

Councillor Stella Creasy from the London Borough of Waltham Forest has set up a weblog to allow people to comment on things that are going on and participate in discussions about issues of concern in the local area. She sees the blog as an extension of the other work she does in the community, such as public meetings and street surgeries. Her weblog can be viewed at: [www.leabridgelife.blogspot.com](http://www.leabridgelife.blogspot.com).

“  ‘Given that more than 50 per cent of UK households now have internet access, it is unacceptable that councillors fail to communicate with their electorate, by using the web’

**Councillor Stuart Bruce,  
Leeds City Council** ”

## the participation matrix



### ? responding to local voices

Imagine that a particular community of people in your ward has been very hostile about some plans to regenerate the area, fearing that their homes will be demolished as part of the process. You know this not to be the case, but cannot begin to convince them of the benefits of the regeneration plans because you are perceived to be 'part of the council'. Given that the community is reluctant to engage with you directly, what ideas do you have for raising the matter locally and trying to begin a dialogue on the pros and cons of the regeneration plans?

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

## dealing effectively with the casework you generate

Dealing with casework will require you to develop your own simple, but effective, ways of managing both the information and paper flow. If you have been a member for some time, you have probably developed systems for doing this by default, i.e. finding out, by trial and error, what works well for you and what doesn't.

Some councils have begun to explore the use of technology-based solutions to help members – so-called e-Casework systems. But a sensible use of the equipment you already have available in your home or office and an efficient paper-based record system will serve just as well. Good note-keeping and diary management are essential, as well as a good filing system.

For those members that like to make use of technology, spreadsheets and databases can help to store, search and retrieve details of individual cases, alongside the use of e-mail as an essential communication tool. It is also worth noting that many electoral rolls are now available electronically, offering you the possibility of being able to merge this information with a proprietary data management system to cut down on the time required to search for people's names and addresses.

### three top tips for dealing with casework

- install a dedicated telephone line - use an answering machine or service for calls outside of normal hours.
- use a simple form to capture the key facts about each case, i.e. names, addresses, contact details, casework history, others involved etc.
- make a record of all calls, conversations and action taken - it doesn't have to be onerous, a simple diary 'log' is usually sufficient.

### ? the casework challenge

*Think about the systems you employ for handling casework. Write down how you would find out the following information about the cases you have dealt with in the past year:*

The proportion of cases successfully resolved?

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The number of people under 30 that have contacted you with casework queries?

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*Look again at what you have written. Could you make any changes to the systems you employ to enable you to extract this and other useful information more readily?*

Whatever your preferred approach and regardless of the systems you employ, there will be a number of general steps that you will need to take in handling the casework you generate. These are discussed in the sections below:

**(a) Identify what the problem is** – you will need to establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. This will include identifying whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past. It is worth approaching each case with a degree of humility – some constituents with evidence of failure by 'the council' may see you as their last resort and some may be angry about the way they have been treated.

Avoid promising to sort out every problem, but do offer a sympathetic ear. While you can use your knowledge, contacts and advocacy skills to assist people, it is best to try and get people to help themselves. And keep the discussion focused on solutions and what can be done, rather than looking for scapegoats and people to blame. Your constituents will be looking for support, but they'll be looking for answers and solutions even more.

Understanding the nature and scale of the problem presented will often require you to use your judgement. Some people may try to use you or may avoid telling you everything you need to know. Before you can assist, you need to get all of the relevant facts and information.

### casework – dealing with anger

People who approach members about serious or intractable problems can often be stressed or angry. Remember:

- be polite and assertive but never aggressive - this will only increase the tension.
- don't promise more than you can deliver - this will create problems in the long run.
- avoid taking personal responsibility for a problem - the blame and hostility may shift on to you.
- approach the council if you need help or training in dealing with awkward customers.
- don't respond to racist, sexist or offensive remarks - draw the discussion to a close.



**(b) Refer the problem to the appropriate council department**

– having identified what the problem is, you should communicate with the council officers who handle members' enquiries or relevant service officers, if that is how your council operates. You may want to put your concerns or questions in writing, although most members find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or e-mail is quicker and easier in sorting out casework problems.

Remember also to give clear instructions to the council officers, either to write to your constituent with a copy for you, or to work through you. Don't leave them to decide which approach you favour. And remember to copy the constituent in on what you have sent to officers unless it is confidential.

Get in the habit of taking copies of all correspondence and treat your constituents' affairs with appropriate confidentiality, i.e. always ask permission before sharing their information or views with a third party and take steps to protect the information you store about them. If you are in any doubt about your legal responsibilities regarding data protection, speak to your council's legal department.

“ ✦ ‘The first time I had to deal with a lot of casework, I used my word processor to fire off hundreds of letters, each on a separate topic, to each of the various officers. Some of them, the highways department for example, received dozens of letters from me. It took me days to write all of the letters, and weeks for the officers to respond. A phone would have saved a lot of hard work.

The next time I stood for election, one of the departmental secretaries rang me to arrange a meeting for the day after the election. 'Just bring round all of the casework and we will go through it together,' she said. What a star!”

**Councillor Paul Sample,  
Wiltshire County Council** ”

## ? helping people to help themselves

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

Two older residents who have complained to you about the "inappropriate language" used by staff in their local library.

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A single mother, with literacy problems, who has come to you asking if you can help her to fill out various benefit claim forms from the council.

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An elderly resident who says he cannot afford to continue with his council tax payments and wants you to let the council know that "he would rather go to prison than pay up".

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Reflect on your answers to the cases above. Is there a risk that you are taking on too much personal responsibility in seeking to resolve these matters? To what extent are some of the issues raised outside of your control or influence?

**(c) Provide feedback** – after you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.

**(d) Consider the wider issues** – reflect on the issues raised by the casework and let your co-members know. A number of similar concerns raised with members may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. Where you have had a success, it is worth letting your fellow ward members know in case they face a similar situation. And always try and publicise your success to local residents through leaflets and newsletters.

Some of your casework queries should prompt you to think about 'the bigger picture', i.e. why problems have occurred in the first place, whether the issues presented by your constituents are just the 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of wider community concerns or whether the case is likely to affect other local people.

A good example might be a sudden increase in the numbers of people coming to you with complaints about housing benefits payments. It is possible that the four or five people you find yourself talking to have isolated and unrelated problems. But equally the cases may be symptomatic of a wider concern – the introduction of a new computer system perhaps, or a change in the rules surrounding benefit entitlement. Your efforts may be focused on tackling the symptoms of the difficulty, when you really need to be speaking to officers about the cause of the problem.

## ? seeing the bigger picture

*Look at the individual cases presented below and write down some of the potential 'big picture' issues that might underlie each:*

Four separate cases reported to you of wheeled bins not being emptied on one estate.

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A number of complaints about the long queue in the council's main reception area.

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A rise in the number of queries you have received about on-street parking by people commuting in from areas outside of the ward.

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*Look again at the examples above. How often do you think about the potential 'big picture' issues when you are dealing with your real casework queries?*

## monitoring your effectiveness

Periodically, it is always sensible to review your approach to casework and consider whether what you do could be improved. For example:

- ask your member colleagues how they tackle the information and paper flow and whether they have any good tips you haven't thought of;
- take a look at the 'Councillor Information' section of the IDeA's website ([www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)) to see what members in other councils are doing to improve their response to casework;
- ask your constituents for feedback on what they felt you did well in responding to their queries and anything you could do to improve;
- monitor a number of key facts and statistics about your casework to ensure that you are targeting the people that need the most help and are being effective in resolving as many queries as you can.

### monitoring your performance

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

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

How did people contact you?

How many cases were you able to resolve satisfactorily?

How does this compare with previous years?

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

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

# a final word

It may be that your periodic reviews will highlight weaknesses in your systems for recording and storing information which you can address. Perhaps it will flag concerns about the volume of cases you are dealing with, which should prompt you to think about ways of getting other members or officers to help you with some of the burden. Equally, the exercise might demonstrate how much of a difference you have made to people's lives through your casework interventions and underline the importance of being visible and accessible to local people as a ward member.

# next steps

## ? where do you go from here?

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

a. what key action points can you identify to improve your effectiveness as a ward member, i.e. what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

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b. have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, e.g. further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

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# appendix

## sources of further information

### printed publications

*A Councillor's Guide*, Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA).

*Community Leadership - What is it?*, Local Government Association (LGA).

*Now What? A Pocket Survival Guide for New Councillors*, Local Government Information Unit (LGIU).

### useful websites

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

The IDeA's website which is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government.

[www.statistics.gov.uk/neighbourhood](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/neighbourhood)

Website of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which provides ward profiles.

[www.upmystreet.com](http://www.upmystreet.com)

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







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