

The neighbourhood agenda and the role of the elected member by Jane Foot and Ines Newman

Key messages

In spite of the increasing complexity and significance of the role of non-executive or ward councillor, surprisingly little investment has been made in developing it. Yet the consistent message from research carried out is that ward councillors often do not have sufficient skills, knowledge or support to fulfil the potential of their role.

The recent focus on neighbourhood governance and management arrangements highlighted the importance of the role and the contribution made by ward councillors. This was confirmed by evaluations of neighbourhood arrangements, such as new deals for communities (NDCs) and neighbourhood management pathfinders.

The clearest exposition of the backbench councillors' role in these new arrangements can be found in 'Vibrant Local Leadership', published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in 2005. Two key roles are promoted in this document: the community advocate and the community leader.

Training and support should be designed to support the key tasks of the ward councillor active in the neighbourhood. These are:

- engaging with, and on behalf of, their communities, including community development, mediation, consultation and promoting cohesion
- influencing and communication
- service management, scrutiny and evaluation at the design, delivery and impact stages
- strategic and service planning to achieve outcomes
- negotiating and brokering
- partnership working
- monitoring and enforcement
- representation and casework

As neighbourhood devolution progresses, ward councillors increasingly take on responsibilities that mirror, in range if not scale, those of their colleagues on the executive or scrutiny. They should be offered access to existing leadership development programmes.

Ward councillors work in neighbourhoods alongside many other partners and activists. Joint support and training for all stakeholders in localised governance arrangements would clarify different roles and responsibilities.

Part one: current and recent thinking on the role of the ward councillor

Local Government Act 2000 – the new political arrangements

Under the 2000 Act, all councillors were meant to have powerful roles. These would be either acting together in the full council or as members of the executive, powerful overview and scrutiny committees (Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions, 1999).

The Government emphasised that members' representational roles should become more important. In practice, most attention was placed on the executive. Under the new arrangements non-executive councillors would spend less time in formal council meetings, enabling them to bring "a full knowledge of what their local communities need and want" to the council's decision making processes (Armstrong, 1999).

In essence, they were to take on the roles of community leadership, neighbourhood representation and effective communication between citizens and councils about local needs and priorities.

The evaluation of the new council constitutions has concluded that "to say that non-executive councillors often feel their role has changed and that they are excluded from the decision making or policy processes of the council, is in part simply to restate one of the purposes of the Act in a negative way. The aim was to enhance the role of the political leadership and as such to limit the day-to-day decision making influence of non-executive councillors" (ODPM 2004).

Area arrangements

The 2000 Act gave councils power to delegate to area committees any functions and decisions that do not adversely affect other areas or the whole council. Only councillors elected for the area covered can make decisions. Co-optees often sit on area committees but have no voting or decision making powers.

A Local Government Agency (LGA) survey in 2004 found that 26 per cent of local authorities in England and Wales had set up area committees. These mostly covered their whole council area. Urban areas – 58 per cent of metropolitans and 41 per cent of London boroughs – are more likely to have area committees than rural counties or district councils.

In addition to the formal area arrangements, there are also many non-statutory neighbourhood structures in which the ward councillor plays a role. For instance 54

per cent of authorities have area forums and 81 per cent of these are partnership bodies (LGA 2004).

Parish and town Councils

This is the first tier of local government, whose importance has been reinforced in both the Urban and Rural White Papers. There are 8,000 to 10,000 local councils in England and Wales with approximately 70,000 parish councillors. An IDeA census found that 26.2 per cent of councillors of principal authorities are also parish and town councillors.

The parish council model is changing as new urban groups see the potential of the right to levy a precept and to be consulted on planning issues. Bevan (2003) found about 170 new parish councils, mostly in traditional rural areas. The majority of the new ones in urban areas were the result of a deliberate decision to 'parish' the whole area as in Milton Keynes, or promote parishes as in Bradford.

The move to neighbourhoods

Several factors have given rise to a new emphasis on neighbourhood arrangements. These are the combined effects of localism and the devolution of decision making; the role of citizen engagement; and the need to target mainstream resources on 'narrowing the gap' between the most deprived wards and the rest.

Neighbourhoods are to be among those geographical spaces where services and agencies that impact on the quality of life are to be joined up. This is intended to counter the 'humpty dumpty effect' of central government silos (Audit Commission 2004). Carley (2005) identifies 200 neighbourhood management initiatives in England.

There is an extensive spectrum of partnership bodies with a neighbourhood dimension. These are most notably neighbourhood renewal boards and new deal for communities (NDC) boards. Neighbourhood Management models include policing, regeneration agencies, Sure Start partnerships and market town initiatives.

The Home Office is a particularly vocal advocate of neighbourhood working, with proposals covering community policing; anti-social behaviour; community cohesion; social capital; and civic engagement.

There is also a wealth of innovative models of local working for instance Brent Council's ward working model. In Brent ward councillors are given support to engage with their communities and develop ward plans that feed into the council's business plans.

Local:vision

The ODPM's five-year review 'Sustainable communities, people, places and prosperity' (January 2004) was accompanied by a policy paper 'The future of local government: developing a 10 year vision'. It was followed by three consultation papers on local government and a paper on local area agreements (LAAs).

'Vibrant local leadership'

This report sees effective local leadership as key to the vision of flourishing neighbourhoods. Ward councillors will play a "pivotal role" in relation to neighbourhood arrangements, as advocate and as leader.

'Citizen engagement and public services: why neighbourhoods matter'

This paper argues that neighbourhood governance can help secure improvements in public services and re-engage citizens with the institutions of government. The Government wants to see neighbourhood arrangements being adopted far more widely but has recognised that there can be no one-size-fits-all.

Whatever form is adopted, it must be "capable of making a real difference" by influencing service delivery through contracts or budgets. In addition, "existing democracy must be at the heart of neighbourhood arrangements". The Government is proposing a set of tools, for example a national framework and principles; neighbourhood charters; urban parishes; neighbourhood improvement districts; and powers for neighbourhood bodies over anti-social behaviour.

'Securing better outcomes: developing a new performance framework'

People should have more power to influence services and hold providers to account. This report recommends that both individuals and neighbourhoods should have powers to trigger improvements in delivery. It proposes more joining up between partner organisations; more accountability between organisations and more coordination of cross-sector performance as is being developed through local area agreements (LAAs).

This is a rapidly developing policy area. We can expect the new local governance White Paper in summer 2006 to include many radical proposals about the powers, role and potential of neighbourhood arrangements. It is likely there will be framework documents for neighbourhoods in the spring.

Typologies of neighbourhood governance:

Lowndes (Local and Regional Government Research Network 2005) suggests it is helpful to distinguish between four types of neighbourhood governance, which can exist simultaneously. These are neighbourhood government; neighbourhood partnerships; neighbourhood empowerment; and neighbourhood management.

Neighbourhood government

This is part of the existing representative democratic arrangements. Elected councillors have a formal role. Examples include parish and town councils, and area committees.

Neighbourhood partnerships

These bodies are made up of delegates from a range of partners. Councillors may represent the council, or act as champions of their community. Examples include the mini-local strategic partnerships in Birmingham and Wakefield.

Neighbourhood empowerment

The objective of this is consultative and participatory. When councillors participate, it is usually in their community leadership role, for example, new deal for communities' boards.

Neighbourhood management

These are officer-led arrangements; councillors are rarely directly involved, but may play an important influencing and championing role.

Each of the above has different implications for the role of ward councillors, and the type of skills and knowledge they need to be effective. Since they exist simultaneously there is often a problem reconciling different roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.

Part two: how is the role of ward councillors envisaged for the future, especially with regard to the neighbourhoods agenda

What roles?

The clearest exposition of the role of backbench councillors in the new arrangements can be found in 'Vibrant Leadership' (ODPM 2005). There are two key roles that are promoted: community advocate and community leader.

This role of the community advocate includes:

- speaking up for, and on behalf of, individuals and groups
- encouraging residents to engage and participate

- participating in plan making and planning decisions
- communicating residents' concerns to the council and to other providers eg the police

But in this role, councillors must "not lose sight of the strategic context for the council area as a whole".

This role of the community leader includes:

- stimulating local organisations and individuals to take up opportunities to express their views – the idea of voice
- representing local level concerns and perspectives
- maintaining a link between the users and the providers of services
- encouraging the community to organise for themselves
- working with other community leaders in the voluntary, community and business sectors
- offering vision and direction to local groups, and building support for that vision
- brokering agreements between different interests and partners
- contributing as an effective partner in neighbourhood arrangements, including those that deliver delegated functions

This list of activities and skills is similar to many descriptions of the council-level community leadership and advocacy role with partners, as well as regional and central government. Indeed, as the paper notes "the challenge for councillors seeking to lead their area is similar to the challenge for councils in terms of leading the entire locality". Leadership has to be both "shared and provided".

To emphasise this point, 'Vibrant Leadership' talks of neighbourhood or 'mini mayors', and of local councillors as the "mayoral" figure for their locality. The Young Foundation (2005) argues that the title 'mini mayor' could "lead us down the wrong path, unless we are genuinely considering turning individual councillors into the single authority for a ward with an executive-managerial leadership style". It argues for the term 'councillor-advocates'.

What issues? What tasks?

Local government research work on area committees and area forums (LGA 2004 and Wilkinson 2004) lists an enormous range of services, and decision making and budget responsibilities that different councils – working with different forms of

localised governance – have devolved. As new forms of neighbourhood governance emerge, new services and activities are affected.

There are many other proposals and initiatives that will change the face of local service delivery and neighbourhood governance, for example neighbourhood policing; co-location of services in schools or community centres; new children's centres etc.

Government proposals refer to a much narrower list of council functions that they think will benefit from devolution. The nature of that devolution may range from fully devolved budgets and management to localised management of a centrally provided service.

The list of council functions that the Government thinks will benefit from devolution is as follows:

- open spaces, parks and play and recreation facilities
- street services eg cleansing, traffic management, safety
- liveability agenda: clean, green and safe
- community safety and policing
- youth services
- planning at both a strategic and local level
- housing management, through tenant management organisations (TMOs), registered social landlords (RSLs) and arms-length management organisations (ALMOs)
- community facilities such as village halls, libraries, community centres
- influencing and managing neighbourhood renewal
- small grants budgets for community groups/activities

Many of those who have experimented with decentralisation would argue that some services on the list above should not be devolved. This is either because of cost savings or conflicts of interest (see Sullivan et al 2001 on the importance of making any service devolution consistent with the aims of the decentralisation strategy). In particular many believe that the planning function is best operated at local authority level; several local authorities have devolved planning only to centralise it again.

What tasks and responsibilities?

Two key points need to be made about the specific needs of ward councillors.

For most neighbourhood arrangements, ward councillors are sitting alongside other community leaders who are also expected to take on aspects of these roles and responsibilities. Joint support and training for all stakeholders in localised governance arrangements would ensure a common understanding and clarity about different roles and responsibilities.

As neighbourhood devolution progresses, ward councillors increasingly take on responsibilities that mirror, in range if not scale, those of their colleagues on the executive or scrutiny. Leadership – organisational, political and community – happens in all sorts of spaces not just in the executive or local strategic partnership.

Each of the key policy documents allocates a range of tasks and activities to ward councillors that neighbourhood governance will bring. Since there is no single model of neighbourhoods – and the ward councillors themselves will influence the local model – this section lists the most frequent key tasks and activities mentioned.

Community engagement

This is the key activity mentioned in all documents. The tasks reflect the full spectrum of engagement activities from consultation (eg from convening local meetings) to community development with local groups developing their own organisations and voice, and processes such as 'Planning for Real'. It goes beyond attending meetings and sitting on committees. It is a more pro-active and developmental role.

Community engagement includes bringing in other communities such as schools; local agencies; and retail and business communities who have a stake in the neighbourhood.

It means building the 'social capital' and neighbourhood identification that supports the accountability of neighbourhood structures.

It also entails challenging the representativeness, democracy and parochial tendencies of community groups. This means helping them to become inclusive of communities of interest, new communities and excluded or unpopular groups in the neighbourhood. It may not only be ward councillors who stand up for such values, but they should have the credibility and legitimacy to take the lead.

Communications

Ward councillors act as a conduit for information from the council to communities. They explain the context and rules of what is possible, and access the information

and data required for councils to engage. They alert local people to proposals, issues and policies that will affect them and signpost services and processes in the council and other partner organisations.

They also act as a conduit from communities to the council. They feedback on policy proposals about a local or specific impact; advise on tailoring services and responses to their neighbourhoods; represent the opinions, preferences and experiences of local groups and other stakeholders; and advise on council consultation and engagement exercises.

Mediation and conflict resolution, promoting cohesion

With many more voices and interests to be heard, the need for mediation between conflicting views and brokering a consensus becomes key. Ward councillors should aim to have the credibility and impartiality for this role. They will also be drawn into mediating and brokering between local people and failing providers, particularly when trigger enforcement processes are invoked.

Ward councillors have a key role in actively promoting cohesion and advising on the impact of council activities on community relations. They must influence the council or other partners on behalf of the neighbourhood.

This means mobilising data, evidence and stakeholders to influence the council and monitoring the impact of policies or new delivery models. It involves advocacy and representation in formal council settings (eg party meetings, full council, area committees, scrutiny sessions) and engaging with decision making mechanisms (eg budget allocations, service plans, best value or service reviews, and other local initiatives).

Ward councillors should engage with partnership bodies such as the local strategic partnership, or single-issue partnerships such as the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) as well as with regional and subregional bodies.

Strategic planning

The process of negotiating local plans is a key mechanism to express neighbourhood needs and to show how the different partners are, or could, deliver. These range from parish plans, market town action plans, neighbourhood plans and ward plans.

Local councillors are one mechanism to link such plans to the community strategy and to different partners' business arrangements.

Where the neighbourhood and ward councillors aspire to influence mainstream services, they will need to engage effectively with council-level mechanisms. These may include the development of local performance plans and corporate plans; best

value reviews and service planning; the community planning process; regional and subregional plans such as transport.

Negotiating and brokering service delivery and outcomes

The model of devolution being discussed is similar to the LAA or local public service agreement (LPSA) model. This is a negotiated devolution of resources specifically tied to agreed outcomes. The proposed neighbourhood contracts, community service agreements and mini LAAs are all similar in conception.

They will clearly be useful to ward councillors by:

forming part of the detailed development and negotiations of the agreement

- brokering and supporting voluntary and community contributions to the outcomes

brokering service providers' contributions to the outcomes

- monitoring performance against the agreement

working with other partners

- monitoring the council contribution to the agreement

Any evaluation of the second round of LAAs could look at the involvement of ward councillors and neighbourhood bodies. This would be wise after the mixed experience in the first round, where elected members were often not part of the negotiation process. Many felt that LAAs, far from encapsulating their leadership, threatened their democratic role in the community.

Management of delegated services, budgets and functions

Neighbourhood management arrangements that include councillors – either as a condition of delegation or in a leadership role – will require them to ensure effective management and budget accountability. They will be responsible for obligations such as the Standards Board framework, proper employment practice, and statutory responsibilities such as health and safety and promoting race equality. We have found no guidance for councillors sitting on neighbourhood or other partnerships about their responsibilities in relation to council duties.

Ward councillors will have power over community funds, and the management of community assets such as village halls, community centres, libraries and recreation facilities.

The enforcement role

Since the 2005 Labour Party manifesto there have been proposals to legislate for local people to have powers to “trigger action” in response to local service failures, through their neighbourhood arrangements.

The role of ward councillors varies. In ‘Why neighbourhoods matter’ it is suggested that local people “with the support of their ward councillors” have access to information about performance and the right to petition the council or other providers for changes and improvements.

The police reform policy paper ‘Building communities beating crime: triggering action’ (Home Office 2004) suggests that councillors could be given the right to trigger action when local communities have not been able to get an effective response to persistent crime or anti-social behaviour. It envisages actions at three levels: access to information; attendance at a meeting; and action by the relevant agency.

Neighbourhood bodies may be given formal powers in relation to such things as anti-social behaviour orders; fixed penalty notices for litter; graffiti or fly-posting; and involvement in alcohol licensing.

Scrutiny and performance monitoring

Neighbourhood enquiries, or neighbourhood scrutiny of council activities and investment in the area, could lead to changes in delivery and even a neighbourhood outcomes agreement. This could tie in with future rounds of LAAs.

Neighbourhood charters against agreed service standards will rely on data interpretation and performance monitoring activities.

Representing the council, particularly partnership working

Ward councillors may be selected to represent the council’s interests on neighbourhood partnerships or bodies eg regeneration body. Ward councillors might have to speak up for difficult decisions, which may be important strategically eg estate demolition or building new homes – but which are unlikely to command community support.

Constituency matters

This remains a significant role for local councillors in the eyes of the public. Surgeries, casework and advice require access to complex information and referral mechanisms.

Political party role

The overwhelming majority of councillors are also accountable to their political parties, and have to balance that with their community advocacy role.

The importance of context and structures

There are four ways in which context will influence the role and therefore the skills and support needed, of which organisational context is the most important.

Organisational context

Where the ward role is valued and supported by the council and its political structures, councillors are likely to be far more effective.

Research (see Local Government Information Unit 2005 forthcoming) has shown that a clear route for referring decisions between area structures, the executive and scrutiny arrangements is key to ensuring that ward work is fed effectively into the authority's decision making processes.

Research by Chris Leach (2003) indicates that establishing area forums dominated by local people facilitates the achievement of public inclusiveness but does not necessarily empower backbench councillors. In several authorities, area committees have been "totally ignored" by portfolio holders and non-executive councillors have lost their link to service departments. Area committees have therefore become little more than area surgeries, duplicating existing roles (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005).

Needham (2002) in her research of one large authority, found that the results of consultation exercises are primarily used by officers and the executive. This direct form of communication with local people can lead to the marginalisation of backbenchers. As councillors play a limited role in formal consultation exercises, backbenchers rely on the informal links that they forge with communities as ward representatives.

Authorities considering ward arrangements and the effective involvement of their non-executive councillors should plan for:

- links with the corporate centre and partnership bodies, ie overview and scrutiny, the executive and the LSP
- links with service departments, officers and performance management
- officer support and informal links and learning between area arrangements, the corporate centre and decision making structures

Spatial context

The neighbourhood role partly depends on the scale of the devolution. At present this ranges from constituency level in Birmingham – with many ward councillors and major budgets – to areas with up to 4000 households in the neighbourhood pathfinder schemes and one or two ward councillors. Some counties have hundreds of such small neighbourhoods. Roles will also differ where neighbourhoods have been associated with deprived areas, with the need to bid for and target resources to narrow the gap.

Governance tiers

In two-tier areas, the complexity of neighbourhood level arrangements is a serious strategic issue. For instance, usually a county has so-called neighbourhoods that coincide with districts. Usually there are both county and district LSPs eg Surrey and Warwickshire. Sometimes there are parishes represented on the LSPs but not always, and there are county associations of parishes (CALCs). The district council may have its own neighbourhood structure. The role of ward councillors, and at what level they are involved, can be even more complex. In addition some county councillors are also district councillors.

Increasingly three, and even four, tiers are becoming significant with the proposed spread of parishes, town and neighbourhoods structures at the localised end, and the implementation of regional and subregional bodies at strategic level. The role of ward councillors in relation to the regional and subregional bodies is worth consideration and development.

Political context

Where ward councillors are from the opposition party, or from the majority party but representing a different perspective, their role and motivations may differ. Whether the neighbourhood arrangements are set up as part of the council decision making, or just as a talking shop, will also impact on how councillors see their role in relation to the council.

Part three: what has been the experience of ward councillors in support of neighbourhoods

The non-executive role

It is clear from both evidence and anecdote that many councillors find themselves frustrated at being unable to carry out this role effectively. The experience of the changes arising from the new constitutions is varied.

Non-executive councillors complain that they feel isolated from decision making processes, lack access to information from the authority, have little contact with and minimal support from officers in the council, yet they need to represent their constituents and influence the work of the authority (LGA, 2001; JRF 2002; JRF, 2004). It is apparent that many elected members have felt disempowered.

Despite feeling disempowered, members are working with more complex partnership arrangements and with more emphasis on consultation of local residents. This has led to them spending more time on council duties.

"The role of non-executive councillor appears to also involve a considerable amount of time, with an average of over half of the hours in a working week devoted to council-related activities... If part of the aim of the Act was to make the job of non-executive councillor less time-consuming and more attractive to a wider range of people, it has yet to realise this potential.

"Some non-executive councillors still appear to have to commit a considerable amount of time to their task and of all the groups involved in local government non-executive councillors appear to be most dissatisfied with the operation of the new governance arrangements. A time-consuming but ineffective role is unlikely to be an attractive prospect for many." Stoker (2004)

Representative role

For non-executive councillors under the new arrangements, it was assumed that eliminating the traditional committee system would release time to develop their representative role and that this role could be strengthened. This view, according to Jones and Stewart (2005) underestimated the demands made by the overview and scrutiny roles. The representative role has also become more demanding in authorities that have set up area committees, many of them exercising executive functions.

The neglect of the neighbourhood or ward role

Government policy in the period up to 2004 neglected the ward councillor role. Significant attention has been focused on neighbourhood management on the one hand and on community engagement on the other. Both these agendas have failed to deal with the ward councillor role.

This neglect of the ward councillor role was soon picked up in the evaluation of government policy.

The evaluation of NDCs argued they were more effective where strong partnerships were forged with local authorities and recommended that effort was put into partnership building in the future (National Audit Office 2004, Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research 2004).

The most recent annual report argues that the local authority remains the most important agency with which an NDC has to engage. It indicates that the better relationships exist where there is high level representation of councillors on NDC boards.

The neighbourhood management Pathfinder programme national evaluation commented that "all pathfinders need to identify those councillors and officers who can act as champions".

All this led to a reassessment of the ward role.

"Non-executive councillors are having difficulty with the new structures, and more work is needed to help them find an effective role." Nick Raynsford on 30 November 2004.

Consistent messages about support and training

There is a striking consistency in the messages from the range of research that we reviewed.

'Neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion' (IDEA, LGIU, LGA 2005)

This recommended that most people involved in Neighbourhood Renewal need new skills, better knowledge of what works, willingness to reflect and learn. They list skills such as budgeting, evaluation, knowledge of what's effective and different ways of working as well as interpersonal skills such as influencing, can-do approach and innovation.

'Local authority members and partnership working' (JRF 2002) Mick Wilkinson and Gary Craig, Hull University, www.jrf.org.uk

While being very positive about the contribution of partnership working, they found a dearth of support. What is needed is training from a range of perspectives and sponsors. It should be innovative, flexible and user-friendly. It could include coaching and mentoring, peer reviews, exchanges, secondment and shadowing. There were particular skills and areas of advice highlighted such as managing conflicts of interest.

'Parish and Town Councils and Neighbourhood Governance' Ines Newman, LGIU, www.jrf.org.uk

The report argues for recognition of the potential of local structures, such as parish and town councils, to engage in strategic policy making. It calls for capacity building of both local councillors and ward councillors with greater clarity about their respective roles, and for more support for mediation, peer support, joint councillor development programmes and best practice information.

'A Local Voice?' Mick Wilkinson with Gary Craig , University of Hull Working Paper in Social Science and Policy No 13

This report identifies four areas of weaknesses including:

- the lack of a strategic approach to engaging members of the public
- the failure to engage ward councillors and members of the public directly in performance monitoring and best value reviews

'Mark Bevan (2003) New Parish and Town Councils in Urban Areas. JRF'

His research identified the need for capacity building for local parish councillors. The only resource he was able to point to was the 'Good councillors' guide' which is primarily an induction pack for newly elected parish councillors. (The IDeA have subsequently developed a course in 'chairmanship' skills with the National Training Agency).

'The LSPs' Evaluation Action Learning Set on Governance'

The report argues that "job descriptions, annual reports on councillor performance to constituents, performance appraisal systems and personal leadership by senior councillors all help".

Marilyn Taylor (2005) 'The role of councillors as community advocates' (Local and Regional Government Research)

Taylor's conclusion provides a useful summary of the points found in many literature sources.

" Based on this and whatever term is used to capture the councillor's 'community' role, training and skill development will be essential. Facilitation, listening, mediation and conflict resolution are particularly important skills for community engagement. Councillors need capacity building as well as communities, but it is often difficult to get busy councillors to recognise this and make a commitment to ongoing learning (as opposed to a one-off input which is likely to have limited impact).

"How can learning opportunities and access to them be maximised? Joint events where community participants and councillors are learning together and workshops where they are addressing issues together are one particularly effective way to increase mutual understanding. The national programmes discussed in 'Vibrant Local Leadership' should also include inputs from community participants, as well as training in the skills required for effective community participation."

Part four: what help and support is provided

We have noted that the majority of research and investment in capacity has been aimed at those in leadership positions. Following the definition of 'leadership' set out by Leach, Hartley, Lowndes, Wilson and Downe (JRF 2005), it can be argued that ward councillors exercise as much of a leadership role as those on the executive, albeit in a different space and context.

"Leadership is viewed in this study not as a set of individual skills alone, nor simply as a particular role in the local authority (eg leader, portfolio holder) but rather as a set of social processes of influencing and motivating individuals and groups, and of shaping goals and outcomes through influence, persuasion and negotiation. The work of Heifetz (1996, 2003) is valuable for its emphasis on leadership as an active process of working with individuals, groups, communities and organisations."

In the context of neighbourhood governance – of whatever level of formality and influence –councillors taking up their community leadership and advocacy roles at ward or neighbourhood level would benefit from the training in skills usually ascribed to executive councillors.

Skills for all elected members

There has been substantial thinking about the skills needs of elected members as a whole. 'Vibrant Local Leadership' (ODPM 2005) quotes the IDeA Skills Framework for Elected Members. This framework is intended for all elected councillors, with the three additional skills sets for executive councillors. It could easily be adapted to reflect the specific roles of ward councillors in neighbourhood governance. The IDeA has also published a 'Councillor guide 2005-06' that discusses councillors' roles and responsibilities as ward representatives and the importance of community leadership.

The Local Leadership Academy has a module on 'Effective ward working' under development that aims to cover what being an effective local councillor means; the skills effective councillors display; and good practice in dealing with casework. Benchmarks of effectiveness and best practice.

There are no best practice benchmarks developed to drive improvement. The Beacon Scheme has not selected a theme to do with democratic renewal and the role of councillors. However a theme 'Neighbourhood and community champions: the role of elected members' has been announced for 2007.

The Local Government Chronicle (LGC) now have an award called 'Supporting local democracy', sponsored by LGIU. This is focused on member development. MJ have a category called 'Community leadership' but no clear criteria.

Assessment and development frameworks

There are two main consultant supported developmental frameworks. These are LGIU's 'All members matter: a consultancy package enabling members to assess their own support needs', and the IdeA's 'Local community leadership fitness check', a consultancy supported package. This covers the non-executive role of "councillors as champions and advocates of the community they represent" based on the political skills framework.

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