

Ward councillors and community leadership: a future perspective

Findings
Informing change

November 2007

The role ward councillors should play in community leadership and strategic decision making has become a pressing issue for local authorities in the context of current policy and legislative changes. This study investigates how the role is likely to change in England over the next five years as neighbourhood working, legislative and policy changes impact on the role of local government.

Key points

- Many non-executive councillors feel distanced from council decision making and struggle to engage with local strategic partnerships and other structures set up to influence decisions about mainstream service allocation.
- Councillors had clear ideas about the 'ideal' ward councillor role and the changes needed to develop this role over the next five years.
- Members and officers identified a number of short-term issues that present challenges and potential obstacles to introducing new councillor roles. These hinge on the new skills and support councillors will need to make the transition to new ways of working.
- Councillors and officers acknowledged that developing an empowered role for ward councillors will require major changes to the way local authorities, political parties and communities work with elected members. These are long-term issues, many of which are dependent on changes to the culture of local authorities and local political groups.
- The researchers' primary policy recommendation is for the development of a Ward Councillor Compact, a voluntary two-way agreement between the council and elected members that would help to define the future role, and address issues about support, development, and performance standards.
- The Ward Councillor Compact would set out the council's commitment to provide minimum levels of support and training for members and the council's expectations of the ward councillor role, encouraging basic minimum standards of activity and performance in each of the dimensions and functions of the job.

The research

By The Young Foundation and the Local Government Information Unit, based on new qualitative data.

Introduction

The research explores how the role of ward councillors is changing today and how it is likely to develop over the next five years. It captures the views of current councillors about the skills and support they need to adapt to a new role, and the short- and long-term obstacles to change.

The future role of elected members has become a pressing issue in the context of current legislative and policy changes affecting local government. The Local Government White Paper, published in October 2006, makes a strong statement about the importance of ward councillors as local political and community leaders. It encourages local authorities to adopt a package of powers and responsibilities to empower councillors, including new opportunities to act on local issues and to influence mainstream service choices. The debate about the role of councillors in local decision making and neighbourhood working has been a welcome development for many elected members.

Aspirations for change

Many councillors feel distanced from decision making within councils and Local Strategic Partnerships, and disaffection with the 'backbench' councillor role is widely acknowledged. They identified six areas for change to the current ward councillor function, which reflect their desire to act as 'connectors' between communities and the council:

- 1 Community engagement:** councillors need to be more actively engaged with all parts of the community if they are to be effective leaders. They need to be empowered and supported to engage with residents and community groups using a range of different tools.
- 2 Advocacy:** councillors need to be able to speak freely and openly challenge the executive.
- 3 The political role:** councils need to acknowledge and value the political dimension of the role and not see this as a barrier to improving local services.
- 4 Local action:** councillors and community organisations want elected members to be able to tackle local issues directly, especially persistent problems concerning local public spaces such as fly-tipping, graffiti or unkempt parks and green spaces.
- 5 Influence:** councillors must have real opportunities to influence strategic decisions about how mainstream services are allocated spending, and at a point where

local priorities and intelligence can be fully reflected in how services are planned and delivered.

6 Local intelligence and information: members need more and better quality intelligence about local issues in order to make informed decisions and more effectively influence strategic decision making.

To fulfil this connecting role, councillors recognise the need for change in two directions: they need to be more proactive and community-focused, and at the same time have much stronger links to strategic service planning, particularly over decisions taken 'beyond' the ward that have a local impact.

Defining the future ward councillor role

Councillors identified six distinct dimensions of the 'ideal' future ward councillor role, which represent their aspirations for the role and the skills and attributes future members would need. These are:

- 1 Political representative:** the ability to connect with all parts of the community and represent everyone fairly, and to balance local concerns with the political demands of the group manifesto.
- 2 Community advocate:** be a skilled advocate for people from different backgrounds, cultures, and values; have the confidence to speak freely and challenge the executive.
- 3 Community leader:** exercise community development skills – support local projects and initiatives, and educate people about local participation; be a good communicator – explain what political decisions and structures mean to constituents and community organisations; be sensitive to difference and issues of diversity and equality; have knowledge and skills to engage people in a variety of ways (not just meetings); be a conflict broker.
- 4 Service transformer:** understand the complex business of local government and services provided both by the council and others; have the confidence and ability to hold service providers to account; be able to work in partnership with a range of agencies and interests; ability to understand local problems and use this knowledge locally and strategically in local action planning; setting and monitoring service standards.
- 5 Place shaper:** being a local figurehead/role-model that people feel they can turn to; be able to shape the very local environment – ability to identify priorities, work with officers and service providers to address public realm problems, manage delegated locality budgets.
- 6 Knowledge champion:** be the primary source of local intelligence flowing between the community and the council; have the skills to collect and analyse local information and use it to benefit the community

Obstacles to developing new roles

Councillors and officers acknowledged that developing an empowered role for ward councillors will require major changes to the way local authorities, political parties and communities work with elected members. Many of these changes are dependent on a cultural shift within local authorities and political parties towards valuing frontline aspects of councillors' work (such as community engagement and advocacy), and supporting them to operate in this capacity. These are long-term challenges that could take years, if not decades, to effect and must involve commitment from political parties, councils and communities.

In the short term, councillors recognised that they will have to develop different skills to make the transition to a more empowered role and will need new types of support to do this. Members and officers also agreed that councillor activity currently varies widely from place to place, according to the interests, political motivations and skills of individual councillors, pointing to the need for measures to ensure more consistent standards.

Short-term challenges

Councillors identified where support is needed:

1 Defining the future role: establishing a clear-cut definition of the future ward councillor role will be important if members are to take on new responsibilities. This research found that ambiguity about the current role causes confusion and tension with constituents and community groups. This is a particular problem in two- or three-tier areas, where there may be up to five elected members representing one area, and very little clarity about where responsibility and accountability for decision making lies. Interviewees discussed the value of creating a national definition or description of the future ward councillor role, reflecting the changes and skill sets earlier identified.

2 Skills, learning and development: councillors need more personalised training that takes into account specific local challenges, such as dealing with community conflict, understanding equalities, community cohesion issues, or new approaches to community engagement. Training needs to be more flexible to reflect time pressures councillors face.

3 Information: councillors need access to better quality intelligence about council business, service performance and local issues in order to make more informed decisions.

4 Officer support: councillors identified the importance of officer support in enabling them to respond rapidly to community concerns and to deal

with service improvement. However, access to officer support is currently limited.

5 Member support: councillors expressed serious concerns about their capacity to fulfil a more complex and demanding future role without better basic support. Support needs include: better administrative back-up (access to paperwork for meetings, appointments and surgeries, support with casework), help with community engagement, training to use ICT.

Long-term challenges

Local authority culture change

The research identified the need for a fundamental change in the way council officers and councillors work together. Officers recognised there is currently little incentive for them to work proactively with councillors, and changing this will require a strong message from council leaders and senior officers, to ensure that changes are made to the way members are supported.

The role of local political parties

Officers and councillors identified a number of issues that they felt could undermine the member empowerment agenda if not addressed. These include: the way local party groups operate, in particular cooperation between opposition and ruling party members; the role of party whips; and local selection procedures. Members and officers felt that there is little that councils can do to influence local political parties, and change needs to be driven at the national level through central party offices. This points to a broader cultural issue concerning political parties' lack of support for the frontline aspects of the ward councillor job, assessing councillors' performance based on the amount of time they spend in the town hall.

Councillor recruitment

The research identified concern among councillors, officers and community groups about the scale and complexity of the future ward member role, and the impact this may have on councillor recruitment. Many feel it is time for a national debate about how the future role is remunerated.

Policy and practice implications

In response to these obstacles the researchers recommend a number of reforms to current policy and practice, including:

A Ward Councillor Compact

The primary recommendation is for the development of a Ward Councillor Compact, a voluntary two-way agreement between the council and elected members.

The Ward Councillor Compact would:

- help to define the future role and address issues about support, development, and performance standards, among others;
- set out the council's expectations of the role, encouraging basic minimum standards of activity in each of the dimensions and functions of the job, possibly combining specific tasks with suggested approaches, skills and behaviours;
- set out the council's commitment to provide minimum levels of support and training for members. This could be based on IDeA's recommendations for all councillors to have access to a package of basic support measures including a community induction; support for every councillor to be in e-mail contact from home; enabling councillors to draw on council resources to conduct surveys of local opinion; and providing them with a single officer as a channel for complaints.

Reforms to political parties and councillor recruitment

- Parties should agree a series of 'national standards' for the operation of political party groups, particularly in relation to diversity, recruitment and selection.
- There should be cross-party support to significantly reduce, if not prohibit, the use of whipping in all aspects of local democracy other than Full Council.
- There needs to be significant improvement in councillor remuneration – there should be cross-party cooperation in opening a genuine national debate about member allowances and support.

Skills, support and information

- Councils need to invest in more effective ward-based information systems that allow authority-wide performance data to be disaggregated down to a ward/neighbourhood level and disseminated to councillors in a relevant and timely manner.
- Councils need to develop a more strategic

approach to councillor learning and development.

- Councils need to identify a named officer to offer direct support to each ward councillor.

Increasing strategic influence

- The research highlighted ways that the strategic influence of local councillors could be increased, a number of which are strongly related to the Local Government White Paper proposals. For instance, both national and local government need to consider how to bring about a 'culture change' in Overview and Scrutiny with more effective independent support and a prohibition of party whipping.
- Councils need to put in place better forms of overview and scrutiny at the ward level – such as neighbourhood inquiries – to allow non-executive councillors more ability to call in local service providers about local issues.
- National government should extend and strengthen the 'Duty of Cooperation' (proposed in the Local Government White Paper, 2006) to make sure it applies in wards and neighbourhoods.

About the project

The research was carried out in the London Borough of Newham, Salford, Suffolk and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. These locations were selected because each contains deprived neighbourhoods with a range of regeneration initiatives in place, yet have different political leadership (Liberal Democrat, Conservative and two Labour) and contrasting leadership models.

The research was qualitative in its approach and design, involving a combination of semi-structured one-to-one interviews and 'futures' workshops with executive and non-executive councillors, council officers and individuals from community organisations. In total, 65 people participated in the research.

For further information

Further information about the study can be obtained from the Neighbourhoods and Local Innovation Team, The Young Foundation, 18 Victoria Park Square, London E2 9PF. Tel: 0208 980 6263 or www.youngfoundation.org or from the Local Government Information Unit, 22 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0TB. Tel: 0207 554 2800, email: info@lgiu.org.uk or visit www.lgiu.gov.uk

The full report, **Ward councillors and community leadership: a future perspective** by Saffron James and Ed Cox, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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