

## **Frontline councillors and decision making**

### ***Broadening their involvement***

*Tracy Gardiner*

This report examines the ways in which non-executive councillors are able to influence decisions in local councils.

There is now an emerging body of experience of how councillors are involved in decision making following the introduction of new council constitutions under the Local Government Act 2000. According to many frontline councillors, who are not on the executive, their experience to date has been mixed.

This report looks at how some authorities are supporting their frontline councillors to contribute to the role of the full council, the executive, overview and scrutiny functions and, for those authorities which have them, area structures. It also considers how an authority's informal and cultural context of decision making can affect the ability of a wide range of members to be involved. The crucial role that political groups play in ensuring that their members can have meaningful roles is also explored. Examples of case studies from a wide range of authorities provide illustrations of how non-executive councillors can and do effectively contribute to decision-making processes.

A series of benchmarks are set out to assist authorities to 'health check' their own processes and procedures for the involvement of their frontline councillors, to help identify what happens when their frontline councillors are fully engaged and participating positively in decision making.

This report will be of interest to executive and non-executive councillors alike, as well as to those supporting the decision-making processes within local councils. It will also be of interest to policy makers who are assessing how well the current constitutional arrangements are working and for those considering how best to further develop structures and institutionalise support for all councillors.



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# Executive summary

All councillors will have powerful roles, acting together in the full council, or as members of the executive or powerful overview and scrutiny committees.

(DETR, 1999)

Local government now has an emerging body of experience of operating under new council constitutions introduced by the Local Government Act 2000. The experience of non-executive councillors shows that their ability to engage and be involved in decision making under the new arrangements has been mixed.

Since the introduction of the new constitutional arrangements, the authorities have inevitably put much emphasis on ensuring that, first, executive members and, second, scrutiny members have had the support and resources they need to take on these new roles. The motivation for moving to these new structures included the supposition that, by adopting new roles, there would be new opportunities for non-executive councillors to spend less time in formal council meetings and to bring to the council's decision-making processes 'a full knowledge of what their local communities need and want' (Armstrong, 1999). For non-executive councillors under the new arrangements it was assumed that eliminating the traditional committee system would release time for councillors to develop their representative role and that this role could be strengthened.

Many non-executive councillors, despite being busy with their representational roles and being very active at ward and divisional level, are having difficulty with the new structures and lament the demise of the committee system. This experience is felt among all types of authority. However, there are differences of experience and many authorities are attempting to address this issue.

It is clear that dissatisfaction is not limited to one particular political party and that frustration has been expressed by members across all political parties. For non-executive members in opposition, it is they who most acutely feel the increased formalisation of executive decision making under the new arrangements. There is a clear difference in experience around decision making for those non-executive members within a controlling group and for those of minority groups or independents. But, generally, this research has revealed the limited extent to which structures and institutional support have been developed for the non-executive role and this has created a number of tensions.

However, the research has also shown that some authorities are adopting a good-practice approach to the new arrangements and are setting up structures to support and set out distinct roles for non-executive councillors to avoid that tension. Others are developing responses to the tensions that have arisen to meet the needs of their non-executive members and support them to find an effective role both at ward/division and within the decision-making processes of the authority.

This report looks at how some authorities have designed their structures, not only to support the executive in its decision-making processes, but also to develop and support processes to enable frontline councillors to contribute to the development of the formal policy framework and to influence the work of the decision-making processes of the executive and the council. It does not look in detail at executive roles, at the roles of the councillor in regulatory functions or at the role of the councillor in engaging with the voluntary and community sector. Its focus is on council structures and how the frontline councillors can influence decision making in their representative role.

Consequently, research has been conducted to look at how some authorities are supporting their non-executive councillors to contribute to the role of the full council, the executive, overview and scrutiny functions and, for those authorities that have them, area committees, as this has been seen as an important element of fulfilling the Local Government Act 2000's expectations of new models of political leadership. The report also examines how authorities have considered their own informal and cultural context of decision making with, in particular, the crucial role of the political groups to ensure that frontline councillors have meaningful roles.

For example, some use frontline members to act as a conduit between the executive and the rest of the council, working as 'executive assistants', or as member champions, or as a link between the executive and overview and scrutiny functions. Others see area committees or area forums as supporting the ward councillor role and feeding into council strategies and wider community strategies. Scrutiny is providing an opportunity in many authorities for non-executive members to affect debate and for them to challenge the work of the authority. Communications, training and protocols are also supporting non-executive councillors to have access to the decision-making processes. Examples of their use in practice demonstrate that non-executive councillors can and do effectively contribute to decision-making processes.

In considering how best to develop structures and institutionalise support for non-executive councillors, and to respond to issues of tension between executive and non-executive functions, a set of standards or benchmarks have been developed to assist authorities to 'health check' their own processes and procedures for the

involvement of their frontline councillors. These are designed to help local councils judge their performance. They do *not* set out or seek to promote a particular structure but identify the outcomes that would be visible in a local council where the frontline councillor was fully engaged and participating positively in decision making.

In practice, authorities need to consider implementing arrangements that support their executive and non-executive members so as to ensure that both roles complement each other and deliver effective decision making that is in touch with local aspirations and rooted on strong democratic foundations.

### Structure of this report

New empirical research involving case studies has been undertaken to determine the problems and opportunities (both practical and cultural) for frontline councillors in being involved in and having an influence on the decision-making processes of the new structures.

This study has examined:

- how frontline councillors are involved in decision making within a range of authorities
- the role of the political groups, the culture they promote and their internal processes in enabling frontline councillors to have an input into policy decisions
- how officers can best support frontline councillors' appropriate involvement in policy decisions
- examples of good practice in encouraging frontline councillors to contribute to authorities' decision making
- the community leadership role for non-executive councillors as defined and promoted by Government, local government bodies, local authorities and councillors themselves
- the types of support frontline councillors find most useful in terms of member development, training and wider support to carry out their role effectively.



The first part of this report is divided into chapters considering the issues in relation to the decision-making arenas of full council, the executive, overview and scrutiny, area arrangements, political groups and informal links and learning. Examples of good practice and determining key factors and processes are identified within each chapter. Each chapter concludes with a 'Things to try' section. A selection of more detailed case studies illustrates how a range of authorities are addressing the issue of engaging and involving non-executive members in decision making to illustrate the wide variety of approaches that authorities are taking in practice. While this study concludes that there is no single best method of addressing frontline councillor involvement, a number of objectives that may assist councils in assessing their practice in this area have been determined. These are found at the end of each chapter and are appended in full, where they also include both positive and negative indicators against which to benchmark progress.

Finally, the report contains a set of recommendations around encouraging authorities to 'health check' their own processes and procedures to ensure they make the best use of the valuable resource they have in their frontline councillors.



# 1 Introduction

Whatever the pros and cons of the old committee system versus the new executive structures, the Local Government Act 2000 did recognise new models of political leadership and set out distinct roles for non-executive councillors.

All councillors will have powerful roles, acting together in the full council, or as members of the executive or powerful overview and scrutiny committees. People will know who is responsible for decisions, and communities will have a clear focus for leadership. Decisions will be scrutinised in public, and those who take them and implement them will be called publicly to account for their performance.

(DETR, 1999)

Local government now has an emerging body of experience of operating under new council constitutions introduced by the 2000 Act. Key to this has been the experience of frontline councillors for whom their ability to influence their authority's decision-making processes and represent their constituents has been mixed.

Non-executive councillors are having difficulty with the new structures, and more work is needed to help them find an effective role.

(Nick Raynsford, 30 November 2004)

Their experience shows that, if authorities are to fulfil the aspirations set out in the 2000 Act, councils need to design their structures, not only to support the executive in its decision-making processes, but also to develop and support processes to enable frontline councillors to contribute to the development of the formal policy framework and to influence the work of the decision-making processes of the executive and the council. This includes ensuring councillors can contribute to the role of the full council, the executive, the regulatory functions, overview and scrutiny functions and, for those authorities that have them, area committees. Authorities need also to consider their own informal and cultural context of decision making with, in particular, the crucial role of the political groups to ensure that frontline councillors have meaningful roles.

Since the 2000 Act the great majority of authorities have adopted models with a cabinet system and councillors' roles have evolved to adapt to the new structures. Inevitably, much emphasis has been put by authorities onto ensuring that, first, executive members and, second, scrutiny members have had the support and

resources they need to take on these new roles. Less attention has been focused on the new roles for frontline councillors that the Act sets out and officers are uncertain how best to support members to develop and adapt to their changed roles.

This is despite clear government guidance on new council constitutions, which sets out that members' representational roles should become even more important under a new constitution and that: 'Local authorities will need to ensure that the roles of councillors outside the executive are meaningful and well-supported' (ODPM, 2000).

Therefore, the Secretary of State recommends that local authorities should ensure that there is effective and regular consultation and communication between the executive, the relevant overview and scrutiny committees and other members of the local authority during the development of plans and strategies which need the agreement of partner organisations. Local authorities should, therefore, adopt protocols to ensure that any councillor who is neither a member of the executive nor the partnership responsible for developing the plan or strategy has opportunities to feed their views into the development of any such plan or strategy.

(ODPM, 2000)

The Government aims to persuade councillors that this enhanced role will open up new opportunities for non-executive councillors, as they will spend less time in formal council meetings and will bring to the council's decision-making processes 'a full knowledge of what their local communities need and want' (Armstrong, 1999). The Government maintains that the roles can only 'be fully effective when separated from each other' and yet they need to maintain 'clear and close relationships' (ODPM, 2005a, p. 25).

Numerous studies demonstrate that the majority of councillors believe that their main role should be to represent their wards – acting as community leaders in their communities (Newton, 1976; Elcock *et al.*, 2003). The Government believes that, under the new forms of local governance, the majority of councillors will have greater freedom and a greater impact on the direction of the council and the services it provides to local people than is currently often the case. They will have:

- a freer role in the review of policy and the formulation of future policy
- a duty to question and evaluate the impact of the decisions and actions of the executive, even if they are in the same political party

- more time to undertake these roles and to consult directly with those they represent because day-to-day decision taking will be by the executive.

As provided for in a council's new constitution, councillors in their representational role can play a significant part in the consultations on:

- the development of local performance plans
- fundamental reviews of best value
- other local initiatives, for example on community safety
- the community planning process more generally.

Councillors will be able to concentrate on bringing the views of their neighbourhoods and local people to bear on the council's decision taking process, rather than, as is so often the case today, spending their time on justifying the council's decisions, in which they often have no real say, to their people.

(DETR, 1999)

It is clear that many councillors find themselves frustrated in being unable to carry out this role effectively. Many non-executive councillors lament the demise of the old committee system, which has left a void and which the new executive and scrutiny arrangements have not filled. The experience of the changes arising from the new constitutions is varied. Non-executive councillors complain that they feel isolated from the 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 Liberal Democrat Group, 2001; Wilkinson and Craig, 2002; Wilkinson, 2005). It is apparent that many elected members have felt disempowered.

Despite feelings of being disempowered, members are working with more complex partnership arrangements and with more emphasis on consultation of local residents, which 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 *et al.*, 2004)

For non-executive councillors, under the new arrangements it was assumed that eliminating the traditional committee system would release time for councillors 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. Where they have been developed effectively, these roles have proved more demanding of time and effort than previous committee work. The representative role has also become more demanding in authorities that have set up area committees, many of them exercising executive functions. It is therefore a pertinent time for local authorities and the Government to reconsider the role of non-executive members given the Electoral Commission's consultation paper on periodic electoral reviews (Electoral Commission, 2005).

The publication of the ODPM consultation document *Vibrant Local Leadership* (ODPM, 2005b) places particular emphasis on the councillors' role in representing their community. This has reinvigorated the need for further clarification of the structures and processes for decision making within an authority to engage and support all its members, not only executive members, in positive outcomes.

Now is a good time to look at how the arrangements flowing from the 2000 Act are working in practice. Examination of the relatively limited information on ways in which some authorities use their frontline councillors reveals many different responses to the challenge of operating new council constitutions and the tensions of the new arrangements. For example, some use frontline members to act as a conduit between the executive and the rest of the council, working as 'executive assistants', or as a link between the executive and overview and scrutiny functions. Others use 'champions' to lead on issues or service areas to focus on particular sectors of the community. Others see area committees or area forums as supporting the ward councillor role and feeding into council strategies and wider community strategies.

It is clear that the role for executive councillors is rewarding and time consuming for those concerned. However, given the significant workload on the executive, many authorities have sought to spread the workload to a wider group of members to prevent them from being overloaded and also to develop talent for succession

planning. Involving and engaging frontline councillors in decision making is therefore important, not just to ensure legitimacy and effective decision making for the authority today, but also to ensure that the authority has a strong democratic foundation to take forward. In a national survey of councillors, Rao (1999) found that few members were satisfied with their exclusively non-executive role. As Chandler (2001, p. 9) points out there is an irony in that:

... the more 'in-touch' frontline councillors may be the people's representatives, but apparently can only represent the people by being freed from the onerous task of policy-making and political accountability that goes with it.

The challenge for authorities, therefore, is to ensure that executive members are satisfied with their roles, and also non-executive members are clear what their role is in terms of decision making and to have the support and resources to deliver.

Finally, a clear distinction must be drawn between non-executive members in the administration and those in opposition. The increased formalisation of the division between executive and non-executive following the adoption of the new constitutional arrangements has been felt most acutely by those non-executive members who are not members of the majority group. Opposition members, those from smaller parties and independents appear to be most dissatisfied with the new arrangements, for example 30 per cent of independents want to see either a return to the committee system or more influence for minority group councillors. This compares to a national average of only 20 per cent advocating the same. Opposition politicians have always had less influence in affecting decision making and the role of the political process and the manifestos of the political groups cannot be divorced from the issues at hand.

## 2 Full council

When the new forms of decision-making arrangements were introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 the sovereignty of the full council was not brought into question. Key decisions about the direction and objectives of the authority rest with full council and it remains the main formal decision-making arena involving all councillors. Executive and non-executive councillors acting together as the full council are required to:

- agree the council's overall community strategies, including such key plans as its education development plans, land use development plans, local transport plans and its local performance plans;
  - determine each year its revenue and capital budgets;
  - take those decisions which would represent a departure from the strategies and budgets which the council had previously agreed;
  - adopt the form of local governance under which the council operates;
  - make appointments to such committees and sub-committees as the council's new constitution provides, and to the executive where the new constitution so provides; and
  - make or confirm appointments of the council's chief executive and chief officers as the council's new constitution provides.
- (DETR, 1999)

In implementing the new arrangements, authorities were urged to reconsider the development of the role of the full council and to recognise that it could play a more significant role (Stewart, 2000). However, many authorities have reported a struggle to find a role for the full council (Birmingham City Council, 2005).

Research undertaken by Leach *et al.* (2003) shows that the modernisation of the full council has received scant attention when compared to that given to the executive, or to overview and scrutiny, or to area committees. Although some authorities have introduced new styles, formats and initiatives to invigorate the full council there is little evidence of a radical rethink of the role of full council as a political means to improving democratic engagement and decision making.



One of the issues that authorities need to consider when attempting to redesign the work of the full council is that any changes need to be workable and meaningful, and must avoid the pitfall of artificially manufacturing a role for the full council that does not add to its legitimacy.

There seem to be a number of key problems that authorities need to consider in redesigning the full council's role. The first is that the full council's processes and procedures are often steeped in ceremony and tradition that go to the heart of the authority's culture and identity. There may be great reluctance to break with traditional styles of meeting and operation that have served the council in the past. Control of the agenda may rest in the hands of a few and this may not sit easily with giving frontline councillors a greater role given the shifts in decision-making powers to the executive body. Furthermore, in some cases, decision making at full council is still little more than a rubber-stamping exercise authorising decisions taken elsewhere. Many members have referred to the full council meeting as a piece of theatre rather than an engaging experience, where a minority of members participate in the debate or are able to enter into discussions on issues that they believe to be of topical or local importance. Lastly, the formal nature and style of adversarial politics often seen in the council chamber can be off-putting or 'daunting'.

To overcome some of these problems a number of authorities are now reviewing the arrangements in place for full council. Some are giving this task to their overview and scrutiny bodies, which take evidence, including from the public; others have convened working groups of the council.

*Braintree* undertook a review of its decision-making processes during 2004/05 and set some guiding principles and outcomes for the role of the full council – that it should:

- be meaningful, accessible and accountable to citizens
- debate major policy/issues
- hold the executive to account
- decide the policy framework.

## **Question time**

Some authorities have experimented with trying to involve the public directly by using a question-time session for the public while others have abandoned this approach.

Authorities that have experimented with making the full council meeting more interactive and increasing the involvement of frontline councillors also report that these initiatives have not succeeded in enlivening proceedings (Stewart, 2000). On the whole, these have also not been found to have significantly increased public interest (Birmingham City Council, 2005). The level of public attendance remains low at many council meetings. This is particularly so where compared to some authorities that have area committees, which have had more success in attracting attendance.

*Sheffield* and *Bristol* are among those that have introduced questions from the public. *Manchester* has dispensed with a public question time and has replaced it with a web-based questioning system, which is available all the time (not just timed to coincide with full council) as are the answers.

### State of the nation

Stewart (2000) further suggests the potential of the council meeting focusing on the area, rather than the council's own committees giving the local authority a more dynamic setting to develop community leadership with a suggestion that state of the borough/county/town or district be debated.

*Reading* has an annual 'state of the city' meeting with the local strategic partnership (LSP), stakeholders and partners – with standing orders suspended to facilitate more informal working, e.g. breakout workshops. *Wolverhampton's* annual state of the city debate is led by the leader's address reflecting on the previous year and setting out priorities for the coming one. *Southampton* also held a 'state of the city' debate, but this was not considered a success in terms of raising public awareness and improving public participation and attendance.

### Themed debates

Some authorities have experimented with full council meetings focusing on a particular issue of community concern.

*Braintree* has held meetings on issues of local concern such as housing options appraisal and the re-routing of a major highway. *Leeds* has reintroduced the custom of inviting deputations, allowing each deputation five minutes to speak to full council with a maximum of half an hour allotted in the agenda. *Sheffield* alternates between two models of full council, with the agenda for every other meeting being set by overview and scrutiny.

Others have rejected this as not having been successful. Some councillors feel that attempts to engage frontline councillors through state of the nation or themed debates in this way have been more tokenistic than meaningful.

## **Council in committee**

For some council meetings a number of authorities have used a format where the council meets in committee, engaging in broad-ranging discussions and deliberations. This more relaxed style of council meeting can allow frontline councillors greater freedom to participate.

*Barnet* uses the council in committee session, which includes suspending council standing orders to allow for a more free discussion and to give members the possibility to speak more than once in debate. *Kirklees* has recently attempted to increase the 'deliberative content of its council meeting' by starting some meetings in seminar mode followed by member discussion in small groups led by officers.

## **Council meetings as an event**

The emphasis on full council can be redesigned from its traditional meeting format to become an event. This would include giving greater advance publicity to full council meetings – including information about forthcoming topics for debate, questions and answers received, and information on questions from members of the public.

*Braintree* meetings are now held on a Monday instead of a Wednesday. This enables proceedings to be reported in the local newspaper (published on a Thursday) the same week. *Birmingham* is considering televising debates on large screens in the city. It is also considering giving more prominence to the council's business on its website.

Enlivening the role of full council may give greater prominence to the role of all councillors not just the executive.

### Members' initiatives

Some authorities have experimented with offering members of the council (by ballot) the opportunity to bring the attention of the council to topical issues of importance to them.

*Liverpool* allows two 15-minute debates on items put forward by frontline councillors at its full council meetings, these are selected by ballot. *Braintree* allows any member to make a statement at a council meeting about any matter in relation to which the council has powers or which affects the area or the inhabitants of the area. Each statement will receive a response from the appropriate cabinet member or committee chairman. *Gateshead* and *Southampton* initiate borough-wide debates by way of putting forward motions that are frequently initiated by frontline councillors.

### Holding office holders to account

The council meeting should provide the opportunity to hold executive members and other post holders to account for their actions and to discuss forthcoming issues. In the political arena of full council this can often be an opportunity for opposition politics to come to the fore rather than a free-ranging discussion between frontline councillors and executive.

The council can also debate reports from scrutiny committees.

At *Braintree District Council* the leader, chair of any committee, group or panel can make a statement on key issues. Any other member can question these statements. They can also raise oral questions without notice to the leader and they can also use written questions. Questions are published, along with the answers, to all members of the council and the press. This open style of questions ensures that all members of the cabinet appear well briefed on all matters which might be raised. *Gateshead's* leader and cabinet report monthly to the full council on their activities and are actively questioned by frontline

*Continued*

councillors. *Blackburn with Darwen* has a strong emphasis on accountability and the question time of the cabinet at their council meetings often takes as much as two-thirds of the meeting.

## **Agenda setting**

Some authorities use a group of members to determine the business of the council meeting and have a formal business management group, comprising the leader of the council, group whips and frontline councillors. Others have initiatives that give greater freedom to frontline councillors to determine the meetings' agendas.

*Liverpool* allows half-an-hour debate put forward by the leader of the opposition. *Nottingham* has established a council business steering group to co-ordinate the programme for full council meetings, and to determine what business should be presented to council and when. It is a politically balanced group chaired by the lord mayor whose role is to represent the interests of the wider council and the public. *Kirklees* has established a council business committee, which determines council meeting agendas. It also undertakes post-mortems of the previous meeting and meets in public session.

## **Policy development**

For many authorities there has been a decline in both the level of business and the importance of the council meeting to such an extent that the full council meeting is no longer the setting where debates take place on important local policy issues. Stewart (2000) acknowledges that full council's decisions on policy are often on the advice of the executive. To ensure that full council is not just a rubber-stamping exercise, it is important to make certain the relationship and the links between full council, the executive and overview and scrutiny (and area committees if the authority has them) work well.

Balancing the relationship between speed and efficiency of decision making with openness and inclusiveness is the good-practice challenge for authorities.

Policy developments that arise need to have sufficient airing to gain support and consensus among the authority. Involvement of members, both executive and non-executive, in policy development and in influencing decision making is key.

Determining which bodies should deliberate policy and the route of a decision through the authority should be a matter of significant importance to both the executive arm and non-executive members.

*Gateshead* has a practice, as part of its service planning/budget cycle, where the leader holds a series of meetings with the councillors from each ward to gain their perception of local issues and priorities, so that these can inform the budget-setting priorities.

Despite the statutory list of policy framework plans that the full council should consider, there is nothing to prevent authorities from considering and including other major plans and strategies for full council approval. It is questionable whether councils are currently operating successfully in managing the overall policy framework and keeping it up to date given the declining and relatively small number of major plans and the budget that are approved by full council in a given year. This may be because policy framework debates tend to be sterile because the plans are in final form without real opportunity to influence them. The role of full council is to scrutinise and approve the policy framework documents and this is a policy development process that is therefore open to all members. Other models of considering them could be tried, such as the green/white paper approach, which is still relatively untried in local government.

Involving frontline councillors through full council policy development groups is one way some authorities are dealing with this. It is clear that not all policy proposals need come from the executive. Councils may set up working groups or panels to develop proposals for consideration by full council or individual councillors may propose items for decision similar to private members' bills in the House of Commons.

In *Barking and Dagenham* policy commissions, which all councillors are eligible to sit on, are appointed to develop new policies and review existing policies for the assembly to agree. *Braintree* has established policy development groups that are similar to think tanks to develop policy. The programme is agreed at a co-ordinating meeting of the chairs of the policy development groups, scrutiny panel and audit panel to which the leader is invited at the beginning of the year, and is then subsequently approved by full council. The programme takes its cue from the council's 'direction and ambition' together with suggestions from frontline members. The work programme is dovetailed to ensure that it works in advance of decisions by the executive in the forward plan and is timed to allow

*Continued*

debate of the policy development group's recommendations by full council. This has given frontline councillors more opportunity to develop forward-looking policy initiatives in good time to meet the council's overall direction of travel. *Swindon* has a budget advisory group that ensures levels of high frontline involvement in the budget process. *Northamptonshire* has started a process of councillor engagement sessions, where councillors are briefed on current developments, such as the development of a new strategy and discussion about the council's goals and priorities. This enables them to have more information and to ask questions in an informal setting prior to a formal decision being taken at full council or by the executive.

Some authorities have experimented with a first reading of the policy framework before being considered in detail at second reading. *Southampton* trialled this in 2003 but has not continued the process. Another example of this appears in the Doncaster case study.

Others have a history of petitions being presented to the council and these could be used to trigger discussions in council or referred to scrutiny for review. Similarly, innovations such as Early Day Motions that are used in Parliament could be used by authorities to draw attention to issues.

Despite authorities experimenting with innovation, for many authorities, the full council meeting remains a formality with many of the decisions having been deliberated beforehand. The formats of adversarial debate and the style of oration used in many councils are, according to researchers, offputting to newer councillors, frontline councillors and the public.

The real business and debate is often behind closed doors in political groups. While much of the procedure of full council meetings is formulaic and rehearsed within party group, non-executive members can nevertheless bring a dimension to full council that has been unplanned and unrehearsed by the political groups. Depending on group protocol, this can be seen as having a personal impact and can have a very positive reaction from the public – who recognise that members are talking from the heart.

### Things to try

- Open question time.
- State of the nation style debates.
- Council in committee.
- Wider policy development.

### Objectives to consider

- The council has an agreed and effective policy framework, corporate plan and budget, with involvement from all members.
- Council meetings are a focus for debate of borough-wide issues, executive accountability, executive–scrutiny relationships.
- Council committees function effectively.
- Councillors have appropriate knowledge and skills to participate in council-wide policy making.
- Councillors have positive attitudes towards the corporate policy-making process.



## 3 Executive

The capturing of ward policy issues is an area of interest to all members. There therefore needs to be a two-way process where ward members are made aware of executive decisions and the cabinet has a good understanding of the issues facing councillors in their wards. There are many issues to consider here. It is important that the cabinet does not lose touch with issues affecting the electorate borough-wide. Similarly, the senior management cadre of officers, who work closest with cabinet members, need to ensure they are in touch with issues on the ground.

Many executive members enjoy busy, satisfying lives (Elcock and Fenwick, 2004) but remain concerned about the widespread frustration among their non-executive members, especially in authorities where members have not taken to the work of overview and scrutiny or where scrutiny has got off to a shaky start.

### Openness

'Openness is a key to success' of cabinets, according to the County Councils Network (2004), which advocates public papers, sending agendas to all members, providing a standing invitation to shadow cabinet members to attend and contribute, inviting local members to participate on local issues, providing a public call-in process, public question time and an agenda focused on key issues of concern to the community. In East Sussex, for example, petitioners are invited to speak at cabinet meetings.

To ensure accountability in individual decision making, it is important that there is a good communications system so that, for example, the record of the decision is well publicised and everyone knows that decisions will take place on a certain day. This will ensure that the call-in system works effectively.

Influencing the work of the executive entails ensuring that non-executive members are informed of the work of the cabinet in a variety of ways and are able to influence debate at an early stage. Authorities have introduced a number of initiatives to improve the information flows between executive and frontline councillors. It is necessary to balance the need for a good flow of communication with the pitfall of sending out to members more information that gets lost in the mass of paperwork from the authority.

*Northamptonshire* holds quarterly meetings between the executive and senior overview and scrutiny members to encourage dialogue about the current agenda, and to establish and improve good working relationships between the two functions.

### Widening involvement

In authorities where the tendency is for executives to make decisions collectively, there is the possibility that they will become overloaded.

As demand on executive members' time is significant, there are difficulties in encouraging a wide group of people who reflect the local community to become cabinet members. Those in full-time employment or who have caring responsibilities may find it most difficult to fulfil their roles. Sharing the workload with a wide range of additional members to support the work of the cabinet can encourage a broader range of people to consider election to councillor duties and can also help succession planning within the authority.

In these circumstances it makes sense to share some of the policy-development and decision-making workload more broadly within the authority.

Sharing the workload of the executive may take several forms.

- 1 Delegation to officers.
- 2 Delegation to area committees (or other neighbourhood arrangements or parishes, for example).
- 3 Involving a wider range of members in supporting the work of the executive:
  - acting as member champions, speaking on behalf of communities of interest or on specific themes
  - appointing individual members or groups of members to act in an advisory capacity to portfolio holders as assistants or deputies, or to the cabinet overall
  - rapporteurs, carrying out investigations and reporting back to committees.

## Member champions

Member champions are one initiative that authorities have tried. A non-executive member is given lead responsibility for advancing the interests of specific sectors of the community. These member champions or policy advisers may act in an advisory capacity to individual portfolio holders, the cabinet or council and may attend and speak at meetings and receive appropriate special responsibility allowances to assist them to carry out their role. According to Stevenson (2000) the role of member champion may consist of four elements: signposting; monitoring; acting as advocate; and representing.

*Bracknell Forest* has established community champions who are non-executive members who represent specific themes or communities of interest, e.g. older people, voluntary sector, leaseholders and tenants, commuters. These are carefully chosen themes of groups of people borough-wide so as not to take away from the legitimate role of ward councillors to represent their constituents. Their role is to monitor the work of the executive to ensure that executive decisions do not work against the interests of the group they represent, to advise and develop policy, and to liaise and foster relations between the council and the community. They receive a special responsibility allowance together with specific officer support and have managed to achieve a high-profile role. They are popular roles for frontline councillors to fill. *Southampton* has also appointed a number of councillors as community champions whose role is to lead on specific areas with groups at both local and city-wide level.

However, the role of member champion is not an easy one. It is often reserved for members who, for a particular reason, may not have been able to be selected for a role on the cabinet (for example, because of lack of time availability or because other members were deemed to have better experience). In turn they are often supported by second- or third-tier officers. Given that member champions need to be self-starters, they may lack the time, support or experience to deliver significant change. Nevertheless, the potential is there to develop a positive and meaningful role for members in addition to their representational role, which aids the authority's policy development.

In *Barking and Dagenham* some executive portfolio holders have nominated champions (frontline councillors) for areas of portfolio work.

*Continued overleaf*

*Wolverhampton* has developed role descriptions to clarify what is expected from their member champions. The executive regularly holds (four or five times a year) open-forum discussions with scrutiny and member champions to discuss their work and make proposals. Link officers support the member champions' work.

### Advisers

Appointing advisers to portfolio holders has assisted the executive in some authorities to engage a wider range of members in the work of the executive.

*Rotherham* has appointed non-executive member advisers to executive members to facilitate decision making. *Southampton* has appointed a non-cabinet position of assistant member to the cabinet member for children's services in view of the increased workload of the portfolio. *Reading* has developed a system of assistant and liaison councillors to shadow lead councillors on specific areas of activity in the lead councillor's portfolio area. These assistant and liaison councillors also link into the scrutiny panel to which the lead councillor reports and may attend cabinet meetings to speak – but not vote – on their area of activity.

### Advisory groups

Some authorities have established policy advisory groups that advise the cabinet or relevant portfolio holders. However, careful consideration needs to be taken about the number and frequency of meetings of these groups, and issues they consider, or else it may only serve to reintroduce the former committee system by the back door.

In *Bedford* (a mayor and cabinet model) two executive members have created a 'cabinet committee'. The first of these was set up by the executive member of strategic transport and partnerships in response to what she regarded as frustrations from members of all parties stemming from a lack of influence in executive policy making. The committee meets on an ad hoc basis and does not have any decision-making powers but provides a useful sounding board for transport issues. It has been able to input cross-party frontline views on matters at an early stage of projects and policy development, which councillors report as

*Continued*

helping smooth the passage of policies through the executive and full council. This authority has a long history of no overall control. *Wolverhampton* has set up special advisory groups on areas such as children's services to involve opposition/frontline members with portfolios of the executive's work. *Gateshead* has five cabinet advisory groups operating on an informal basis, reflecting one or more portfolios. This attempts to allow greater involvement of non-executive members in decision making.

## Involving a wide range of members

Within the structures of the new arrangements, there is a balance to be made between the efficiency and speed of decision making and an open and inclusive approach. However, employing initiatives that give a full airing to controversial issues prior to decision making may not necessarily take longer than waiting for a decision to be called-in and has the advantage of allowing the authority to develop a unified and consensus-building approach to decision making.

*Bracknell Forest* has used a system of appointing a commission to advise and make recommendations to the executive on certain items. For example, when considering its housing stock options appraisal, the authority wanted to gauge the views of its tenants and non-executive members rather than waiting for a possible call-in by scrutiny, which it felt would take an adversarial approach to policy development. Instead of choosing this route it created a commission to consult tenants and to distil their views. The commission was made up of tenants and members of the council. It made its recommendations to the relevant executive member via a debate in full council where members' views were also recorded.

Policy briefings from officers to cabinet members can also be extended to frontline councillors who are interested in a theme and, while this may be easiest to organise on a political group briefing basis, some authorities may choose to open up briefings to all non-executive members cross-party.

## Ward matters

Consultation of ward members on executive decisions that affect their ward is seen as very important. *Cambridge* has routine mechanisms and triggers for consulting ward councillors.

### Things to try

- Member champions.
- Advisory groups.
- Open discussions on the executive's work programme.
- Rapporteurs/lead advisers.

### Objectives to consider

- The executive has an effective dialogue with non-executive members and allows input into its decisions (including those on the forward plan, key decisions and delegated decisions) with involvement from all members.
- Strategic approach to the appointment and use of advisers to the executive.
- Executive enables a flow of information to and from non-executive members.
- Councillors have appropriate knowledge and skills to participate in executive decision making.
- Councillors have positive attitudes towards the executive decision-making process.

## 4 Overview and scrutiny

With these principles of public access, the new forms of local governance will ensure that a council's affairs are conducted openly and subject to effective scrutiny. Councillors, the local media, and others interested will be helped by these new forms of governance to question those taking decisions, and to hold them to account as never before. Open and accountable decision taking will become a reality. This was the original aim of the traditional committee system, but which is today often more theory than practice.

(DETR, 1999)

Scrutiny processes need to be open, transparent and constructive. Scrutiny should not seek to duplicate the work of the executive's decision-making processes. Where scrutiny has been considered to be successful, the authority has accepted that scrutiny is an important role and healthy to the organisation. Members are supportive of scrutiny processes and committed to them. Members feel empowered to actively and fairly challenge so that the authority can consider and deliver continuous improvement in its services and operation.

For non-executive members to have a clear opportunity to affect debate the relationship between executive and scrutiny must not be too cosy. They should be empowered to scrutinise a wide range of issues, to call senior officers to account and to have effective performance management systems that enable them to strongly challenge performance both across the breadth of council services and in relation to a particular area or locality.

A mixed picture of reform has emerged with some parts of the system working better than others for example executive arrangements are operating better than overview and scrutiny functions on the whole. Some authorities have adapted more quickly than others. Some groups seem to be happier with the new arrangements than others with executive councillors, senior officers and stakeholders more positive about the system than non-executive councillors and junior officers.

(Stoker *et al.*, 2004)

Scrutiny is perhaps held up as the opportunity for non-executive members to contribute to the policy development and feed into the decision-making processes of the authority under the new arrangements. However, where authorities have got off

to a shaky start with scrutiny, there has been limited success in getting more frontline councillors involved and for them to feel that their input has been worthwhile. This may result in low attendance and engagement in meetings, limited member consultation on scrutiny reviews and poor member buy-in for the final reports. The overview and scrutiny function in many authorities, according to Leach *et al.* (2003), is often fragmented and lacking in cohesion.

Some authorities, however, have invested heavily in the scrutiny function. Others have reviewed their scrutiny processes to continue to address and draw out the initial problems that they faced and have found solutions that enable them to have a scrutiny programme that works for their authority. Some of the initiatives that they have considered and initiated are worthy of being examined by other authorities, which may want to review their overview and scrutiny processes to ensure that they are engaging and involving non-executive members.

*Bristol* recently carried out a review of the impact of its scrutiny processes since its introduction. Interviewees were asked whether scrutiny had had an impact on the work of the executive. Several interviewees confirmed that scrutiny had had an impact on their decision making. However, this impact was not usually publicly visible as decision change. Often scrutiny achieved impact by providing an opportunity for contentious or complex issues to be debated in a public forum. This debate would inform the executive's decision making once all the options had been considered. Several interviewees who had been executive members mentioned that, while they had not originally seen this as a useful role for scrutiny, they had subsequently changed their minds.

*Braintree* has reviewed the way it conducts its overview and scrutiny function. Previously, the council used policy review groups, which tended to look at issues presented to them on their way to cabinet. Members felt that they were being asked to 'rubber stamp' already worked up proposals with little time for participation to have a real input. Braintree has now put in place a greater focus on policy development in support of the council's direction and ambition. It has established the following principles for its overview and scrutiny work:

- it should be worthwhile
- members should be able to participate
- members should be able to influence
- overview and scrutiny should be appropriately supported.



## **Member-led scrutiny**

In some authorities, members have been critical and frustrated that scrutiny committee agendas were dominated by officer reports. Good work planning is vital to a balanced work programme and to supporting a variety of roles. To tackle this, members in many authorities have developed a more member-led approach to scrutiny reviews. This may include ensuring that scrutiny has its own dedicated team of officer support to assist members in preparing, scoping and carrying out reviews; or members themselves developing a strategy for deciding on the review programme, rather than relying on officers to bring forward proposals or solely responding to the executive work programme. Planning the work programme sufficiently in advance, such as six months to a year ahead, allows sufficient opportunity in some authorities to develop their work programme effectively.

Several interviewees referred to good practice where scrutiny works effectively, co-operatively and proactively with the corporate agenda.

*Northamptonshire* has kept a record of how its scrutiny work has influenced the policy agenda of the council. The structure of scrutiny committees and their work programme have been explicitly designed to more closely match the council as a whole to ensure that scrutiny councillors are engaged in purposeful work towards the council's overall goals and priorities.

Other interviewees spoke very positively of using scrutiny before decision making, or developing a work programme that would jointly assist the cabinet and non-executive members fulfil their agendas. Some authorities valued the use of a *business manager* to assist in developing this aspect of managing the work programme.

## **Holding the executive to account**

The relationship with the executive needs to be one of co-operation but equally one of fair challenge. A co-operative relationship with the executive can be helpful where, for example, the cabinet actively seeks the views of overview and scrutiny on issues prior to decision making. While this can be useful on occasion, if used too frequently, this practice may absorb the capacity of scrutiny to effectively set its own agenda for challenge and holding the cabinet and officers to account, thereby weakening the ability for non-executive members to actively influence the issues for debate in an authority.

*Tower Hamlets* has a single overview and scrutiny committee, which is politically balanced and consists of members with responsibility for each of the five community plan themes with an additional member for health issues and a frontline member who act as scrutiny leads. The committee takes a proactive approach to formulating the work programme and also scrutinises cabinet reports prior to decision making. It uses a system of pre-decision questions to seek formal responses from cabinet and has played a major role in cabinet's consideration of decisions. This mechanism along with changes to the procedures has made call-ins more focused and has reduced their number. The committee also considers all budget and policy framework documents (two months) prior to agreement by council. They come to the committee in draft form to allow members a genuine opportunity to contribute to the development of policy.

### Forward plan

For non-executive members to be able to play an active role in scrutiny it is important that the forward plan is a live document, which is easily accessible and updated as time moves on.

Some authorities employ the method of using an all-party group to consider the forward plan and to look at decisions for call-in.

*Barking and Dagenham* uses a scrutiny management board to hold a monthly examination of the forward plan, sometimes asking for information before decisions are taken. The IDeA has referred to this approach as proactive and exemplary. For call-in only two members are required to call-in a decision. Use of call-in, although low, has successfully enabled members' concerns to be raised and has resulted in positive action being taken. *Kirklees* has also used the method of an all-party group to look at the council's own forward planning.

### Task and finish groups

In some authorities, a task and finish group approach to scrutiny has been implemented to look at specific issues. Others refer to a similar approach of time-limited scrutiny panels to examine topics in depth. Members may choose to self-select themselves to sit on these groups in some authorities.

*Rotherham* has implemented a task and finish group approach to scrutiny whereby the groups have looked at issues such as road safety and domestic violence in detail. Using this model the authority has sought to draw up a membership for each task and finish group according to the topic, attracting those with an interest in, knowledge or experience of the issues involved. Drawing on this detailed level of experience, knowledge and interest has ensured that the executive has listened carefully to their findings. *Barking and Dagenham* uses time-limited scrutiny panels.

## **Informal member groups**

Informal groups of members may be asked to carry out fact-finding missions to inform scrutiny processes, or to consider a narrow topic in greater depth.

*Bristol* has used small informal working groups spun off from its larger scrutiny commissions. In these informal groups members have been able to work with officers to develop greater engagement in an issue, which may not have been easily dealt with in a public forum. This approach has been effective, for example, in scrutinising the support that the LEA provides to schools in difficulties.

## **Challenge sessions**

*Tower Hamlets* has introduced single challenge sessions on specific aspects of the council's work as its latest scrutiny innovation. The challenge sessions are designed to allow members to quickly check out the robustness of services and contribute to policy development to improve services.

## **Individual members**

It is important that individual members may be able to raise issues for consideration by scrutiny. However, there needs to be a mechanism for ensuring that the capacity and effectiveness of scrutiny is maximised and that the agenda is not set by a few members, or by hobby horse issues.

*Stoke-on-Trent* has eight commissions undertaking the role of overview and scrutiny, but also uses an overview and scrutiny management committee to co-ordinate and manage requests put forward by individual members. It takes into consideration factors such as the benefits that could be achieved from undertaking the work and the priorities of the council and the people who live in the city.

Some authorities have appointed individual members with informal lead roles on overview and scrutiny on policy issues, which allows individual members to develop a specialism and breadth and depth on an individual policy/service area that would perhaps not be possible by an individual executive member whose portfolio area would generally be much larger.

### Information flows

It is not only information about the forward plan that is vital to inform the work of scrutiny but also information about the full range of scrutiny activities that needs to be relayed to all members of the council so that those with relevant interest in, knowledge or experience of an issue, or whose ward may be affected can contribute to the process.

*Tameside* produces quarterly newsletters in both hard and electronic formats, which are available on the website to inform both members and the wider community about scrutiny activities. All members of the council are consulted about scrutiny policy reviews and scrutiny review reports are circulated to all members of the council and debated at full council meetings.

In many authorities, full council receives and debates the final reports of overview and scrutiny, which gives a wider airing to the recommendations, however it should not be for full council to have a veto or to approve the report.

*Braintree* has established policy development groups to bring forward policy proposals. The outcomes of these reviews are debated in full council and the full council's views are recorded before being forwarded to cabinet. This ensures that cabinet is likely to listen carefully to the views of full council rather than the smaller group of members involved in the policy development group.

For scrutiny to be able to measure its impact, it is important for non-executive members to have clear information flows about the outcome of scrutiny reviews and for the executive to respond in detail to the scrutiny report and its recommendations. At a later date there should also be robust processes in place to clearly demonstrate the ongoing implementation of outcomes and action plans to non-executive members.

At *St Helens* all scrutiny reviews include recommendations to the executive, to which the executive must respond with proposals for action. As scrutiny matures the need for more evaluation has been recognised and early reviews are being revisited to ensure actions are being delivered. *Southampton* has an overview and scrutiny management committee (an overarching scrutiny body), which monitors the effectiveness of scrutiny. It receives reports showing, for each cabinet decision, whether a scrutiny panel made a comment or recommendation and whether it was taken into account by the executive.

Some authorities have carried out assessments on how scrutiny is perceived by executive and non-executive members, how it has affected (or not) decision making, and whether its processes are effective and trusted by both executive and non-executive members. This is a useful exercise to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their scrutiny programme.

### Things to try

- Pre-decision scrutiny linked to the forward plan.
- Regularly assess and report back on impact of scrutiny reviews.
- Task and finish groups with self-selecting membership.
- Challenge sessions.
- A single overarching scrutiny management group to plan, review and evaluate the scrutiny programme.
- Regular communications (such as web and printed newsletters) to keep all members and the public informed about scrutiny activities.

### Objectives to consider

- Overview and scrutiny are empowered to set their own challenging agenda with input possible from all non-executive members.
- The executive takes note of and responds to the reports and views of overview and scrutiny.
- Overview and scrutiny provides a focus to develop policy for borough-wide issues.
- Overview and scrutiny operates in an open and constructive style.
- Councillors have appropriate support, knowledge and skills to participate in overview and scrutiny.
- Councillors have positive attitudes towards the overview and scrutiny process.

## 5 Area arrangements

Councillors will be able to concentrate on bringing the views of their neighbourhoods and local people to bear on the council's decision taking process, rather than, as is so often the case today, spending their time on justifying the council's decisions, in which they often have no real say, to their people.

(DETR, 1999)

Area arrangements can provide a route for councillors carrying out their 'representative' role. The involvement of frontline councillors in neighbourhood or area arrangements can help local councillors to engage with their local constituents and to work through local issues, developing decision-making processes locally. Many have argued that the development of local area arrangements enhances the local representative role of all councillors, provides a setting for local councillors to demonstrate and develop community leadership, and is a means to increase local democracy and accountability.

Councillors, through area arrangements, are able to raise matters of local concern and the structures can provide a means of consulting local people. Area arrangements vary widely from authority to authority and there is no 'one size fits all' solution. However, two main forms of area arrangement exist (apart from parish councils, which are a separate institution) and both can impact on the decision-making role of frontline councillors.

Under the Local Government Act 2000, councils can delegate to area committees those functions and executive decision making that pertain to their area and do not have an adverse effect on other areas or the whole council. Only councillors elected for the area covered can make decisions. Co-optees (either appointed, elected or nominated by voluntary and community groups) often sit on area committees but have no voting or decision-making powers. According to an LGA survey in 2004, 26 per cent of local authorities have area committee structures. Of these, 90 per cent reported that area committees have been successful in making good use of non-executive councillors (LGA, 2004).

Area forums usually have no legal status (although some have registered as friendly societies or even companies). They are consultative bodies. However, they can play an important influencing role in decision-making structures and, because they are partnership bodies as opposed to local authority committees, they can relate more

directly to the work of the local strategic partnership and to area management issues. Fifty-four per cent of authorities have area forums in place. Of these, 81 per cent are partnership bodies. The majority act as sounding boards on area issues; play a crucial role in community planning; and supervise neighbourhood management initiatives.

The introduction of the new constitutional arrangements has provided an impetus for authorities to give further consideration to area arrangements as a means to counter concerns that the leader and cabinet or mayoral structures would lead to less transparency, accountability and engagement. Although, according to the LGA (2004), 27 per cent of area committees were introduced before 1999, 44 per cent were introduced in 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 and the remaining 29 per cent since April 2001.

Elected members, particularly non-executive councillors, have by and large indicated that they have enjoyed their enhanced community leadership role through area working (Wilkinson, 2005). It is argued (Wilkinson, 2005) that there are clear benefits for authorities introducing area arrangements, such as:

- civic renewal
- improved service delivery/relationships
- local project development
- community leadership.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that area arrangements are a panacea for solving the difficulties around ensuring that non-executive councillors are effectively and satisfactorily engaged in the authority's decision-making processes. In fact, research by Leach *et al.* (2003) indicates that establishing area forums dominated by local people facilitates the achievement of public inclusiveness but does not necessarily empower frontline councillors.

A clear route for referring decisions between area structures, the executive and scrutiny arrangements is key in ensuring that area work is fed effectively into the authority's decision-making processes. In some localities it has been found that there was no meaningful link between the area committees and other structures. Coventry's area co-ordination structures were held up as the example of area working in the Policy Action Team 4 report on neighbourhood management in 2000 (DETR, 2000). Yet, two years later, the council obtained a 'poor' rating in its



comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) and the CPA report commented 'neighbourhood planning does not as yet link and inter-relate with the corporate plan and service planning to achieve local outcomes and proper use of resources'.

Similar criticism has been made of neighbourhood management arrangements in some local authority areas. In Salford, a recent community report argued that the current set-up and state of development of neighbourhood management did not enhance local influence over mainstream service planning and budgets. These criticisms included that policy was not backed up by sufficient resources for it to be successfully implemented and delivered; that mainstream service providers were either unable or unwilling to fully commit to it; and that there was a variability of commitment from partner organisations. Without greater local accountability and involvement, neighbourhood management risks becoming just another layer of administrative function, as distant from community-level ownership and the ward councillor as traditional city-wide services.

In several authorities, area committees had been 'totally ignored' by portfolio holders and non-executive councillors had lost their link to service departments. Area committees had therefore become little more than area surgeries, duplicating existing roles (Wilkinson, 2005). If there are no established routes for non-executive members to channel their area activity into corporate decision making, there is a risk that the development of area working is a further complication to the routing of issues, providing another possible entry route that creates a set of schisms between decision making, scrutiny and area work.

Other indicators show that the executive's ability to communicate directly with citizens through area arrangements may diminish the involvement of non-executive members in decision making. Needham (2002), in her research of one large authority, suggests that consultation offers an opportunity to be a resource for influencing debates between backbenchers, executive members and officers. However, she found that consultation exercises were primarily used by officers, second by executive members and in some cases by steering groups or partner organisations. Only in four cases out of 22 were consultation data passed to area committees, where backbenchers could utilise the information in local decision making. She reports that, as consultation findings are more often reported to the executive, they may claim their own direct channel of communication with local people rather than relying on the representative credentials of backbenchers. Her findings demonstrate that there is a genuine marginalisation of backbenchers in the consultation processes of the authority concerned. As councillors play a limited role in formal consultation exercises, frontline councillors rely on the informal links that they forge with their communities as ward representatives.

Positive outcomes must enable authorities adopting area arrangements to find ways of assisting councillors to communicate directly with citizens to identify community needs, so that collective choice is exercised and policies that benefit the whole authority are adopted.

There are therefore a range of issues to be considered by authorities thinking about area arrangements and the effective involvement of their non-executive councillors:

- links with the corporate centre and partnership bodies: both overview and scrutiny and 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
- councillor training and support for community engagement/capacity building
- delegated budgets and services
- consultation support and information
- neighbourhoods versus communities of interest.

### Links with the executive and overview and scrutiny

A number of councils have created a strategic link between the area forums and the corporate centre.

In *Brent*, area committees forward strategic issues or entrenched problems directly to scrutiny and overview committees. In *Barnsley*, the area forums' dedicated senior officer informally brings to the executive's attention any particular sticking points in the locality and formally feeds into the executive the results of mass communication exercises undertaken by local forums. *Kirklees* has established a committee of all area chairs plus executive members who have an area responsibility, together with communications and the chair of scrutiny. Cabinet members go out to discuss themes across all areas. In *Trafford*, area board chairs meet executive members with responsibility for the

*Continued*

LSP and community issues, and together they make recommendations directly to the executive. In *South Somerset* all members are on one of the four area committees. The four chairs of the area committees are on the executive. The scrutiny committee scrutinises the work of the area committees. If a particular area committee is being scrutinised, members of the scrutiny committee who are also members of that area committee declare an interest and stand down for this process. *Bradford* produces forward plans for its area committees. These ensure that the executive knows the key issues that are coming up. In *Barnsley*, area forum minutes are submitted to cabinet for receipt on a regular basis and proceed to council with an indication of the cabinet's view. Reports on issues of local concern are submitted to cabinet, which is required to respond in recommendations to council, or by reference to other arms of the democratic framework, such as the scrutiny commissions, who might be asked to investigate if there are felt to be borough-wide implications.

## **Links with the local strategic partnership**

Many authorities are aware that the link with frontline councillors and the LSP are weak and are currently reviewing how to improve this link. However, here are some examples of good practice.

*Tameside* has eight district assemblies chaired by frontline councillors. The assemblies are constituted as committees of the council but the partnership role is built in by each committee having an advisory group that involves local community organisations, elected year 10/11 pupils and local police. The link with the LSP works in different ways.

- There is an executive member for district assemblies who is also the chair of the LSP. He has regular meetings with assembly chairs.
- Each assembly has a nominated councillor to lead on community safety. These meet regularly with the portfolio holder for community safety and the chief superintendent of the police in Tameside.
- The LSP does not have an environmental theme group, as this role is led by the assemblies. The budgets for street scene services have been delegated to the assemblies and councillors work with their advisory groups to ensure these are responsive to local needs.

*Continued overleaf*

- Each assembly has a town plan, which states the outcomes that will be achieved in relation to the community plan. This is performance managed using the same indicators as the LSP's community plan.

In *Barnsley*, the area forum officers are responsible to the assistant borough secretary (community planning), which helps provide linkage into the larger-scale, borough-wide strategic community plan and whose staff also support the LSP, regeneration initiatives and the social inclusion agenda, and seek to promote the well-being of the borough through partnership working. The area plans help feed into the borough-wide community plan, in addition to which the community planning team carries out 'community summits' in each of the area forum areas to involve the public in the work of the LSP.

### Links with service departments

Several area committees have forged formal links with service departments in order to influence mainstream provision. Working closely with officers and having their support for the area dimension strengthens informal links and learning between area arrangements and service performance.

In *Warwickshire* all service departments undertake an annual needs analysis of each area and then identify the particular actions being undertaken to address those needs. They present workshops locally to their area committees, which are run by ward councillors, to outline their planned responses. The area committees monitor progress against targets in those area plans and against 70-plus area-based 'quality of life' headline indicators. Also senior officers from each of the main service departments have responsibility for liaison with area committees and for the achievement of the specified service targets within the local business plan.

*Salford* asked Community Pride, a voluntary group, to undertake a study to identify some of the opportunities and blockages that currently exist for devolved budgets and community action plans, drawn up by the eight community committees in Salford, to influence mainstream spending. The council's website states that:

Community Committees support the local neighbourhood and make decisions about the priorities for the neighbourhood ... The City Council and other organisations then focus work on these priorities.

*Continued*

The study revealed that community committee participants did not believe community action plans and devolved budgets had an influence on mainstream spending of the council, police and primary care trust (PCT). They could not monitor any impact because of the lack of a formal response, annual report, general feedback or any other accountability mechanisms from the council and partner organisations. The study recommended that Salford City Council and its partner organisations develop a monitoring framework to show how it is responding to community action plan and devolved budget spend.

*Bradford* has five area committees each covering a constituency of six wards with nine backbench councillors (half the total number of ward councillors) on each committee. There is a parallel area co-ordination office structure with seven people in each area office. Members are seen as the advocate and community champion for their areas. Each area committee now has an area action plan, developed through the neighbourhood renewal process, which relates to service delivery from the council and partners. Officers from partner organisations and council departments are called to the area committee to report progress on the action plan and are held to account by backbench councillors through this process. The council is committed to supporting all communities in the district to develop their own local action plan. Local councillors are actively involved in the action plan being developed in their ward. There is an annual community conference reviewing the local action plans, which feed into the area committee action plan.

*Barnsley* already has an area committee model through its area forums, but is supplementing these with 'area boards', which it is believed will allow a local management role for elected member and community representatives to monitor and scrutinise service delivery/performance against pre-agreed targets and make recommendations to improve performance. The development of nine area boards, including one pilot board, is the first step along this path. Executive authority for services will remain with the accountable executive director, but the board will have the opportunity to influence and determine local priorities based on an improved approach to community engagement and local action planning. Most of the decentralised services, at least to begin with, will be concerned with the 'liveability agenda'. A key tool for the area boards will be service agreements, which will be devised from current service specifications, modified by community priorities and agreed by partners following the local community planning process. The boards will meet at least four times a year. Area forums will continue to operate on a monthly basis, as the 'public face of localism', and to provide the mechanism for two-way feedback and wider accountability through the formal democratic process.

### Devolved budgets and services

Many councils have established relatively small-scale (generally under £100,000 per area) local project budgets to be allocated by area committees. These have proved popular with councillors and community representatives alike as they represent direct decision making by frontline councillors with their communities. But they can be problematic in that they can detract frontline councillors into time-consuming allocations of small funds rather than working to influence mainstream decision making. There has been some reluctance among elected members and senior officers to devolve significant mainstream budgets, particularly with the pressures of the Gershon agenda.

*South Somerset* has been particularly successful in decentralising budget allocation and monitoring responsibilities in housing, planning, technical services and environmental health. Many, however, have experimented with innovative strategies to bring local influence to bear on service delivery. *Doncaster* has restructured several services into one directorate called neighbourhood services, with a flagship component, the Community First programme. Each neighbourhood management partnership has a 'quick-win' budget to facilitate speedy improvements as the community planning process takes shape. Delivery teams of multi-agency local service staff are working with neighbourhood wardens, in each neighbourhood management area, to deliver local targets. These are supplemented by local thematic initiatives such as a community recycling partnership, in which the public directly influences the shape and delivery of services. *Barnsley* has incrementally moved to delivering an increasing number of services – the youth service, housing estate managers and Neighbourhood Pride (a multi-skilled workforce, locally based, undertaking grass cutting, sweeping, cleaning, caretaking, etc.) – on an area forum basis. Neighbourhood Pride has won national innovation awards. Area forums have £25,000 each to spend on highways for schemes they can't get into the main programme and £40,000–60,000 to spend on community projects. In *Warwickshire*, area committees have a range of executive powers over such matters as public and community transport, traffic management and community development grants. Each committee has delegated powers for the allocation of small amounts of funding (£50,000) for projects that promote the well-being of the area, particularly through the local community plan and area business plan. In *Bradford*, the five area committees control the traffic and highways budget for street improvement; £30,000 budget for small parks and recreation; £30,000 for local cleansing plus £20,000 for special clean ups and have a £20,000 small grants budget. Last year the devolved budget doubled in *Salford* and, in 2005/

*Continued*

06, just under £500,000 is available to community committees across the city. There is still variation in the way decisions on these budgets are being made. The Community Pride report recommends that community committees agree a common process for making decisions about devolved budgets between themselves and that devolved budget spending moves away from a 'small grants' approach to being more of an 'innovation fund' to kick-start mainstream work, not to plug the gap but to build more effective services.

## **Local councillor budgets**

Although only a minority of councillors reported that they would like an option to have a small budget to spend in their own ward, a number of councils have experimented with this.

In *Surrey*, each county councillor has an annually agreed revenue budget of £11,500 to promote the community well-being of their area and brings funding proposals to their local committee for approval. There is one local committee covering each of the borough areas within the county council boundary. Councillors may pool their funds to support larger projects or provide small community grants that have made a difference locally. Each of the local committees also has £35,000 available to spend collectively on capital projects.

## **Consultation support and information**

Councillor training for the area/neighbourhood community leadership role remains weak but there are some examples of activity.

In *South Somerset*, planning is delegated to the area committees and so all members are given planning training. New members have induction training to support the decision-making role on grants and the scrutiny role of area committees. In addition, area development managers will give individual support to members on the area committee to help them steer proposals through the internal and external decision-making structures. In *Tameside*, the scrutiny committee ran an in-depth review of the difficulties the district assemblies were having in hearing from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and

*Continued overleaf*

engaging them in the advisory groups. Training and support were given to members to run the consultation process themselves and hold events at which they heard from BME residents. *East Hampshire* offers training in chairing and facilitation skills to area community committee chairs.

In some areas, local area teams have engaged in area profiling, undertaking surveys of local opinion and drawing up area plans. This helps the local councillor in their community representative role by assisting them in understanding their area.

In *Manchester*, each ward has developed a local plan through its local forums. These ward plans have been fed into the strategic/community plan for the service directorates to implement. In *Doncaster*, a community audit was followed by each of 20 neighbourhood management areas establishing a neighbourhood management partnership and forging a management plan with local people through a 'Planning for real' process. This will impact directly on service delivery and on the strategic planning process by linking into Doncaster's strategic partnership. *Blackburn and Darwen* has developed fortnightly members' information packs, personalised for each member, which include briefings on decisions taken by the executive and updates from scrutiny commissions, together with information about or affecting local ward areas.

In many local authorities, the officer structure plays a key role in community development, which supports the community leadership role of the local ward councillor and helps them engage with those who are often not heard.

In *Bradford*, the neighbourhood support service meets with the chairs of area committees and with ward members to support their role and also supports the open public meetings of the smaller neighbourhood forums across the district. These meetings, attended by frontline councillors, are held in around 130 different locations and support the consultation process in Bradford. The performance of the neighbourhood support service is judged by how many people attend the meetings and how many people attend for the first time. This gives some measure of the outreach work that supports the representative role. Public engagement levels at neighbourhood meetings have more than doubled in the past five years, with over 15,000 people choosing to engage with the council in 2004/05. In *Barnsley*, each of the borough's nine area forums is supported by one dedicated senior principal officer, whose work, inter alia, involves:

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- organising the work, meetings and agenda of the area forum
- assisting members to develop the work plan of the area forum
- developing relationships and communication channels with parish councils, community partnerships, residents and local organisations
- encouraging access and participation by local residents
- acting as a local advocate and contact point, and to interface with local authority services
- drafting reports and presentations on behalf of the forum to the forum and other bodies such as cabinet
- producing a local community plan each year on behalf of the forum
- assisting members to determine the award of community support funding
- supporting members in their surgery and appropriate ward work
- undertaking the 'Think local' consultation exercise.

## **Things to try**

- Having clear routes through to the executive and overview and scrutiny. Does the leader meet with area chairs? Are minutes of area meetings discussed at cabinet and action taken reported through to full council?
- Clear links with the LSP. Does the chair of the LSP meet area chairs? Are there area plans that feed into the LSP? Do area structures lead on some of the community plan themes?
- Ensuring service departments have clear processes to know about and respond to local area needs. Does the ward member have a performance monitoring role of a local action plan? Are there service-level agreements in which the ward member has a role?
- Training and support for councillors in facilitation and consultation.
- Ward information/profiling that is regularly updated and communicated to ward members.
- Specific officer support structures for the area role.

### Objectives to consider

- Area arrangements enable all councillors to be well informed about local areas of concern, and to contribute to developing policies and services as a result.
- Clear opportunities to receive regular briefings from senior officers on matters of local concern.
- Strategic approach to community capacity building so that ward councillors can develop their ability to consult and hear the views of a wide range of people from within their ward.
- A flow of information.
- Councillors have appropriate support knowledge and skills to participate in area arrangements.
- Councillors have positive attitudes towards area arrangements and structures.

## 6 Political groups

There is very little research evidence on the role of political groups within the new constitutional arrangements. This is surprising given that over 95 per cent of all local councillors are representatives of the three main parties and that, in the real world, local party politics plays a significant role in the council's operations.

There appears to be unease in openly recognising the role of local party politics and group activity among council officers and local government agencies. Unsurprisingly, there is no government guidance relating to group activity nor does the Local Government Act mention the role of political groups in shaping and developing policy decisions under the new arrangements.

To overlook the importance of the political groups' processes would be naive. However, for officers, it is difficult to marry the processes for improving the constitutional arrangements and engagement of frontline councillors in decision making because they are rightly divorced from the differently managed political group processes within their own authority.

However, it is appropriate to consider political group processes as a legitimate part of the political process of decision making within authorities. Copus (2001) suggested that the introduction of the new constitutional arrangements should also provide councillors with an opportunity to rethink the role, processes and functions of the party group. He identifies characteristics of four models of party group as partner, arbitrator, filter and leviathan for councillors to consider. Recent research (Leach *et al.*, 2005) suggests, however, that there is little evidence of party pressure or adversarial party politics having diminished under leader and cabinet models.

It is therefore imperative that members themselves make choices that truly engage all member colleagues in the processes of the authority and enable them to carry out their roles effectively. There is no magic formula that suits all authorities and all groups. In each case the implications for the group need to be considered. Improvements and revisions to the constitution therefore should be member led and involve a proportion of frontline councillors. Officers can legitimately support this in a number of ways.

It is difficult to make generalisations about how group processes and dynamics affect the smooth running of the constitution and the involvement of frontline councillors in decision making given the myriad of leadership styles and cultures from group to group and from authority to authority. However, in discussion with members in a

range of authorities, they felt that it was the group processes that determined to what extent frontline councillors were engaged in policy development and decision making in any meaningful way. According to the majority of members surveyed, the group is the place where members develop their most important relationships and it is central to their political lives and role as councillors.

According to one leading member, the political group meeting is 'singularly the most important meeting that the council has'. This councillor added, 'everything else is just for show'. This did not appear to be an unusual view from the research interviews conducted. Others referred to discussions of executive decision making being considered and deliberated on within group as an important part of the process for cabinet and non-executive members to debate with each other before moving through the formal decision-making processes of the council.

### Group dynamics

The dynamic of a group, whether it be newly in control, having a healthy majority or having held a majority for a long period (or the reverse of these), can influence the ease with which frontline members are able to air and carry their opinions in group. Similarly, the leadership style and openness of the group to debate, the regularity of meetings and information flows, the levels of support both within and for political group processes are factors that may determine how effectively frontline views are sought and received within group. Leach *et al.* (2005) identify how leadership is affected by distinctions between cabinet and leader as opposed to mayoral model, and between situations of majority and no-overall control.

The development of group structures and systems needs to reflect the changing circumstances of the group. Consideration could be given by both executive and non-executive members to the group's methods of communications, standing orders, frequency of meetings, job descriptions, voting systems, how business is managed and who controls it, an agreed programme of developing strategy and political tactics.

In some authorities, for example, the whole group elects the leader and cabinet and this therefore leads to a high degree of accountability to their political group colleagues.

## **Building an inclusive group**

### ***Group away days***

Some groups meet as a whole in away-day sessions at the beginning of the year to develop and agree policies, priorities and plans for the forthcoming year. This can provide a useful piece of work for members in a political group. It is helpful to set out a consistent set of policy preferences (or manifesto) to which a political group coheres. Cabinet members then expect their frontline colleagues to support their work and advocate the priorities agreed in group through the formal processes of the authority.

### ***Group communications***

Political group newsletters provide ways for the group to keep in touch with all its members. However, some groups worry that it may fall into the wrong hands and therefore keep their notes very short, if not cryptic! Some groups rely heavily on the use of e-mail for the dissemination of information, while others take every decision through group prior to every formal council decision-making process.

Some groups use a system of cabinet members sending a report to colleagues for information. Verbal reports from executive (or shadow) members at group meetings can provide for lively discussions on group policy and the importance of group meetings and face-to-face discussions is apparent as the group dynamic evolves according to its size, length of time in control (or opposition) and personalities involved.

### ***Specific group policy development***

The budget is the issue that dominates council discussions at many authorities and is at the forefront of all councillors' minds. Group processes unsurprisingly are in evidence to develop budget policy proposals.

*Bracknell Forest* has established within its majority party a budget review group, which is made up of non-executive councillors to deliberate and make proposals to the group. This is outside the formal structures of the council's decision-making processes. *Bedford* has an opposition budget working group charged

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with ensuring its manifesto priorities are given due consideration in the budget round and with making recommendations that the group can take into negotiations with other groups and the mayor. Typically, the recommendations proposed are then debated by the whole political group and members report that this approach to developing policy is useful and valued, and gives members a clear political steer on group priorities.

*Nottingham* has a system of regularised leaders' policy briefings and political group policy briefings to which councillors from the relevant political group are also invited. Similar opportunities are available to other political groups.

### ***Group executive support members***

Within the political groups, some authorities appoint executive support members, shadow deputies, or shadow champions, which involve more non-executive members in the process. In a large group, this can provide both training for members within the group and support to those who may be overstretched. In an authority with a large majority group, one leader commented that it was vital to have as many different ways to involve non-executive members in decision making as possible.

### ***Group links between executive and non-executive members***

Some groups have a formal process of scrutiny representatives working closely with executive councillors as a way of representing frontline members in developing policy and the forward plan, without engaging the whole group on each occasion. Another invites the chief whip to sit at cabinet to represent frontline councillors.

### ***Group business managers***

Some authorities have processes that formally engage the groups in managing council business agendas.

*Northamptonshire* has agreed allowances for the group business managers who help manage full council and other agendas, and ensure that they run in a coherent and managed way. They also have political assistant posts to support councillors in their policy development roles.

Others have appointed political assistants to aid their group processes and, for many, these have been an important development. In some authorities, they are also used to support members with their casework issues, and to assist with group communications and group training and development.

## **Things to try**

- Group away days.
- Regular intranet/e-mail group newsletters.
- Developing a wide range of 'shadow' roles to build member capacity and experience.
- Consider the appointment of political group assistants.

## **Objectives to consider**

- The political group enables non-executive councillors to be well informed about group policy and the procedures for developing policies within group, and to have an effective dialogue with individual councillors to allow input into its decisions.
- Clear opportunities to receive regular briefings from senior officers are available to all groups and a wide range of members within those groups.
- A flow of information within group.
- Councillors have appropriate support knowledge and skills to participate in group decision making.
- Councillors have positive attitudes towards the group decision-making process.

## 7 Informal links and learning

Finally, the changing roles of councillors imply different needs for training, facilities and officer support. The increasing importance of direct consultation with local people and other stakeholders, whether by the executive or by councillors outside the executive, will also lead to new and different demands upon council officers. But they will also benefit from the new structures proposed. Instead of producing papers for and attending committee meetings, they will be able to devote more time to the effective management of services and supporting the new ways of working for councillors.

(DETR, 1999)

### Routes

The routes by which all councillors can access officers, seek information and input their views need to be clear and easily understood. Guidance on how to get things done, who to contact and how to escalate issues if there is no response is important, especially for new members. It seems that, in many authorities, there is a tendency to rely on members developing their own relationships with officers driven by their own interests rather than a process that is structured or strategic.

It is also vital for senior officers to have regular contact with councillors so they do not lose touch with matters on the ground.

### Protocols

A number of authorities have introduced protocols to clarify the relationship between officers and members, and to set out what members should expect by way of officer support. With regard to ward matters, this is often the area where members are most keen to ensure they are equipped with the latest information and can input their views. Members reported that they weren't always informed of developments in their 'patch' or when complaints they had raised had been resolved. It was a recurring theme that the level of communication between the executive and ward members needed to be improved.



In *Barking and Dagenham*, the scrutiny management board has played a role in developing the list of matters that should be routinely reported to ward members in response to members' concerns about the lack of communication by officers with members, particularly at a ward level, and in relation to a general concern about the lack of involvement by members in certain areas of decision making.

*Gateshead* has a protocol that sets out that ward councillors must be consulted on executive decisions that affect their ward and that the results of the consultation should be considered by the executive.

## **Strengthening the relationship between officers and members**

Building a close and effective relationship between the authority and all members of the council, not just those with specific portfolios, is an issue some authorities have worked hard to address. Many have introduced senior officers as councillor mentors following a new member's election to council (such as Leeds) or else on appointment to a new office holder role. Others have tried more mainstream approaches that include all non-executive members.

*Brent* has organised regular internal service briefings, which have been well received by non-executive members. Under the new arrangements, these sessions provide opportunities to have direct contact with, and to question, officers. *Blackpool* has organised 'A day in the life of a council officer' to promote good working relationships between members and officers. This mainly involves shadowing frontline service staff. *Worcestershire* has an ongoing campaign targeted at all officers within the county council. The campaign focuses on officers to ensure that they all actively involve county councillors in activities, projects and initiatives, and consider them at the earliest possible stage. All council staff are actively encouraged to 'Think once, think twice, think local member' when going about their work. This campaign has helped to break down some of the barriers between members and officers.

Creating more informal networking opportunities between officers and members and also between different tiers of local government in their area was a challenge some non-executive members would wish to see addressed by their authority.

*Liverpool* offers non-executive members access to senior officers by providing briefings on a group-by-group basis. This enables all frontline councillors to have the opportunity to have regular face-to-face contact with senior staff at the authority.

A simple issue reported as a difficulty in one authority, which could easily be addressed, was that members would appreciate a regularly updated internal telephone directory in hard copy.

### Ward information

A large number of members reported that they do not feel properly informed about decisions and matters affecting their patch, and communication between the authority and members on ward- or division-specific issues needs to be examined carefully to ensure that information flows are working effectively.

A number of authorities have initiated ward information, such as *Gateshead* and *Tower Hamlets*, or neighbourhood information, such as *Southampton*, to assist members with their local representative work.

### Communications

Issues affecting the authority's area as a whole are where members sometimes report disengagement. To combat this, many authorities have attempted to improve the level, method, detail and frequency of communications to non-executive members so as to share information in a useful and timely way.

*Tower Hamlets*, *Swindon*, *Gateshead* and *Braintree* all produce regular and frequent members' bulletins giving information on a variety of issues. They are of an open style and flag up issues and provide resources for further information. *Derbyshire* e-mails a monthly cabinet circular, service development diary and news review. *Worcestershire* circulates monthly directors' bulletins and ward profiles.

*Tower Hamlets* ensures all its members are aware of consultation activity by the authority. Members can learn of the consultation currently under way by looking

*Continued*

at the consultation calendar on the council's website and can register for e-mail alerts when a consultation is added to the calendar. *Worcestershire* has an interactive consultation website allowing members and officers to have information and knowledge about all consultation exercises taking place throughout the county, so as to share good and bad feedback. Members have been trained to enable them to log into the database and to assist them to be fully aware of relevant consultation exercises taking place in their 'patch' that both support their local knowledge and encourage local participation.

One area that members reported needed to be addressed by a number of authorities was that they would like more feedback from LSP representatives.

## **Training and support**

Induction training carried out by many authorities has been well received, but authorities should have regard for a strategic and sustained approach to a development programme subsequent to induction. Many authorities have used initiatives such as The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) Member Development Charter or the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) Member Development Charter to frame their programmes.

The development of appropriate member training and development appears to be vital to ensure, not only that councillors have the training and skills to enable them to carry out their non-executive roles, but also that the skills and knowledge they can bring back to the authority are captured effectively.

Ensuring that training and learning and development opportunities are attractive to elected members is an issue. Many authorities now offer training seminars but, in some authorities, they are often poorly attended. Members suggested training opportunities, such as videos, webcasts or distance-based, needed to be flexible to fit around their wide variety of commitments and roles.

Mentoring is one way many authorities are developing non-executive members.

*Tower Hamlets*, as part of its member development strategy for all members, includes emphasis on developing all members' strategic leadership. As a result, it has put forward frontline councillors from each of the main political groups to the IDeA leadership academy programme.

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*Brent* has established specific sessions and events for members of the opposition and non-executive members of the majority group. For opposition members, these have looked at ways to provide effective political opposition, getting the best out of overview and scrutiny structures, challenging, criticising and holding the administration to account. One session designed for non-executive members of the majority group addressed two key issues: how they could improve the way they work together and how they could better represent the views of the community. It looked at engaging local people, making stronger links with the council's area and user consultative forums, methods to interact with local groups and ways of using council structures to represent local issues.

*Lancashire* has a full programme of training and development for its members. Officers and members have collaborated in the design and delivery of a training course targeted at new officers to the council. 'The mysterious world of the elected member', co-facilitated by a councillor and officer, provides participants with an insight into the world of political activities, representative democracy and councillors' many and varied roles.

### Member role descriptions

A number of authorities, such as Leeds, have established specific role descriptions to enable both the authority and the members themselves to establish what is expected from them in their various roles. This, in turn, helps inform and develop specific learning and development programmes according to these roles.

### Member liaison groups

Decisions about member support and their priorities is best determined by members themselves. However, in some authorities, members seem unaware of the level and range of support on offer to them, or what they might be entitled to either within their own authority or to colleagues in other authorities.

*Southampton* has established a member user group, which is cross-party. Although not part of the formal decision-making process, it is used as a means by which members can raise issues of concern around how the authority can better support their representational work.

## Casework systems and support for surgeries

*Reading* has a tradition of members having direct access to the service in question. All members can request briefings in line with the member–officer protocol. *Halton* has developed a template member inquiry form to enable councillors to log and receive responses to ward work quickly and efficiently. *Darlington* supports councillors to hold ‘street surgeries’ in schools and accessible places such as supermarkets and homes for older people. *Worcestershire* and other counties organise joint surgeries across district, county and parish council areas.

### Things to try

- Regular briefings (face to face and written) and contact opportunities with officers for non-executive members.
- Ward-specific information and protocols on consultation.
- Regular communication, e.g. members’ newsletters, information on consultation activities, service-specific information, updated telephone directories.
- A strategic member-led approach to member learning and development.
- Casework and surgery support and systems and clear routes to enable members to raise issues.

### Objectives to consider

- There are structures to support non-executive members to have contact with senior officers, which enable them to carry out their representative roles and contribute to the council’s decision-making processes.
- Officers enable a flow of information to and from non-executive members.
- Non-executive members are provided with information resources to enable them to have a good understanding of the council and its work, and of their wards and responsibilities.

## Frontline councillors and decision making

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- Non-executive councillors on outside bodies are sufficiently supported and able to represent the authority.
- Councillors have appropriate support, knowledge and skills to participate in learning and development.
- Councillors have positive attitudes towards working with officers.

## 8 In practice

A number of detailed case studies are cited below to demonstrate how a range of different types of authority are engaging and involving their non-executive members in their decision-making processes.

These provide illustrations of how these authorities are engaging and involving their members in the work of the full council, the executive, scrutiny, area arrangements, through the political groups and by informal links and learning. A wide variety of approaches are used and this demonstrates that there is no one model for local authorities.

### Wolverhampton City Council

#### *The council*

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the role of the full council?

- The role of the full council has been recently reviewed to ensure that it continues to be the focus under the new constitutional arrangements for debates on important local issues.
- The council holds an annual state of the city debate. This involves a presentation from the leader of the council, which is a reflection on the previous year and sets out priorities for the forthcoming year. This is followed by debate.
- Executive members regularly give an account and short written report to full council summarising their activities and commenting on the strategies around their decisions. Members are able to question executive members on their report. Questions are put mainly by the opposition. This is developing and members report that it enables people to engage in a public forum with the executive.
- The council holds a full discussion on the outcome of scrutiny processes. This includes regular reporting on progress with reviews and other scrutiny work, and debate on the recommendations from individual scrutiny reports.
- The media regularly report on the council.

### ***Executive decisions***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

- The executive has appointed member champions. Some work closely with a portfolio holder, others freelance. Member champions and the executive meet regularly together. In addition, there is a regular forum, four or five times a year, for the member champions to meet and discuss proposals as a group with both the executive and scrutiny representatives. Each member champion is appointed a link officer (a senior officer who is able to provide them with information and advice) with whom they have regular meetings. The member champions are drawn from the ruling group. Role descriptions have been devised for each member champion and a special responsibility allowance is payable.
- The cabinet has appointed special advisory groups to support the work of the executive. These are cross-party task and finish groups involving executive and non-executive members.
- The press attend executive meetings.

### ***Scrutiny***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?

- Scrutiny bodies are chaired by majority group members. There is an overarching scrutiny body.
- The scrutiny agenda is identified by an annual away-day session, last year attended by 50 members who brainstormed key themes. An annual programme was filtered down from this session. Members are regularly asked to proactively identify issues for scrutiny. This may include matters that have arisen as a result of casework, for example. In addition scrutiny organises a series of committees of enquiry, which are able to look very quickly at issues, meeting for a day or so. From the list of reviews, members are able to self-allocate themselves to the issues that interest them. The membership of scrutiny panels is usually limited to 15. The scoping of reviews is member-led.



- As a matter of protocol, scrutiny reports on its activity to the executive and the executive in turn produces an action plan on scrutiny reports. Scrutiny has a process through which it is able to revisit reviews and audit them to see if its recommendations have been adopted and have been successful.
- Call-in is used frequently by opposition members and this is seen as an opportunity to hold a political debate on issues under consideration by the executive. The media report on political discussion.
- The council produces a scrutiny bulletin four times a year to support its communications with all members. It also has a computerised report and tracking system, which is posted on the web and which not only publicises agendas and minutes but also flags up by ward or interest and can produce e-mail alerts to those who register their interest in an issue or ward.
- Reports of scrutiny activity are routinely given to full council.
- Petitions are routed to scrutiny. They are received in relatively high numbers by the council each week and officers respond to them. They are reported to the scrutiny board.

### ***Area committees***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements?

- Area arrangements are evolving following a recent review and the authority is piloting neighbourhood management structures in seven areas.
- All members are involved in area forums.

### ***Political groups***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

- The majority group and the opposition have processes and structures for engaging non-executive members in their decision making. For example, both have budget-setting processes that involve their frontline councillors.

### *Informal links and learning*

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

- Each political group has access to a research assistant.
- Members have access to a casework system. The council supports member surgeries.
- Members regularly raise enquiries with officers. Scrutiny calls on officers to make presentations on issues that they raise.
- Seminars take place for all members on key and developing areas of work. Officers provide regular briefings to members.

## Coventry City Council

### *The council*

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the role of the full council?

- There is the opportunity for each political group to submit a notice of motion to the council meeting. Groups are canvassed in advance for subjects and topics can be instigated by non-executive members. At full council it is often the shadow spokespeople who tend to participate more than other frontline councillors in debate. Question time gives all members the opportunity to ask written and oral questions of the executive. More questions are put from opposition members and it's seen as a good opportunity to hold the executive to account. This is well used, as is the use of supplementaries and oral questions where politics comes to the fore. Questions may be put not only to cabinet members, but also to chairs of scrutiny, representatives on outside bodies such as the fire authority and housing trust representatives. Again, shadow spokespeople tend to dominate more than other frontline councillors. Recommendations are submitted to council from the executive, enabling all councillors to have the opportunity for debate.

### ***Executive decisions***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

- A shadow cabinet operates in Coventry.
- The cabinet has appointed advisory panels, which are cross-party and comprise a number of non-executive members. This is a mechanism that has been in place for some time, including under the previous administration. There is a consensus that this works well and it involves a wide range of frontline members. They enable cabinet members to obtain advice and have a dialogue with a wider group of members before decisions are reached. Members with an interest in the issue can take part and there is no limit on numbers. Members can self-select themselves onto the panels or by a process via the political groups.

### ***Scrutiny***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?

- Scrutiny is a contested area, as the number of boards and numbers of members participating have been recently reduced, and there are a small number (members of the opposition) who are not members of boards. A degree of compromise has been reached by introducing open scrutiny board meetings, when any frontline member can attend and contribute to discussion as a non-voting member. There is also a scrutiny co-ordinating committee where opposition members can raise topics for discussion. There are four boards and these are chaired by members cross-party. Separate from scrutiny boards, the council runs a number of scrutiny review groups. For some large-scale reviews all members can be invited to participate in a scrutiny review, but most are smaller groups. Any member can be appointed to participate in a separate review of a particular service or issue. These tend to be more informal than the boards. The cabinet has used scrutiny to take its advice and comments prior to making decisions. A recent change has been to circulate an extended version of the forward plan to members, so that scrutiny boards can identify in advance issues that they want to examine. Questions can be put to cabinet and senior officers. The authority has a protocol of sending government consultation papers to scrutiny before a formal cabinet response is formulated.

### ***Area committees***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements?

- The authority operates area forums within the city and these are supported by officers and attended by a nominated cabinet member. However, these are to be reviewed in the light of current changes being made in neighbourhood management in the city.

### ***Political groups***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

- There is an internal shadow cabinet in the majority group, a '1992 committee' to help them understand the cabinet role. Anyone can put their name forward to shadow a particular cabinet member in an area of interest. Group meetings have been rearranged so that they are alternate weeks. Individual officers can make presentations on their departments and roles, to inform members of their activities and contributions. This has opened up discussion with a wider group of members and has been regarded as positive and informative. Each member has an annual meeting with the leader to identify ways that the group can support them in terms of training and help. The group encourages non-executive members to take on a range of responsibilities, such as membership of external bodies.
- The main opposition party operates a mentoring system linking new members with one or more experienced members. Training is encouraged. The group has set up topic review groups on a number of topics identified by group members. These topic review groups help determine group policy and are chaired by frontline members.

### ***Informal links and learning***

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

- There are seminars offered on a political group basis, particularly in relation to the budget process. These may also be on topics such as the budget or restructuring of the fire service. There is less enthusiasm among the main opposition group for this system. Briefings are offered in major policy areas, but there are limited opportunities for briefings, although groups are able to invite a senior officer to make a presentation for a group briefing. As a consequence, it is the usual practice that officers try to fix briefings on the same night and groups run their meetings in sequence. There is a feeling among some members that chief officers concentrate on cabinet members and, while understandable, this causes tensions.
- Individual briefings are utilised by some members and these take place as a result of individual members building up relationships with particular officers. Members can contact the members' support service for advice, support or referral, or can contact an individual officer directly. They can also request a meeting with a cabinet member and arrange to hold a joint member–officers' meeting with the public. A conference room is available on the members' corridor for this purpose.

## **Newcastle City Council**

### ***The council***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the role of the full council?

- Each executive member gives an annual report to full council: these are scheduled throughout the municipal year. They are followed by question and answer sessions.
- The council is used in less formal sessions on occasion to consider subjects such as community safety or to hear from guest speakers such as the chief constable.
- Question time allows both oral and written questions. There is scope for supplementary questions. This is principally used by the opposition but is open to all members.
- Scrutiny can use, and has used, full council sessions to call-in executive decisions.

### ***Executive decisions***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

- The executive meetings are open for all members to attend and the opposition regularly attends executive meetings.
- The majority group has portfolio teams to work with executive members. These portfolio teams hold frequent meetings and include four non-executive members. They meet frequently to discuss performance management and the development of policy. On a quarterly basis they meet to review the work of the portfolio area.
- The leader of the council has an open-door session each Friday afternoon for all members and the public.

### ***Scrutiny***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?

- Scrutiny chairs are now held by opposition members. There is an overarching scrutiny management committee chaired by a majority group member.
- Call-in is mainly used by opposition members.
- The scrutiny work programme is published regularly to inform all members of forthcoming work.
- Executive members have made reports to scrutiny panels in advance of the executive decision-making process but this has not been widely used to date.
- A review is under way to consider ways to improve scrutiny processes. This includes a joint workshop with executive members and scrutiny panel chairs and vice-chairs.
- The majority group scrutiny members report to their group on scrutiny activity.

### ***Area committees***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements?

- Ward committees are a formal part of the council's decision-making process. They are made up of ward councillors and have regular meetings. They were established in the mid-1970s but have evolved over time and a new role is proposed for them from 2006. Area committees are being phased out in favour of a more neighbourhood ward-based services approach. Ward committee co-ordinators provide the officer support for their work. They will be used: to identify community priorities; as a mechanism to put ward councillors at the heart of community engagement; to link formal public meetings to more sophisticated community engagement techniques; to provide a strong role in service planning, delivery and monitoring; and to administer grant aid.
- Ward committees, and therefore all councillors through them, have routes to other decision-making processes, as they will be able to refer ward committee issues to scrutiny, to the neighbourhood management sub-committee, or externally, including to the LSP.
- Ward councillors have oversight over ward plans, monitoring and performance management of services at ward level.
- The leader of the council has a regular cycle of meetings with ward members of the majority group in each ward.

### ***Political groups***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

- The majority group has increased the frequency of its political group meetings and these are now held twice a month. Each month one meeting is given over to policy and is timed to take place prior to the executive's meeting. The group takes reports from each executive member on their portfolio activities. The second meeting takes place prior to full council and deals with council business and other group matters.
- Political assistants have not been appointed.

### ***Informal links and learning***

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

- E-mail has greatly increased the opportunities for all councillors to have contact with officers.
- There is a culture of open and free exchange between officers and members.
- Councillors are responsible for their own casework. There are procedures for escalating issues arising from casework if they are not resolved.
- Member services are provided for all members and offer secretarial and research assistance.

## **Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council**

Doncaster has changed significantly over the past five years and introducing mayoral governance has had a major impact on the borough. The directly elected mayor leads the council, setting policy and budget frameworks.

### ***The council***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the role of the full council?

- All councillors have the opportunity to submit a notice of a motion to any council meeting. There is no restriction on the number of motions debated at council. There is no shadow executive in operation.
- The authority operates at each council meeting a question time session, which gives all members the opportunity to ask written and oral questions. Written questions have to be submitted seven working days before the meeting for inclusion on the agenda and, while the majority of questions tend to come from the opposition, members of the majority group can and do ask questions. These can be directed at the executive and the chair of the overview and scrutiny management committee.



- The authority has introduced a green/white paper initiative, which was started on the introduction of mayoral governance three years ago. In that time, there have been white papers on black and minority ethnic issues ('Towards a better understanding'); neighbourhoods ('Making a difference in your neighbourhood'); housing ('Decent homes in decent neighbourhoods') and special educational needs ('Learning together – proposals for pupils with special educational needs'). A green paper (consultative), entitled 'Doncaster's tomorrow – ensuring every child matters', has recently been launched. Scrutiny has a key role to play in this process and would be involved from the scoping stage.

### ***Executive decisions***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

- The main vehicle for influencing the executive is seen to be through the scrutiny process.
- Each cabinet member is appointed by the mayor and is responsible for delivering aspects of the mayoral manifesto, policy development and performance management. Some non-executive members have expressed their concerns about their ability to be involved in policy development.
- There is no shadow executive system and there are no cabinet advisory panels.

### ***Scrutiny***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?

- There is an overarching overview and scrutiny management committee (OSMC), which sets its annual work plan and scrutinises corporate issues. There are four specific overview and scrutiny panels. These are: healthier communities and vulnerable people panel; schools, children and young people panel; safer and stronger communities panel; and the sustainable communities panel. The panels examine the policy framework not only of the 13 statutory plans but also of other strategies such as emergency planning and the corporate equality strategy.

- OSMC and the panels consider issues included within the corporate plan theme that relate to their area. In relation to budget setting, the process is due to change, as the priorities identified in the council's corporate plan will drive the budget process based on the actions contained specifically within it. The scrutiny panels have recently been realigned to reflect the corporate plan themes and will monitor the progress on outcomes identified within each theme.
- All councillors, excluding nine cabinet members, are members of a scrutiny panel. There was a 71 per cent attendance rate by councillors attending scrutiny committee meetings last year. Each scrutiny committee/panel holds approximately eight meetings a year. There has been a deliberate attempt to ensure that scrutiny chairs come from opposition parties and opposition councillors chair two of the four thematic panels. The chair and vice-chair of the OSMC are also opposition members.
- There is evidence that the impact of scrutiny on the executive has been seen as influential. Where scrutiny recommendations are accepted by the executive, these are revisited to identify if they have led to changes in executive decisions made. Call-in has been used but none has resulted in any changes of decision.
- Every six weeks there is a meeting between the chair and vice-chairs of scrutiny and the cabinet and main officers.
- There is a possibility of information at one scrutiny panel not being shared with other panels. One way scrutiny has tried to combat this is by holding a monthly meeting of scrutiny chairs and vice-chairs to discuss their agendas with the minutes of these meetings then being e-mailed to all members.
- The scrutiny support team has recently been relocated within the policy and performance directorate and this is seen as a move to increase the opportunity for scrutiny to play a more significant role in policy development.

### ***Area committees***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements?

- Doncaster is in the process of restructuring its area arrangements. It is therefore difficult to assess the impact that non-executive councillors are able to have on

their work. There are now six neighbourhood teams, which are supported by area managers and team leaders with their offices based in the neighbourhoods.

- Community forums are also undergoing change. They are open meetings for members of the public to attend and these are organised on the same geographical basis as the neighbourhoods. It is envisaged that they may play a more meaningful role now that services have been organised on neighbourhood lines.
- In Doncaster, a community audit was followed by each of 20 neighbourhood management areas establishing a neighbourhood management partnership and forging a management plan with local people through a 'Planning for real' process. This will impact directly on service delivery and on the strategic planning process by linking into Doncaster's strategic partnership.

### ***Political groups***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

- There is no shadow executive.
- A review is planned to examine how the involvement of all councillors in policy development can be enhanced. This is supported cross-party.

### ***Informal links and learning***

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

- Training and mentoring is offered and this tends to be organised on a cross-party basis. This has, for example, included experienced councillors from one political party mentoring younger members of an opposing party.
- The council, mainly through the deputy mayor's office, has organised training and development workshops and policy seminars, which are open to all councillors.

### London Borough of Brent

#### *The council and executive decisions*

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

- Brent has had a fraught political history but, since 1998, it has had political stability and the current leadership has a consensual political style. It has limited formal structures in place to enable frontline councillors to engage with the executive but informal opportunities are widely available. It has a lead member for democratic services who is committed to ensuring a full role for the frontline councillor.
- There is a general debate at every council meeting when frontline councillors can raise any issue about the executive report, the scrutiny and overview committee reports, and any major strategies that have been submitted to council for approval. There is also an opposition debate for 25 minutes at each council meeting. Any councillor can put a motion to full council and these often lead to a change in the executive's policy. For example, one councillor put forward a motion to amend a controlled parking zone in his ward and this led to a change in policy.
- Council meetings are held every month and give a further opportunity for frontline councillors, which alternates. Every other month, three frontline councillors have the opportunity to raise an item and present this for three to five minutes. There is then a 15-minute debate on this issue. At the alternate meeting there is a question time in this slot. There are ten questions to the executive, two of which are reserved for each opposition group. The remaining six questions are submitted in writing before the meeting and are drawn out of a hat. Those not dealt with in full council receive written responses from the executive.
- The budget process starts with an executive away day in June/July, which is also attended by the whip. The budget draft is submitted to full council in November. It contains options at this stage. A joint meeting of the overview committee and the scrutiny committee reviews the draft. At the final full council meeting in February/March each party presents its budget and a budget is agreed by the council.
- The executive might react to an issue raised by a frontline councillor by setting up a task group.

### ***Scrutiny***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?

- There is a scrutiny committee chaired by the opposition and an overview committee chaired by the majority group.
- The overview committee aims to assist the council and the executive in the development of the authority's policy framework and budget by in-depth analysis of policy issues. It takes a longer-term view and has policy development panels. Its report goes to the executive. Every council meeting also considers reports from both the overview and scrutiny committees.
- The scrutiny committee focuses on implementation and monitors whether the executive takes note of the proposals of the overview committee. It has a forward plan select committee and carries out considerable pre-decision scrutiny. There is also a performance and finance select committee and scrutiny panels on policy areas. There is post-decision scrutiny and officers and the executive are held to account.

### ***Area committees***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements?

- Brent held a 'Ward working' summit on 21 October 2005. It sees ward working as a way of working that creates a strong role for frontline councillors and makes the council and council services more sensitive to and accessible at a neighbourhood level.
- It established six pilot wards outside its major regeneration areas, three with majority party control and three with opposition party control. Each ward has £30,000 to pump-prime activity, to bend mainstream spending appropriately and to address any barriers to change.
- The officer support to the ward councillors in the six pilots comes from a small team with one team leader and three ward support officers. Each ward support officer will support the members in two wards. There is also a ward co-ordinator who ensures that ward issues are fed into the corporate structure. These ward

co-ordinators are senior or middle managers (e.g. the head of museums or a senior housing manager). There is a core team in each ward of a street care officer, a community safety officer and a police support officer who help address street scene, community safety and liveability issues. In addition, Brent has also established ward plans drawn up by ward councillors. These have been facilitated by ward support officers who have drawn up a bespoke programme for the councillors to consult with the community and have held three or four meetings a year for the ward councillors to engage in discussion with partners. There is also a ward newsletter four times a year and this has included a tear-off slip for views on the ward plan to be sent to the councillors.

- Brent is looking at practice in other local authorities and developing its ward working policy. There are still issues around getting cross-party support for the initiative. The council is currently looking at how the ward plans can be fed into the business-planning and budget-making process. The link to the LSP also needs to be developed. The whole initiative is being evaluated by external consultants Ecotec and they will report in January 2006. Proposals to extend ward working boroughwide are then likely to form part of the manifesto for the next election in May 2006.

### ***Political groups***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

- The group is seen as an important part of the decision-making process – hence the whip attends the executive away day. The group considers major decisions. Any member can place an item on the group agenda. Contentious issues are often referred to group and the party before a decision is made. A recent example is the discussion on whether to proceed with an academy school and where this should be. The executive has been strongly guided by group discussions.
- The three whips from the three political groups used to meet once a month before full council to ensure that frontline issues were being addressed. As the constitution has bedded down this meeting has been dropped but the three whips still co-ordinate on an informal basis.

### ***Informal links and learning***

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

- One of the members interviewed felt that there was a great deal of respect for other people's points of view and a good understanding of the role of officers.
- Some lead members who have a service brief that is covered by one department will schedule a briefing with the service director to which opposition portfolio holders will be invited.
- As part of its member development programme, Brent has service briefings that are open to all members.
- There is a constitutional group with a membership of three non-executive councillors. These meet with policy officers and democratic services to review if there are any issues with the way the constitution is working. Frontline members can refer concerns about their role in decision making to this group.

## **Cambridge City Council**

### ***The council***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the role of the full council?

- The full council meeting is formal in its style and has procedures that allow notices of motion and oral questions to the executive with a day's notice and with supplementaries permitted.
- The full council meeting is regarded as a political event and, although any member may put forward motions, it is the opposition that mainly uses it to hold executive members to account.
- Groups may put forward topics for debate and council meetings have been used to hold a more informal discussion of local issues. This has been used, for example, to debate issues associated with street drinking that came forward from

area committees and then came to council. This demonstrates that non-executive members can, and do, raise matters in the full council arena.

- Executive decisions may also be raised at full council for debate.
- Leading opposition members are briefed regularly by officers prior to full council meetings.

### ***Executive decisions***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

- Officers consult ward councillors about relevant issues in their wards before the subject is dealt with by the executive. This is done using a pre-scrutiny process. The majority of executive decisions are looked at through a pre-scrutiny process with the proposed amendments made by scrutiny members available before the final executive decisions are made.
- Frontline councillors have the opportunity to consider key issues (and some selected non-key issues) that are going to the executive member for decision. They are briefed on them and then examine them in pre-scrutiny. The executive member makes decisions only after this process. There are five pre-scrutiny committees each with nine councillor members. Cambridge has 35 councillors, so this in theory means that every non-executive councillor could be on one pre-scrutiny committee, although a number of members have chosen to concentrate on regulatory committees and serve on no scrutiny committees.
- There is a lot of discussion of issues through the groups before pre-scrutiny meetings.
- There are some working parties for in-depth policy development.

### ***Scrutiny***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?



- This is a contentious area among members. Opposition frontline councillors feel frustrated that they have little influence and would like to make better use of the scrutiny process, but feel that they are hampered by having limited officer support, and little capacity to examine other issues outside the pre-scrutiny process.
- However, there is evidence of scrutiny having an impact on executive decisions mainly because of their early involvement by having a pre-scrutiny process. There is little scrutiny of executive decisions once they are made.
- Little use of call-in is made.
- Members can put forward issues they want to be subject to pre-scrutiny and will do this by looking at the forward plan. There are also occasional ad hoc working groups.
- The pre-scrutiny process considers, for example, the budget and service plans and there is therefore scope for non-executive members to have an input through the service-planning process. They also receive six monthly reports on performance against service plans.
- Councillors, groups and spokespersons are briefed before they attend scrutiny committees on key executive decision issues.

### ***Area committees***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements?

- There are four area committees. Currently, these are chaired by non-executive members chosen by the political groups. Local members can put items on the agenda. There is support from committee managers for each committee. Members of the committee receive some training and chairs are briefed by officers prior to meetings. Planning decisions go to the committees. There are some delegated resources for each area committee. Executive members attend on occasion. The public can attend and ask questions during part of the meeting.
- Again, there are mixed views about how well they are working, with some members taking the view that the present system should be reviewed so as to further empower ward councillors.

### ***Political groups***

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

- The political groups have processes that support non-executive members to be involved in decisions within groups.
- In advance of council meetings the groups have a good record of involving their members. The council's annual statement, for example, is extensively discussed in the controlling group before it is placed on the annual meeting agenda. Similarly, budget proposals are subject to increasing group discussion.
- Executive councillors meet with their group colleagues before scrutiny meetings and at regular group meetings to develop policy proposals in conjunction with their non-executive colleagues.
- At a more formal level, scrutiny committee chairs are very much seen by executive councillors as partners, with the chairs representing frontline members in developing policy and the forward plan.
- The majority group makes heavy use of e-mail for the dissemination of information.
- Opposition members have adequate access to briefings.

### ***Informal links and learning***

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

- There is a strong relationship between officers and all members, which is good and positive. To a large extent it is up to individual members to decide how to form these relationships. There are resources available to all members, such as the services officer briefings on important developments and officer briefings to group meetings.
- Briefings are available to all members as part of the pre-scrutiny process and officers brief the groups on major strategic issues.

- There is a member development programme – departments annually offer up topics for member training and these are well attended.
- Officers readily agree to help any ward councillor on information they need for their ward work. The overall culture is that members can be in touch with officers without appointments and officers encourage informal contact to find out what members are thinking. The chief executive has regular meetings with the leader of the opposition, as do directors with opposition spokespeople.

## 9 Recommendations

This report demonstrates that there is no single model for authorities to adopt to ensure that their non-executive members are effectively engaged in the decision-making processes of the authority. It has considered whether there are a set of outcomes that would be evident in a local authority where the frontline councillor was fully engaged and participating positively in decision making. These are suggested as a set of standards against which authorities could 'health check' their own processes and procedures to gauge their performance.

Recommendations arising from the study are as follows.

- Authorities should 'health check' their own processes and procedures to ensure that their non-executive members are effectively engaged in the decision-making and policy-development processes of the authority.
- Authorities should review their structures, processes and support to all councillors at timely intervals to ensure that non-executive members are able to be involved in decision making and policy development.
- Authorities should look at implementing initiatives that complement the authority's own culture and constitutional arrangements.
- Authorities should ensure that the initiatives they implement to support non-executive councillors complement each other and that they do not detract from, or impose other barriers to, the authorities' other decision-making processes.
- There should be a member-led and member-inclusive approach to reviewing, developing and implementing changes to constitutional arrangements. This should include the involvement of non-executive members. Authorities should consider using outside facilitation, such as the LGIU's 'All members matter' programme, to support this process.
- There is adequate support given to supporting the non-executive role, including sufficient capacity to allow non-executive members access to senior officer support and for senior officers to learn from the skills and knowledge of non-executive members.
- The learning and development needs of non-executive members are considered and supported effectively to allow them to fulfil their role.

- Authorities should ensure there are clear routes for decision-making processes that involve and engage non-executive members. These should be clear to new councillors so they are not reliant on personal relationships and interests.
- Authorities should ensure that there are clear routes for non-executive councillors to escalate issues through the decision-making processes if they are not initially able to be resolved.
- Authorities should ensure that there are roles that are satisfying to both executive and non-executive members. This should include a clear appreciation among members and officers of the significant roles that both play and should address, according to the authority's own model, issues of community leadership at ward level.

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# Appendix 1: Methodology and questionnaire

The starting point was for a systematic review of the data sets and of our existing knowledge to define the role of the frontline councillor and clarify the various ways in which frontline councillors are able to be engaged in, involved with and participate in decision making within a range of authorities.

## Stage one

At the first stage we carried out a piece of desk research examining data sets to draw out information on best practice and barriers on the use of frontline councillors in relation to their ward role; a wider community leadership role; their role in relation to area structures; their role in relation to neighbourhood management; their personal development both as community leaders and future executive members; their role in policy development through scrutiny; the use of full council; their ability to input into executive decision making; and their ability to influence group policy making. We did this by:

- undertaking a critical study of the existing research and information on the involvement of frontline councillors in decision-making processes that has been undertaken by ODPM, Home Office, National Assembly for Wales, LGIU, LGA, Audit Commission, IDeA, individual local authorities and academic institutions
- examining the prime data contained in the LGC awards on councillor development for the last five years and the MJ awards on community leadership
- examining CPA results and other performance information from 'Excellent' authorities and the Audit Commission to draw out some conclusions on structures
- conducting interviews with the LGA political advisers and some of the IDeA senior peers to discuss with them good practice in political groups for engaging frontline councillors in decision making
- examining the existing information through the LGIU's work on 'All members matter', area and neighbourhood governance, scrutiny, the Home Office civic pioneers' work, our training and development work and our work on learning networks (LASE and the community strategies network)

- conducting an assessment of the information held by the LGIU on the support for recruitment and retention of BME and women frontline councillors
- carrying out a critical review of the data and research held by universities, LGA, IdeA and JRF on governance and other partner organisations including examining work on organisational culture and scrutiny as part of the contextual framework for effective engagement of frontline councillors.

### **Stage two**

The second stage of research involved a questionnaire (see Figure A1.1). This questionnaire was sent to all our local authority affiliates to seek examples of good practice of involving frontline councillors in decision making. It sought to identify problems and barriers for frontline councillors to be engaged in, to be involved with and to influence decision making.

### **Stage three**

The first and second phases identified general issues and authorities worthy of appropriate case study work. The third phase consisted of a programme of extended interviews with a cross-section of frontline councillors, executive members and officers in a broadly representative sample of authorities.

### **Stage four**

This stage involved an assessment of the findings, good practice and barriers, and analysis of effective processes, structures or cultures.

Figure A1.1 The questionnaire

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION UNIT**

Name of council: \_\_\_\_\_

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

**The council:**

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the role of the full council?

For example, are there clear opportunities for members (especially those not on the executive) to contribute to development of the council's overarching policy framework, corporate plan and budget, and do members who take up these opportunities feel they can make a difference?

How do council meetings support and engage frontline councillors in debate of borough-wide issues, executive accountability, executive/scrutiny relationships?

**Executive decisions:**

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of the executive?

For example, are there processes and support systems for consulting ward/divisional councillors on executive decisions? How do frontline councillors have access to information and support about delegated decisions? Have you investigated innovations in structures such as executive support or shadow office holders/informal deputies/policy development groups and panels (separate from scrutiny)?

### **Scrutiny:**

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in influencing the work of scrutiny?

For example, are there processes and support systems for informing and consulting frontline councillors (not on the relevant scrutiny body)? What is the impact of scrutiny on executive decisions (pre-decision consultation, and through call-in), also the role of scrutiny bodies in inputting to policy and budget development?

### **Area committees:**

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of area or neighbourhood arrangements (if you have them)?

For example, are there processes for enabling frontline councillors to make and influence decisions on the area bodies? Are there any specific decision-making powers that are delegated? Are there effective debriefing systems in place that feed back to those with relevant responsibilities whether cabinet members or officers? Are there effective support systems in place to enable frontline councillors to be engaged in the work of the area body? How do the area bodies and the frontline councillors on them relate to the executive and how are tensions between the executive and area bodies dealt with?

**Political groups:**

To what extent and how are frontline councillors engaged in the work of the political group?

For example, are there processes for enabling frontline councillors to contribute to the decision making of the group and to be informed of group policy? What support systems are in place to assist frontline councillors to be engaged in the work of the executive, scrutiny and policy development within the group?

**Informal links and learning**

To what extent and how do frontline councillors have dialogue with and share information with senior managers? And to what extent and how do senior council officers learn from frontline councillors?

For example, are there processes by which officers provide frontline councillors with written and personal briefings, other written information, interaction with casework and complaints, ward profiles, engagement with councillors as part of public consultation and other informal contact? How are frontline councillors' information needs met?

## Appendix 2: Diagnostic tool

Authorities may ‘health check’ their processes and procedures for the involvement of their frontline councillors. We have developed a set of standards or benchmarks to help local councils judge their performance. These do *not* set out or promote a particular structure but identify the outcomes that would be visible in a local council where the frontline councillor was fully engaged and participating positively in influencing decision making.

**Table A2.1 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in full council**

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<p>The council has an agreed and effective policy framework, corporate plan and budget, with involvement from all members.</p>	<p>There is broad agreement between the executive and non-executive councillors on what policies beyond the statutory policy framework should be approved by the council.</p> <p>There are opportunities, which involve councillors, to review and improve the participation of councillors in policy making and there are clear opportunities for members (especially those not on the executive) to contribute to the development of these policies/budget, both informal and formal, and members take up these opportunities and feel they can make a difference.</p> <p>Examples can be shown of members’ priorities being incorporated into every element of the policy framework and budget. Lead officers can describe how members have been involved. Officers feel there has been some positive input.</p> <p>There are effective arrangements for performance implementation and review, which involve the full council when necessary.</p>	<p>Non-executive members see proposed policy statements/ budget for the first time in the council agenda papers.</p> <p>There are members with whom senior officers have rarely had contact.</p>

*Continued*

**Table A2.1 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in full council –  
*continued***

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
Council meetings are a focus for debate of borough-wide issues, executive accountability, executive–scrutiny relationships.	<p>There is constructive debate at the council meeting, involving executive and non-executive councillors.</p> <p>The council has experimented with a variety of formats and styles for council meetings, to encourage participation and debate.</p> <p>There is media coverage from council meetings.</p>	<p>Council meetings are characterised by oppositional/ confrontational party politics (not genuine debate and disagreement) and party whipping briefings. And/or formal ceremonial functions.</p> <p>For significant proportions of the council meeting, many members are not in the chamber.</p>
Council committees function effectively.	Committees of the council work effectively. Those councillors not on them understand their role, get prior information on issues that affect their ward and feel they can influence decisions when necessary.	Councillors not on planning or regulatory committees do not receive timely information about their decisions and do not feel they can influence them.
Councillors have appropriate knowledge and skills to participate in council-wide policy making.	<p>There is good member understanding of policy and budget issues, and of processes to develop council-wide policy.</p> <p>There is training or other appropriate briefing opportunity on these issues for members and take-up of these opportunities.</p>	<p>Many members cannot name or describe the main priorities of significant policy documents or summarise the implications for their ward.</p> <p>There is no appropriate training/ briefings or opportunities are not taken up.</p>
Councillors have positive attitudes towards the corporate policy-making process.	Attitudes: members feel they have had a chance to contribute.	Councillors have a negative or passive attitude towards full council decisions and regard council meetings as a waste of time.

**Table A2.2 Benchmarks for non-executive member influence on executive decisions**

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<p>The executive has an effective dialogue with non-executive members and allows input into its decisions (including those on the forward plan, key decisions and delegated decisions) with involvement from all members.</p>	<p>There is broad understanding between the executive and non-executive councillors on what policies should be approved by the executive and those that should be approved by full council.</p> <p>The executive is able to show good forward planning, with clear programmes to develop policy and key decisions in a realistic timetable before approval by the executive or individual cabinet members. There are opportunities, which involve non-executive councillors, to review and improve the participation of councillors in policy making.</p> <p>There are clear opportunities for members (especially those not on the executive) to contribute to development of these decisions, both informal and formal, and members take up these opportunities and feel they can make a difference.</p> <p>Examples can be shown of non-executive councillors' involvement being incorporated into executive decisions.</p>	
<p>Strategic approach to the appointment and use of advisers to the executive.</p>	<p>Executive appoints backbench members to become community champions.</p>	
<p>Executive enables a flow of information to and from non-executive members.</p>	<p>Councillors not on the executive understand their role, get prior information on issues that affect their ward or communities they represent and feel they can influence decisions when necessary.</p> <p>Councillors are able to have sight of executive agendas and to attend the meetings.</p>	<p>Councillors not on the executive do not receive timely information about their decisions and do not feel they can influence them.</p>

*Continued*



**Table A2.2 Benchmarks for non-executive member influence on executive decisions – *continued***

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
	<p>All items (not just key decisions) on executive agendas are circulated prior to meetings to non-executive members.</p> <p>Executive decisions are circulated quickly to all members.</p>	
<p>Councillors have appropriate knowledge and skills to participate in executive decision making.</p>	<p>There is good member understanding of executive decision-making processes and how non-executive members can influence these processes.</p> <p>There is training or other appropriate briefing opportunity on these issues for members and take-up of these opportunities.</p>	<p>Many members cannot name or describe the main priorities of significant policy documents or summarise the implications for their ward.</p> <p>There is no appropriate training/ briefings or opportunities are not taken up.</p>
<p>Councillors have positive attitudes towards the executive decision-making process.</p>	<p>Attitudes: members feel they have had a chance to contribute.</p>	<p>Councillors have a negative or passive attitude towards executive decisions – they are regarded as the exclusive domain of the cabinet members/ officers.</p> <p>A significant proportion of councillors have tried to influence executive decisions and have had no impact.</p>

**Table A2.3 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in overview and scrutiny**

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<p>Overview and scrutiny are empowered to set their own challenging agenda with input possible from all non-executive members.</p>	<p>Councillors not on the executive have a clear understanding of the role of overview and scrutiny.</p> <p>Scrutiny sets its own challenging agenda and is dealing not only with reviewing executive decision making. There are also processes to involve non-executive members in policy development.</p> <p>There are opportunities to involve all non-executive councillors across the whole overview and scrutiny programme.</p> <p>Overview and scrutiny are able to challenge the performance of council services and there are effective arrangements for performance management, implementation and review.</p> <p>Members find the forward plan clear and informative. There is active use of the call-in process to debate and challenge executive decisions, either before or after they are taken.</p>	<p>Overview and scrutiny input is ignored, no positive impact of overview and scrutiny on council-wide decisions can be evidenced.</p> <p>There are no effective means for non-executive members to contribute to or question performance during the year.</p>
<p>The executive takes note of and responds to the reports and views of overview and scrutiny</p>	<p>There are clear processes for overview and scrutiny reports to be fed into the executive with a cycle of reviews to monitor implementation of adopted action plans.</p> <p>The executive has utilised the skills and capacity of overview and scrutiny by actively seeking their views on a range of issues. There are formal routes to do this.</p>	<p>No formal feedback is given by the executive to overview and scrutiny reports.</p>
<p>Overview and scrutiny provides a focus to develop policy for borough-wide issues.</p>	<p>Overview and scrutiny has experimented with a variety of formats and styles, and enables non-executive members to engage in wider participation and debate both within the authority and with external bodies.</p>	<p>There is low attendance at overview and scrutiny meetings. Members do not believe they are able to influence executive or officer views.</p>

*Continued*

**Table A2.3 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in overview and scrutiny – *continued***

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Overview and scrutiny operates in an open and constructive style.	<p>Overview and scrutiny reports are considered and debated in full council to engender a wider debate.</p> <p>There is constructive debate at overview and scrutiny.</p> <p>Members receive regular information that updates them on all planned and ongoing scrutiny activity, and actively seeks input from all non-executive members.</p>	Overview and scrutiny meetings are characterised by oppositional party politics and whipping of political parties is evident.
Councillors have appropriate support, knowledge and skills to participate in overview and scrutiny.	<p>There is good member understanding of overview and scrutiny processes, including call-in, and the authority has considered mechanisms to ensure non-executive members have the resources to support their work.</p> <p>There is media support for scrutiny work from the council's press office.</p> <p>There is training or other appropriate briefing opportunity on these issues for members and take-up of these opportunities.</p>	There is no appropriate training/ briefings or opportunities are not taken up.
Councillors have positive attitudes towards the overview and scrutiny process.	Attitudes: members have accepted the new arrangements, have contributed to their development and working, and feel they have had a chance to contribute.	<p>Councillors have a negative or passive attitude towards overview and scrutiny.</p> <p>A significant proportion of councillors have tried to influence policy decisions through the scrutiny process and have had no impact.</p>

**Table A2.4 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in area/ neighbourhood arrangements**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
Area arrangements enable all councillors to be well informed about local areas of concern, and to contribute to developing policies and services as a result.	<p>All councillors, through area arrangements, are able to raise matters of local concern.</p> <p>All councillors have a good understanding of the role of the area structure, the routes and mechanisms for decision making arising from discussion in the area structure and the connections between the area structure, the executive, overview and scrutiny and service performance.</p> <p>There are clear routes for ward councillors to take forward issues raised within the area structures into the community strategy with the council, with the LSP and its themed groups, and with partner organisations.</p> <p>There are opportunities in which the area structures can hold the public agencies to account.</p>	<p>There is no meaningful link between area structures and other structures.</p> <p>Many members feel that area arrangements are an extension of ward surgeries.</p> <p>There are no effective means for those involved in area arrangements to contribute to or question performance during the year.</p> <p>There is no evidence that members advocating local views raised through area arrangements have been listened to.</p>
Clear opportunities to receive regular briefings from senior officers on matters of local concern.	<p>Regular briefings from senior officers are encouraged to be offered to all members.</p> <p>Officers fully brief and support members prior to meetings of area arrangements.</p>	Officer briefings are limited to written material.
Strategic approach to community capacity building so that ward councillors can develop their ability to consult and hear the views of a wide range of people from within their ward.	<p>The authority actively encourages and supports community capacity building, and enables the ward councillor to be part of this development.</p> <p>Consultation may be commissioned, and there are resources to support this, by area arrangements. Results of authority-wide consultation are regularly fed into area arrangements.</p>	<p>There is little or no community capacity building or, where it exists, this is not through or with the support of the local ward councillor.</p> <p>Consultation is mainly used by officers, the executive or scrutiny bodies.</p>

*Continued*

**Table A2.4 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in area/ neighbourhood arrangements – *continued***

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
A flow of information.	<p>Councillors receive regular information from the authority on issues that affect their ward or communities they represent and on events.</p> <p>The authority has given consideration to ward profiling, undertaking surveys of local opinion and drawing up area plans to support the ward councillors' role.</p> <p>Members report back to their relevant political group meetings on local issues and intelligence in a way that helps inform group colleagues.</p>	Councillors do not receive timely information about issues within their ward and do not feel they can influence them.
Councillors have appropriate support knowledge and skills to participate in area arrangements.	<p>There is good member understanding of area working and its processes.</p> <p>There is training on community leadership and working with communities for ward members or other appropriate briefing opportunities for members and take-up of these opportunities.</p> <p>There is support for the ward councillor so that the progress of issues raised through local area arrangements can be tracked and reported back.</p>	<p>There is no appropriate training/ briefings or opportunities are not taken up.</p> <p>Support for group processes is not developed or seen as important.</p>
Councillors have positive attitudes towards area arrangements and structures.	Attitudes: members feel they have had a chance to contribute.	Councillors have a negative or passive attitude towards area arrangements.

**Table A2.5 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in political group decisions**

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<p>The political group enables non-executive councillors to be well informed about group policy and the procedures for developing policies within group, and to have an effective dialogue with individual councillors to allow input into their decisions.</p>	<p>All councillors within the group (including those not on the executive) have a clear understanding of a set of consistent policy preferences and policy priorities (or manifesto) of the group.</p> <p>There is broad understanding within the group about what policies should be approved by the whole group and within group meeting and those exercised by office holders or smaller groups of members within group.</p> <p>There are structures in place for enabling non-executive and executive members (if there are any) to have regular contact and open discussion. The group demonstrates good forward planning, with clear programmes to develop policy in a realistic timetable.</p> <p>There are opportunities to review and improve the participation of all group members in policy making.</p>	<p>Officer briefings are offered only to majority party or executive members.</p>
<p>Clear opportunities to receive regular briefings from senior officers are available to all groups and a wide range of members within those groups.</p>	<p>Regular briefings from senior officers are encouraged to be offered to all groups and extended to include a wide range of members within individual groups.</p> <p>Members of minority parties and independents as well as larger groups have access to senior staff for regular contact and briefings.</p>	<p>Officer briefings are offered only to majority party or executive members.</p>
<p>A flow of information within group.</p>	<p>Councillors receive regular information from their group (and from any group executive members) on issues that affect their ward or communities they represent, events and key policy issues, and feel they can influence decisions when necessary.</p>	<p>Councillors do not receive timely information about group policy development and their decisions, and do not feel they can influence them.</p>

*Continued*

**Table A2.5 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in political group decisions – *continued***

Objective	Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Councillors have appropriate support knowledge and skills to participate in group decision making.	Regular group meetings at which there is free political discussion involving all members.	Discussion focuses on the office holders and lead spokespeople.
	The group has discussed how best to communicate among its members and has considered possibilities such as weekly e-news magazine format/ newsletters that flag up news, events and key policy issues.	
	Group meetings include an opportunity to report on ward issues and local intelligence in a way that helps inform policy development.	
	There is always a group meeting before a council meeting to ensure a full discussion beforehand.	
	There is good member understanding of group processes.  The group regularly considers its training needs and considers building its own capacity through an audit of training needs and arranging a training programme that maximises the potential and effectiveness of all members not only lead members, appointing a group member with responsibility for member development and a programme of buddy mentoring for new members.	There is no appropriate training/ briefings or opportunities are not taken up.  Support for group processes is not developed or seen as important.
	The group has considered its support needs and has discussed these with council officers. This may include the appointment of support from a political group assistant, regular provision of briefings, secretarial support and special responsibility allowances for group office holders.	

*Continued overleaf*

**Table A2.5 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement in political group decisions – *continued***

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
	The group considers holding an annual away day to consider future policy development and organises regular mini sessions on policy-specific areas to ensure ongoing development.	
Councillors have positive attitudes towards the group decision-making process.	Attitudes: members feel they have had a chance to contribute.	Councillors have a negative or passive attitude towards group decisions – they are regarded as the domain of the office holders/spokespeople.

**Table A2.6 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement through informal links and learning**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
There are structures to support non-executive members to have contact with senior officers, which enable them to carry out their representative roles and contribute to the council's decision-making processes.	<p>Councillors not on the executive have a clear understanding of how and when they are able to make contact with both senior and operational officers, and examples can be shown of non-executive councillors being consulted in advance of decisions being made or being involved in scrutiny where they have experience, knowledge or interest to contribute.</p> <p>All councillors have the opportunity to report in ward issues and local intelligence that helps to inform policy development.</p> <p>All councillors have the opportunity to request an officer briefing.</p> <p>Councillors not on the executive have designated officers who are able to provide direct support to them in their representative roles. There are systems, processes and targets to help members handle casework effectively.</p>	<p>Only executive members feel they have the support of officers.</p> <p>Many members make no attempt to contact senior officers.</p> <p>There are no effective means for non-executive members to contribute to or question officers during the year.</p> <p>Surgeries and casework are not supported and are regarded as private political activity.</p>

*Continued*



**Table A2.6 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement through informal links and learning – *continued***

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
Officers enable a flow of information to and from non-executive members.	<p>Councillors not on the executive understand their role, get prior information on issues that affect their ward or communities they represent, are consulted on issues affecting their wards, have their views recorded and feel they can influence decisions when necessary.</p> <p>Councillors are able to have sight of all meeting agendas, attend the meetings and there are arrangements to allow them to speak where relevant.</p> <p>Cabinet decisions are circulated quickly to all members.</p> <p>There is a clear expectation that executive members and any champions/advisers to the executive involve and engage non-executive councillors.</p>	Councillors not on the executive do not receive timely information about decisions and do not feel they can influence them.
Non-executive members are provided with information resources to enable them to have a good understanding of the council and its work, and of their wards and responsibilities.	<p>All members are provided with induction material, an A–Z of council services and a telephone directory of key contacts including officers and members, which is routinely updated.</p> <p>Results of all area/ neighbourhood arrangements and other consultations are relayed to relevant ward councillors and fed into the executive.</p> <p>All councillors are provided with ward information including ward profiles, public consultation results and performance data, and receive regular newsletters or bulletins.</p> <p>All councillors receive council information relevant to their ward, including all planning applications, prior to decision.</p>	<p>Access to information relies on informal and often personal relationships.</p> <p>Councillors are left to determine their own information requests, largely driven by personal interest.</p>

*Continued*

**Table A2.6 Benchmarks for non-executive member involvement through informal links and learning – *continued***

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Positive indicators</b>	<b>Negative indicators</b>
Non-executive councillors on outside bodies are sufficiently supported and able to represent the authority.	<p>Have regular briefings prior to involvement.</p> <p>Systems and processes for reporting back.</p> <p>Protocols establishing their roles and responsibilities for their involvement.</p>	
Councillors have appropriate support, knowledge and skills to participate in learning and development.	<p>Training needs of all members are assessed by the authority and appropriate training is offered. The training is targeted, user-friendly, flexible, inventive and takes various forms to suit the needs of non-executive members.</p> <p>Adequate resources are dedicated to training and development.</p> <p>Members themselves determine their priorities for, and have overall oversight of, the authority's training and development programme for members.</p> <p>Non-executive councillors have the facility to attend conferences and events, and support from officers prior to attending and are expected to report back.</p>	There is no appropriate training/ briefings or opportunities are not taken up.
Councillors have positive attitudes towards working with officers.	<p>Attitudes: members feel they have a chance to raise issues with officers.</p> <p>New councillors are introduced to senior officers and offered the opportunity to have a buddy officer (which may be by geographical area).</p>	<p>Councillors have a negative or passive attitude towards officers – they are regarded as the exclusive domain of the cabinet members.</p> <p>A significant proportion of councillors have tried to influence officer decisions and have had no impact.</p>