I&DeA

councillor's guide
2007–08

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Welcome to the new edition of the Councillor's Guide, which has been revised and updated to reflect the latest legislation and thinking concerning local government in England.

The Guide focuses on the needs of newly elected Frontline councillors, although more experienced councillors will find it useful too. It is published simultaneously in printed form and as an identical, free pdf file on the IDeA Knowledge website.

The Guide explores things new councillors need to know at the start of their careers in public life. It discusses councillors' roles and responsibilities as ward representatives, explains how councils work and how they are funded, examines the various checks and balances that regulate councils and councillors and stresses the importance of community leadership.

The Guide also reflects the thinking and ambition behind the Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities, published in October 2006.

Local government's relationship with central government is conducted via CLG, the department for Communities and Local Government. Until May 2006 it was conducted via the ODPM, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and this is reflected in the text.

www.idea.gov.uk

The IDeA's website carries extensive information for councillors that is not covered by the guide and its pages are constantly updated.

The website has a section dedicated to political leadership. This provides an online resource for councillors to keep abreast of the latest guidance, news and opinions that affect them.

In addition, the website covers more than 50 areas of local government improvement and good practice, from community cohesion to workforce development. On the website you will find:

- authoritative case studies
- interviews and features with key personalities in local government
- communities of practice – providing a safe environment to share knowledge and experience
- guides, checklists and toolkits
- public discussion forums
- the option to sign up for regular email bulletins
- detailed information about all the IDeA's products and services for local authorities, including the Leadership Academy, which offers training in political leadership
- an A–Z of local authorities, providing key information about every council in England and Wales.

If you wish to register for regular email updates from the IDeA's website, please visit www.idea.gov.uk/register

The information contained in this guide was believed correct at time of going to press. Opinions expressed by individuals remain their personal views and do not necessarily express those of the IDeA. The content does not purport to give legal opinion and councillors should raise any points of law with the relevant officer. The IDeA cannot take responsibility for errors or omissions. References to government, government policy, plans and intentions, refer to their status in April 2007.

If you have difficulty reading the Councillor's Guide please contact councillors.guide@idea.gov.uk

1 being a councillor

getting started

The Councillor's Guide is an introduction to the world of local government. It covers the main themes a successful Frontline councillor needs to know about. Whether you have a few hours to spare (that won't last long!) or just 10 minutes, you can dip into this guide to find information about the key areas in which you will become involved. This chapter sets the scene for your role as a councillor and has been especially written with the newly elected member in mind.

The Guide and much more information for councillors is also published on the IDeA Knowledge website.

Becoming a councillor is a rewarding form of public service that puts people in a privileged position where they can make a difference to the quality of other people's daily lives. However, being an effective councillor requires hard work.

Every day, councillors have to balance the needs and interests of their residents, voters, political parties and the council.

All these groups will make legitimate demands on the councillor's time on top of their personal responsibilities to family, workplace and friends.

It is therefore important that councillors understand their role so they can perform responsibly and effectively for the council and maintain the quality of their personal lives.

The councillor's role takes in:

- representing the ward
- decision-making
- policy and strategy review and development
- overview and scrutiny
- regulatory duties
- community leadership and engagement.

Chapters 2 and 3 expand on these themes.

representing the ward

The primary role of a councillor is to represent their ward and the people who live in it. They also have a responsibility to communicate council policy and decisions to people in the ward. Members of political parties may find that their party offers advice and guidance on doing this. See the section on representing the ward.

decision-making

Councillors have a central part to play in making decisions that impact on their ward and across the whole area covered by their council.

They will be involved in decision-making through:

- full council
- regulatory committees such as planning control or licensing
- local voluntary organisation management
- sitting on boards and as school governors
- membership of partnership boards
- being employers of staff on appointments panels and disciplinary or grievance appeals.

policy and strategy

Councillors influence and determine the development and review of the council's policy and strategy. They contribute to this through their:

- role in overview and scrutiny
- involvement in advisory groups and partnerships
- interaction with executive members
- role as a representative on local community groups
- role on area forums and committees
- case work
- membership of a political group.

overview and scrutiny

Councillors have always been required to scrutinise the council and the overview and scrutiny function is a natural extension of representation. The process has recently become more clearly defined and distinct and the role of councillors now includes:

- providing a check on the activities of the executive through call-in powers
- monitoring and reviewing policy formulation and implementation
- policy development
- quality review
- scrutiny of external bodies and agencies.

regulatory duties

Local authorities are not just service providers, they also act as regulators. This involves councillors in quasi-judicial roles on special committees appointed directly by the council, such as planning and licensing committees. Most councils arrange special training for councillors undertaking these quasi-judicial responsibilities. In these roles, councillors are required to act independently and are not subject to the party group whip.

community leadership and engagement

Community leadership is at the heart of modern local government and councils are taking on new responsibilities for working in partnership with other organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, to improve services and the quality of life of citizens.

how the council works

Councils are large organisations employing hundreds of staff and they adhere to set rules and procedures to help them function effectively and legitimately.

New councillors should be given a copy of their council's constitution. This provides the framework within which the council conducts its business and makes decisions. It describes who is responsible for making decisions and how decisions are taken.

The legal nature of constitutions means they are not easy reading but new councillors should familiarise themselves with the constitution and, in the first instance, concentrate on four key topics:

- decision-making and council structures
- procedural matters
- roles of officers
- standards and ethical governance.

decision-making and council structures

The full council meeting is the sovereign body of the council. Full council is where all councillors meet to debate and take decisions. Traditionally, full council received recommendations from various committees, which it accepted, rejected or amended.

The Local Government Act 2000 changed this for

most authorities, introducing a system that separated the decision-making executive from the monitoring and representative functions of the council.

Full council:

- makes decisions on the constitution
- decides policy framework
- decides the budget
- appoints chief officers.

The Local Government Act 2000 was designed to improve democratic capacity by establishing a clearly identifiable executive in each council that would enhance political leadership and provide a stronger basis for accountability. Three main structures were available to councils:

- an elected mayor with executive powers
- a leader and cabinet with executive powers, selected from and by the council as a whole
- an elected mayor with an appointed council manager.

A fourth option was available to councils with populations below 85,000, allowing them to adopt a modified committee system but with a requirement for overview and scrutiny.

The legislation means that a council's executive decision-making arrangements can come under one single party. The executive mayor or cabinet is responsible for:

- agreeing new policy and the budget
- conducting strategic service reviews
- promoting the council's interests in partnership
- implementing decisions of the full council, with the council's officers.

There are some areas where the executive does not have responsibility. Quasi-judicial and regulatory functions such as development control, planning applications and licensing decisions are delegated from the council to separate decision-making committees.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, published in December 2006, requires councils – but not fourth option councils – to adopt one of three political management arrangements:

leader and cabinet executive, mayor and cabinet executive or directly elected executive. Royal assent of the Bill is expected in autumn 2007.

Councils must also establish overview and scrutiny arrangements through which non-executive councillors can question and challenge the performance of the executive in a manner that will enable public debate. Overview and scrutiny arrangements have to reflect the political balance of the council. Members of the executive are likely to be asked to attend overview and scrutiny committee meetings regularly to answer questions and contribute to debate.

The government has also proposed that each council should have a standards committee to monitor probity among councillors and the duties of a standards committee are outlined in chapter 2.

Some councils have also decided to introduce area forums that develop strategies to meet specific needs. These committees usually meet in the local area and involve and consult local people. They may undertake the scrutiny role for all services delivered in the area.

The Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities, recognises the growing role and responsibilities of Frontline councillors – those who may not hold executive positions but have a vital role to play as leaders in their wards and neighbourhoods.

co-options
Councils can appoint co-opted members to committees – people from the community with specific expertise and knowledge. Some co-options are statutory, such as the parental and religious members of education scrutiny panels. In other instances councillors will have the opportunity to invite interested members of the community to serve on specific scrutiny inquiries and investigations. While councillors will always retain the mandate of representation through election it can be useful to include people who may not be strongly represented, such as business people, young people and people from ethnic minorities.

procedural matters

Councils have internal procedures that councillors should know about and understand. They concern:

- standing orders
- agendas and minutes
- defamation and privilege
- roles at meetings.

standing orders
Full council, overview and scrutiny committee meetings and regulatory committee meetings are governed by procedural standing orders. The interpretation of standing orders is the chairperson's responsibility. Councillors need to familiarise themselves with them to ensure they comply with them and know when to challenge them if they believe they have been broken.

The standing orders specify the timing of council meetings, the order of business, rules of debate and other matters of procedure.

It is important to understand:

- the rules of debate
- declarations of interest
- terms of reference for committees.

agendas and minutes
The Law requires notice of a public meeting, with its date, time, venue and agenda, to be posted publicly five clear working days before the meeting takes place. Some councils circulate the agendas of all meetings to all councillors in advance. This allows them to check whether there are items coming up that concern their ward. If there are issues of interest to the councillor or their ward, they can ask to attend the meeting as an observer.

A councillor may also ask to speak on behalf of ward constituents but cannot vote unless he or she is a member of the committee concerned.

At all formal meetings of the council, a record is made by council officers of the decisions taken, the background papers received and the reasons for the decision. The minutes are made available to the public. A record must also be kept and made public

when a decision has been taken by an individual executive member or mayor. All council meetings and committees are open to members of the public unless there are legal reasons to exclude them.

The final version of the guidance and regulations that accompany the Local Government Act 2000 includes a number of mandatory provisions concerning the nature of cabinet meetings, the availability of information about them and the relationships between cabinets and overview and scrutiny committees.

A new category, 'key decisions', was identified. These are decisions 'which will involve significant expenditure or savings, or will have a substantial impact on all or significant parts of the authority' (Guidance document, para. 7.12). In addition, the executive is required to set out its programme of work, where it is known, in a forward plan.

The plan will include all key decisions due to be made by the executive in the following four months. The plan must be made public and made available to the relevant overview and scrutiny committees at least two weeks in advance of the commencement of the period covered (para. 7.9).

defamation and privilege
The law of defamation is a potentially dangerous and expensive one for councillors. Councillors can be sued for defamation by saying or writing anything that will 'lower a person in the estimation of right-thinking people'.

Councillors have some limited protection and to allow them freedom of speech they are given qualified privilege in council meetings. This can protect them against being sued for defamation for something they say in defending or supporting the interests of their council, or as part of their duty. But it applies only if they honestly believed what they said and were not motivated by malice.

Defamation is a complex matter and councillors should take advice from the council's solicitor if a difficult situation is likely to arise.

roles at meetings
The chair runs the meeting and is responsible for:

- opening and closing the meeting

- welcoming members to the meeting

- introducing each agenda item, or asking officers to introduce the item

- ensuring that the debate keeps to the point of the agenda

- inviting members to speak when they have indicated they wish to do so

- summarising at the end of each item

- indicating when and if voting should take place

- controlling disorderly members and putting a motion to remove them

- warning and, if necessary, removing unruly members of the public.

At scrutiny committee meetings the chair welcomes witnesses and asks members to put questions in a courteous manner.

Preparation for meetings is important, and councillors should read the agenda and any attached papers beforehand. They may also decide to consult local ward groups and constituents or their ward party colleagues on non-confidential items. If they try to articulate a different point of view, councillors should decide what questions they want to ask at the meeting. They may want to raise a question on a report with an officer beforehand. Some councils hold pre-agenda meetings and councillors should attend them if they can.

roles of officers

Officers are employees of the council – the people who put policies into effect and organise the provision of services. Officers may also be delegated by councillors to make policy decisions. They are led by a chief executive and senior managers who are appointed directly by councillors. Council employees include teachers, refuse collectors, social workers and home helps.

statutory officers
Local authorities are required by law to designate a senior manager as the 'head of paid service'. This will usually be the chief executive. This person is responsible to councillors for the staffing of the council, ensuring the work of the different

Easington District Council now has an excellent CPA rating and the relationship between its leader, Alan Napier, and chief executive, Janet Johnson, is one of the bedrocks of the area's revival. But, as they discuss here, Janet would almost certainly never had joined Easington a few years ago.

Alan I became leader seven years ago and we had a lot of problems. I'm sure Janet would not have touched it with a bargepole. We were heading in the right direction but others – financiers and developers – saw us differently. So we put together a recovery plan. It showed us the most effective areas to channel money so we could then plan and prioritise budgets.

Janet You're right. I wouldn't have joined at that time. Working for neighbouring Sedgefield, I wouldn't have looked at Easington. Then things changed and Easington started gaining a reputation for improvement and energy. What really flagged it up was the best value review of regeneration, where Easington was two star with excellent prospects.

Janet and Alan had met twice before – at a North East Assembly meeting and while hosting a Chinese delegation – when Easington advertised for a new director of regeneration and development.

Alan My first impression was that she was someone who knew what she was about. I've found out since that her dulcet tones may be quiet but the knowledge and thought behind them isn't.

Janet I was shown round and, having seen the scale of challenge, the initiatives and progress, I couldn't

not apply. I can't think of a better job in regeneration, even now. When I was appointed, Easington had just been accepted as a CPA pathfinder. Within the first fortnight, the inspectors were in. It was a true baptism of fire – but a good way to learn quickly. I led on *Clean, Green, Safe and Active*.

Alan To which we've added *Mean*!

Janet Nine months later, we went through CPA proper and gained excellent after getting strong/good in the pathfinder. It gave us greater focus and we did a huge amount of work in those nine months.

Alan Going for CPA pathfinder dates back to Prescott's four green papers in 1998. We scrutinised the papers with a vengeance. When the White Paper came out, we set up a 12-strong working party and looked at everything over 18 months, including changing the political structure. For 18 months we experimented with a leader and cabinet and have since moved to an executive. You have to be prepared to take risks. We had the first local government improvement programme here and the first peer review. We learnt a lot and gained solid foundations. We rarely get it wrong about what's coming from Whitehall or the sub-region. By pre-emption, we get the building blocks in place before others. And by doing that, you're looking after the people out there.

Janet And we've taken the right decisions at the right time, building the organisation's capacity by using people more effectively. The members are a huge capacity in themselves and we've carried out organisational development between the managerial and political sides of the council. We do a lot with the IDeA to increase everyone's skills and capabilities.

In July 2004, Janet was appointed chief executive after shadowing her former boss for three months.

Immediately she was appointed, the pressure was on.

Janet I believed I'd become chief executive – but not for another couple of years. We had six months where it was just me and the director of finance. We had restructured for a team of five but only two were in place. It was incredibly difficult.

Alan We had to make sure we got the right people. We worked hard and long at it – but it was well worth the wait. I've been a councillor here for 15 years and we now have the best senior management team I've ever seen. They are there to stop me in my tracks. I have no idea of their individual political persuasions and that's absolutely right. We have to be split and linked at the same time.

Janet There is a real understanding, not just between Alan and me but also between the management and the members. Alan and I are the same personality type but we deal with things in different ways. My job is to give Alan professional advice and I have told him he's wrong before now. It's a free exchange of views.

Alan We respect each other. I do not want people to allow me to go up a one-way street the wrong way. I have no problem with disagreement.

Part of the impact Easington Council makes is through its partnership approach within the North East.

Alan We're well aware of the potential for unitary authorities and the concept of core cities to return. We know our little cog turns for the best interests of the neighbourhood, the district, the sub-region, the region and nationally. That's the way people have to be thinking – they have to look at the bigger picture.

Janet For example, our business service is a partnership with the development agency, with them providing two-thirds of the staff and others coming from the Learning and Skills Council and Primary Care Trust. We have workplace health initiatives, lifelong learning and apprenticeships included in it, so we get value for money.

Alan The icing on the cake is our business incubator unit. It's a £2.2 million project in which we invested £300,000 – that's not a bad deal.

Janet We work 50/50 internally and externally. Easington is increasingly seen as a key regional and national player. We do a lot of wider influencing and it all takes time.

Both work on the principle that they should work with what they can't change to gain the best for the district.

Alan I'd say the government is still 70 per cent in control but that's depreciating because of national targets. Senior cabinet ministers have to realise that things should be run locally. I'm a great believer in subsidiarity.

Janet Alan's right – the pressure is from the centre. But if you thought there was nothing you could do to influence that, you wouldn't be doing your job. You get in early and influence relatively small numbers of people who are pushing the initiatives. We are there. We are influencing. We have an important seat at the table.

And while their second meeting might have been at a restaurant table, neither sees each other outside work.

Alan We're in each other's pockets five days a week. That's enough. We'd never send each other a birthday present.

Janet We maintain a professional distance. Yes, we sent each other Christmas cards. They were official ones.

- *A version of this case study was first published in* Councillor *magazine.*

- talk to other councillors
- talk to officers
- take up training courses offered by the council
- read the council's corporate plan to gain an overview of the council's agenda and priorities
- learn how the council takes decisions and how you can influence these on behalf of the people you represent
- take on new responsibilities with care – don't take on too much too soon
- if you need to make arrangements for public service leave with your employers, speak to them as soon as possible. You are entitled to reasonable time off but your employer is not obliged to pay you for it
- learn to manage the paperwork – learn what you need to read and what you don't, and don't hoard outdated or irrelevant material
- set up a good filing system
- concentrate on matters that interest you and learn them thoroughly
- think about changing to a different policy area at least once during your term
- communicate with fellow councillors, council staff and officers and with constituents
- many council staff will be based at depots and sites – try to visit them informally, but with advance notice, to show support for and interest in their work. Their feedback can often be invaluable and it's a good boost to morale. Be relaxed and make it clear that this is neither an inspection nor a moans session
- set up a schedule for visiting the key groups in your ward over your first year – including faith groups, voluntary groups, major employers, schools, youth centres, tenants' and residents' associations
- tell people in your ward what you are doing.

departments is co-ordinated, and making sure the organisation runs efficiently.

There must also be a monitoring officer responsible for warning councillors about anything the council does that is likely to lead to legal action or to a finding of maladministration by the ombudsman.

The council must also have a Section 101 officer, usually the director of finance, whose task is to monitor all the financial affairs of the council. This officer has the power to stop the council from spending money if they think it is unwise or unlawful.

All three of these posts are statutorily protected, which means councillors cannot dismiss the post holders without an independent inquiry.

Councillors should expect to be given a chart showing the structure of their authority with the names, titles, responsibilities and, ideally, photographs of senior officers.

management arrangements

The chief executive is the main link between the senior managers of individual departments and between senior managers and councillors. Chief executives advise councillors on procedure, legislation and policy. Each year the leader or cabinet should conduct a performance appraisal interview with the chief executive.

The chief executive leads a management team that meets frequently to discuss the corporate management of the authority and also meets regularly with the executive or cabinet.

Senior managers or directors lead the individual departments of the council. They may also be called chief officers. Senior managers are responsible for advising the cabinet and scrutiny committees on policy and are responsible for implementing councillors' decisions and for service performance. Usually, a separate group of officers supports the scrutiny committees.

Department structures and titles of senior managers vary. Councillors should learn about the arrangements in their authority and which department is responsible for each service.

councillor–officer relationships

The relationship between the elected leader of the council and its appointed chief executive is the most important one in local government and has a profound effect on the council's performance.

Officers are employed to manage the council and to help councillors achieve their policy goals. But officers may have to advise councillors from time to time that certain courses of action cannot be carried out. Officers have a duty to give unbiased professional advice – even if it is not what councillors want to hear.

Officers cannot respond to personal criticism in the same way that politicians can and temper their remarks accordingly. Mutual respect and good communication is the key to establishing good member–officer relationships.

Close personal familiarity should be avoided. It is important to get this right and there are some simple things that can make it easier to establish relationships that work. There should be clarity about the respective roles of councillors and officers and this can only be achieved through discussion.

Getting the councillor–officer relationship right requires that:

- both should aim to develop a relationship based on mutual respect
- councillors should define the core values of the organisation
- councillors should identify priorities, assisted by the officers
- officers should provide clear advice and offer alternative courses of action where they exist
- councillors and officers should communicate clearly and openly, avoiding ambiguity and the risk of misunderstanding
- councillors and officers should work in partnership to turn the core values and priorities into practical policies for implementation.

councillor's viewpoint

Councillor Richard Kemp
Liverpool City Council

I first got elected in 1974 but things haven't changed much. The first big brown envelopes start to arrive through the door and you are determined to read everything. The first meetings schedule comes through the post and you are determined to attend everything. The invites to church and community do's start to arrive and you are determined to go to everything. You are determined to hold two advice centres a week and, of course, you said that you would personally call at every home in the ward every year. – Then you have a heart attack!

The most important lesson that a new councillor must learn is that of time management. You must learn how to split your time between your councillor role and the other important ones in your life. The roles of being a family member, politician and employee are every bit as important and far more important in the long run.

So don't read everything – read those things that are important to your role in the council. Share work in your ward with your colleagues. There really is no need to attend everything. People know that you have another life as well.

Split council work with party colleagues – 100 per cent attendance is not necessary for everything you are invited to. But make sure you go to everything when the Chief Whip says you should be there!

Pace your ward work. Be out and doing things when you can but you and your constituents must remember that this is not your full-time job.

Don't make it your full-time job. Too many people get enticed by the lure of the town hall and lose contact with everything else. You will be a better councillor if you keep a grip on reality and bring outside experience back to the town hall with you.

And if you can do all that come and tell me how you did it because I have never quite managed it myself!

the world of local government

Effective councillors understand the broader local government picture. Not all local authorities are structured in the same way. They do not provide the same services and do not necessarily even have the same structure for elections. It is important that councillors understand the structure of their council and its responsibilities to the community.

local government powers
Local authorities are created by Acts of Parliament.

They may be abolished by Parliament and their powers are determined by Parliament. The powers of a councillor are very different from those of an individual citizen. Citizens are free to do anything that is not specifically illegal.

Councillors and their authority can only do what they are specifically permitted to do by law. Acts of Parliament lay down specific duties that must be carried out – mandatory acts and things that may be done by choice, permissive and adoptive acts. Councillors are bound by statutes and will need to take advice on what actions they are able to take.

For example, the Local Government Act 2000 introduces a general power of 'well-being' in relation to economic, environmental and social issues. This has a significant impact on the community leadership roles of councils and councillors. Statutes will not stop councillors making important policy decisions and there is often scope for discretion in individual cases.

Central government controls many of the activities of local government. Councils are bound by ministerial directives and regulations and many decisions councillors take require the approval of a government minister or civil servant. Many of the services they run are inspected and audited by the Audit Commission and other inspectorates. Some of the decisions they reach may be subject to an appeal to a minister or a government department. Since local government power is embodied in statutes and regulations, its decisions can be challenged in the courts.

local government in England
There are two distinct structures of local government in England:

1. unitary – a single-tier structure in which an all-purpose authority is responsible for providing most of the services. They are to be found in London, six other metropolitan areas and parts of shire England

2. county and district – comprising at least two levels of local government and found in the remaining counties of England. Often there is a third tier of parish or town councils as well.

unitary authorities
There are 46 unitary authorities in non-metropolitan areas of England. In some cases, they have emerged from continuing shire counties – for example, Peterborough used to be part of Cambridgeshire. Others were formed following the abolition of the counties of Avon, Berkshire, Cleveland and Humberside between 1996 and 1998. Each unitary authority sends representatives to a joint board that oversees police, fire and civil defence arrangements across the whole area. These boards are authorities in their own right and set precepts or raise council taxes, but they are not directly elected. There are also joint arrangements in most areas for waste disposal. Some unitary authorities have parish councils in their area.

metropolitan districts and London
There are six metropolitan areas: West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire. Each is now divided into metropolitan districts with most of the services being provided by elected metropolitan district councils. These are also unitary authorities, responsible for all services within their boundaries. They are often called borough or city councils. In each metropolitan area there are two joint boards that oversee police, fire and civil defence arrangements. There may also be joint authorities for waste disposal and for transport.

The responsibilities of metropolitan district councils are the same as those of unitary authorities. There are very few parish councils in metropolitan areas.

In London, there are:

- 32 London boroughs
- The City of London.

The mayor and the Greater London Assembly act in a

strategic way on behalf of the capital to promote its special needs. Generally, the mayor is responsible for developing strategies to improve London's transport, economy and environment, as well as running the police and fire services.

The assembly holds the mayor to account and makes sure services are being run effectively.

Neither takes responsibilities from the London boroughs.

counties and districts

There are 32 counties in England where there are two and often three levels of local government. Each county has an elected county council providing strategic and more costly services like social services and education.

Each county is divided into several districts, each with its own elected district council providing more local services such as the collection of council taxes and non-domestic rates, housing benefits, health and housing. Some of these councils are called borough or city councils. These titles are ceremonial and indicate that the authority has a royal charter and a mayor.

Many district councils are further divided into elected parish or town councils. A town council is a parish council with a mayor. Most parish or town councils are found in rural areas. Parishes deal with services and problems such as allotments, for which they have a statutory responsibility, footpaths, bus shelters, litter and dog fouling.

The Local Government and Public involvement in Health Bill contains proposals for the Secretary of State to invite all direct councils to make bids for unitary status. As this guide went to press nearly 30 bids had been made.

regional structures

Along with the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, the Government has established a regional framework for England, which is beginning to emerge. RDAs (Regional Development Agencies) have been established to co-ordinate economic regeneration strategies for each region. Each RDA has a board of 12 members appointed by the Secretary of State. Three members

are drawn from local government.

Additionally, each region now has a regional assembly of councillors nominated by local authorities across the region.

There are also 10 government regional offices, staffed by civil servants. They act as the local representatives of the Department for Education and Science, Communities and Local Government and the Department of Trade and Industry.

They have a broad remit to work in partnership with local people and organisations to maximise the competitiveness, prosperity and quality of life in their regions.

council services

Councils provide three types of service to their communities:

- statutory services – such as refuse collection – that councils must provide
- regulatory services – such as pub licensing – that councils must also provide
- discretionary services – such as tourism – that councils may choose to provide.

Unitary councils supply all the services listed below.

In two-tier areas services are divided between the county council and its associated district councils.

A few councils may have different arrangements because of their location or circumstances.

Although services such as highway maintenance are sometimes contracted out to district councils by county councils, they remain the statutory responsibility of the county councils. This is also the case when council services are contracted out to third-party suppliers.

services provided by county councils

- care and protection of children
- care for elderly people
- care for people with a disability
- community safety
- concessionary travel and public transport support

- conservation/listed buildings
- country parks and countryside management
- cycle routes
- emergency planning
- highway maintenance
- industrial and craft units
- libraries and archives
- local economy support and development
- meals on wheels
- minerals and quarries
- museums and arts
- maintenance of public rights of way
- protecting and enhancing the environment
- public and community transport
- recycling
- registration of births, deaths and marriages
- road clearance e.g. fly tipping
- road safety
- schools, school transport and other education
- strategic planning for the county
- street lighting and furniture
- tourism
- trading standards and consumer protection
- traffic management and transport planning
- tree protection
- village halls and community facilities
- voluntary organisation support
- water courses
- waste disposal
- youth clubs.

services provided by district councils
- building control
  - regulatory
  - public protection
- car parks
- cemeteries and crematoria
- council tax benefit
- council tax collection

- crime and Disorder Act
  - community wardens
- economic development
- electoral registration and elections
- emergency planning
- environmental health
  - environmental control
  - refuse collection
  - private sector housing quality assessment
  - street sweeping
  - food and health safety
  - dog wardens
  - public conveniences
- grounds maintenance (parks and open spaces)
- housing
  - strategy and development
  - advice and assistance
  - provision
- housing benefit administration
- leisure
- licensing
  - taxis (hackney carriage and private hire)
  - entertainment
  - liquor
- museums and arts
- national non-domestic rate
- planning
  - development control
  - local delivery framework
  - heritage
  - countryside management
- property searches and land charges
- sea defences, watercourses and drainage
- street naming
- tourism

elections

Councillors are elected for a four-year term unless they are elected at a by-election, in which case they must stand again at the next election.

County councils are divided into electoral divisions, with one county councillor representing each division. Elections are held once every four years for all the seats on the council.

Metropolitan districts are divided into wards, each usually represented by three councillors. One third of the seats – one per ward – are up for election each year in three years out of four.

New unitary authorities in England have a choice concerning the election cycle. The year in which councillors will have to face the electorate again will depend on when restructuring took place and the method of election chosen by the council.

District councils in the two-tier structure are divided into wards and also have a choice concerning their election cycle. They may adopt either the metropolitan district system or all the seats in the council can be contested once every four years.

London boroughs are divided into wards and elections are held once every four years, but follow a different cycle from the rest of the country.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill contains measures that allow councils electing by thirds to change by resolution to whole council elections. It also proposes allowing metropolitan districts, currently required to have three members per ward, the same freedom as other districts to change the number per ward.

back-up

Councillors make many different types of decisions and recommendations that have far-reaching consequences for the communities they represent and on council staff. They also have a leadership role that requires them to engage with and advocate on behalf of local people.

In recognition of the increased responsibilities undertaken by Frontline councillors today, councils are expected to provide training and development, facilities, access to information and guidance, and other assets that will help them carry out their roles.

To be efficient and effective, councillors need a range of support services. All councils offer some support, and this may include:

- office accommodation, such as members' rooms, interview rooms, rooms for holding surgeries, public meetings and consultations

- secretarial and word-processing services

- communications facilities – phones, PCs or laptops, email, press office support and so on

- information provision for use internally, perhaps to facilitate scrutiny, and externally, perhaps to respond to enquiries from constituents

- help to manage casework

- research facilities

- care facilities

- training and development

- mentoring.

Councils vary tremendously in the degree of support they give councillors. The level of support offered may depend on a councillor's role and time commitment. Executive members and overview and scrutiny chairs are likely to receive more secretarial and research support than backbenchers. Non-executive councillors may find that they have very little dedicated support. All councillors should have access to some form of communication facility and training and development in new roles and ways of working.

allowances

Councillors are entitled to an allowance set by their council that reflects their level of responsibility and the amount of time they devote to council affairs. In addition to a basic allowance, extra payments may cover:

- special responsibilities – payable to the leader of the council, portfolio holders, overview and scrutiny chairs, opposition leaders and so on

- childcare and dependent carers

- travel and subsistence

councillor's viewpoint

mentoring

Councillor Tony Jackson, East Herts

Becoming a council leader during a period of internal strife presents quite a challenge.

For Tony Jackson, leader of East Herts District Council, it meant dealing with a restless party, unhappy officers and a lot of political fall out.

'I'd only been involved in politics for a relatively short time when I became leader,' he says. 'I started as an activist in my local village branch of the Conservative party and was persuaded to stand in 1999 by my county councillor. He suggested that I might find the job interesting and he was right!

'My first step up the ladder was a result of my professional experience. I worked in finance for many years and am now a management consultant. So, when I was offered the finance portfolio in 2002, I was able to take on the role with some confidence. Then the deputy leader retired and I was put forward to replace him.

'However, the events of last year – which led to my taking the leader position – would not have been my chosen path to the top. The current leader was forced to stand down. The council structure of two executive directors, instead of one chief executive, was no longer functioning effectively.

'The leader was getting drawn in to disagreements between the two executive directors and this led to a perception that he had crossed the member/officer divide – that he was effectively acting in the chief executive role. I was elected as his successor.'

With his professional experience of training and development, Jackson jumped at the chance of getting a mentor.

'I'd taken over a group that was without direction,' he says.

'It also needed someone who could draw a line under the negativity surrounding the council and to make matters worse, we were coming to the end of a political term. I had a large challenge on my hands and I was very conscious that I didn't have the same amount of experience as many other leaders.'

Initially, he simply wanted a sounding board for his ideas on how to get things back on track, but he ended up getting much more out of the process.

'I was offered three potential mentors to choose from and went for Lesley Clarke, leader of Wycombe, because I knew she would understand my day-to-day challenges,' he says. 'Wycombe is also a district council and is a similar size to East Herts.

'We have regular one-to-one meetings which can take place at either of our council locations. We usually start each meeting with two or three issues that either of us wants to tackle. Sometimes they are personal development issues but they can also be about ways in which either of our authorities can develop.

'I'd already spent six months as leader when I started the mentoring, so I'd begun to get my group on side and had put a couple of initiatives into place – a newsletter, for example. I was ready to take the next step within my role. I needed to find ways of looking forward.'

East Herts is the centre for a lot of new development; hundreds of thousands of new homes and proximity to the rapidly expanding Stansted airport. Its largest town, Bishop's Stortford, is particularly affected, so Jackson decided to find a way of creating a vision for the place's future.

- co-optee's services
- pension scheme for councillors.

The allowances are all subject to income tax.

Some incidental costs – such as use of a home office, telephone and so on – may be deducted before calculating the tax to be paid.

The IDeA conducts an annual survey of councillors' allowances and this is published on the IDeA website.

information technology

IT (information technology) offers councillors a fast and efficient means of keeping in touch with the local community. It also gives access to the information councillors need to influence or make decisions.

Councillors will find that electronic communications allow them to get much closer to the people they represent. But new councillors will not necessarily arrive with ready-made computer skills. Every councillor will need to find out about their own authority's IT systems and how they can access them and use them effectively. To get this right they will need training and ongoing support.

The best councils give their councillors a 'home office', including a PC or laptop, so that they can access the council's IT system and the information they need whenever it suits them. They also have technicians who can visit councillors at home to deal with IT problems.

Other councils should at least give councillors access to a computer in the town hall. The better the support available to councillors, the more effective they will be.

Good IT systems and skills can help councillors:

- deal with casework more quickly and efficiently
- manage their time better so they don't have to visit the town hall so often
- keep in touch with residents and community groups
- access key documents or other information online rather than waiting for them to be delivered
- access the council's intranet, an internal version of the Internet, to find out when meetings are taking place, identify an officer or search for information about specific services

'I wanted to bring together a range of interested groups and agencies to create this new vision for the town,' he says. 'I talked to Lesley about it and she said her council was in the process of revamping the centre of High Wycombe. So she arranged for me to meet the developers there and I looked at the site and learned about some of the things they'd done. That gave me some new ideas. It also gave me confidence to say, "I know it's the end of a political term, but that doesn't mean we should stand still."

'Overall, I'd say that mentoring has enabled me to feel that I've earned the right to be leader. It's given me the confidence I needed. Lesley and I have an increasing degree of mutual respect. She's coming over here to sit in on our Local Strategic Partnership board, which I chair, because she thinks she can learn from how we are doing things here. It's been a two-way process.

'She's helped me realise that the issues I face here are not unique – she has faced many of the same problems herself. She's also helped me clarify some of my ideas and propositions. She never tells me what to do but enables me to challenge my own thinking.

'Nobody knows so much that they can't benefit from mentoring. Taking up this opportunity is not a sign of weakness. We in local government can all benefit from it – whether we've been in our jobs for three years or thirty years.'

- The IDeA offers four types of mentoring for councillors: one-to-one, political group, role, and Induction (buddy) mentoring.
  For more information contact chas.leslie@idea.gov.uk or call 020 7296 6863.

councillor's viewpoint

The extent to which councillors can engage citizens through the web is arguably hampered by restrictions that prevent the use of council services for political purposes.

The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity states that publicity produced by the local authority relating to councillors should not be party political, limiting the type of content that can be displayed on authority sponsored websites.

To help councillors stay within the code, each website in the councillor.info project has an acceptable use policy the councillor must sign up to, as well as a facility for members of the public to give feedback about the type of content displayed.

Some councillors have overcome these restrictions simply by asking their authority to provide links to external sites with more overt political content, such as those of their local and national political parties.

Bob Piper from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, one of the participants in the councillor.info project, says: 'My website enables me to keep people informed and correct or confirm local rumours. I think that it does assist in raising the profile of myself as a councillor and hopefully increases respect for the council.'

Publishing a website does, however, present challenges for councillors and their authorities and can have a negative impact, particularly if information is not maintained and kept up to date.

Nic Best from Castle Morpeth Borough Council, another participant in the project, points out that the effectiveness of the website rests with the councillor: 'A website is just a tool that will be effective in the hands of a good councillor but destructive in the hands of a bad councillor,' he says.

Some councillors, including Best and Piper, have set up their own websites and weblogs and linked them to their local authority web pages. These sites allow the councillors to be more expansive about their political views and party involvement and, perhaps, offer greater scope for engagement.

the websites

Bob Piper uses his website to consolidate his community work by offering up-to-date information on local issues like planning and invites feedback from residents. He has a 'Ward News' section on the site and includes a link to a separate weblog where visitors are able to read his opinions on the issues of the day.
www.councillor.info/sandwell/bpiper

Nic Best presents himself as a knowledgeable councillor with a sense of humour. He provides explanations of issues and policy so visitors can gain a better understanding of the work of the council. On a lighter note his 'Pistachio pages' give a more personal insight into his life as a councillor.
www.councillor.info/castlemorpeth/nbest

In Leicester, Deborah Almey has made effective use of images on her website to highlight the range of activities in her ward.
www.councillor.leicester.gov.uk/home/deborah-almey

In Lancashire, Mark Perks uses his site to provide news about his ward, information about his involvement in local community organisations and a link to the county council website.
www.councillor.info/lancashire/mperks

- Adapted from an article in *Councillor* magazine.

- hold online meetings rather than having to get a group of people to travel to a meeting place
- research information about a particular issue
- access government information
- look beyond the council to see how things are done elsewhere.

councillors' web pages

A key goal of the Government's drive to bring public services online by the end of 2005 was to improve the ability of councillors to use technology.

An important part of this initiative required local authorities to provide councillors with the facilities and know-how to publish their own web pages.

councillor.info is one of a number of projects that have helped councils respond to this requirement. As the Government's 2005 deadline passed, it had provided more than 1,000 councillors in 21 English authorities with access to a simple content management system that enabled them to publish their own web pages.

research and information

Councils vary widely in the level of research assistance and information they make available to councillors. Those whose authority has a comprehensive information system or intranet will be able to take advantage of advanced and sophisticated research tools.

Bodies such as the LGA (Local Government Association), the IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency) and others can be valuable sources of information and guidance based on the experience of councils throughout the country. Their websites are good starting points for research. The sort of areas where councillors may need research and information concern:

- council and government policy
- legislation and the implications of council policies
- social and economic trends in the area
- the profile and needs of local employers
- future demographic trends that will affect service delivery and take up.

Many councils have set up research budgets for councillors involved in overview and scrutiny.

top tips

how the IDeA can help

The IDeA offers a range of support and development opportunities for councillors, including:

- the Charter for Member Development specifying roles and responsibilities for member development in individual authorities
- Local Leadership Academy development modules for all councillors, covering a wide range of topics and provided in the council's own offices
- the Leadership Academy for leading members and portfolio holders plus black and minority ethnic councillors and councillors under 35 years of age
- the Strategic Team Development Centre for top managers and councillors jointly
- support and advice on specific challenges and issues
- councillor mentoring
- personal development planning
- seminars for new leaders, and for those who are chairing overview and scrutiny committees
- the Community Champion Review, which supports Frontline councillors in representing and championing their communities and councils by building their community champion capacity
- dedicated pages for councillors on the IDeA Knowledge website.

Some councils have political research assistants. These officers are appointed by the council to serve each of the political parties. Their activities are strictly controlled but they will be able to carry out research and some administrative work on behalf of councillors.

member development and the charter

It is obviously important for councillors to keep up-to-date with developments and initiatives in the public arena and to improve their knowledge and skills through experience, training and development.

snapshot

The SEEMP (South East Employers Organisation) requires councils that are signed up to its charter to provide an action plan based on:

1. being fully committed to developing councillors in order to achieve the council's aims and objectives

2. adopting a councillor-led strategic approach to councillor development

3. having a member learning and development plan that clearly identifies the difference development activities will make

4. seeing that learning and development is effective in building capacity

5. addressing wider development matters to promote work-life balance and citizenship.

When a local authority can demonstrate it has achieved the charter standard, a small, trained team of councillors and officers carries out an on-site assessment on behalf of SEEMP. If the council meets the standard it is awarded charter status.

Councillor Michael Tunwell, chairman of SEEMP, is very positive about the strategic thrust that is taking place in member development: 'We want to do all we can to support councils in their approach to training members. It's very important especially since modernisation and the introduction of cabinet and scrutiny. There is a much more professional approach to the job and extra responsibilities. As councillors, we need to be trained as fully as we can.'

Councillor Tunwell compares the Charter with IiP (Investors In People): 'It's about councils demonstrating commitment to investing in members and, like IiP, it focuses on individuals and the parts they play in the organisation's effectiveness', He also emphasises that councils are likely to become more successful and more efficient by making sure that development relates to corporate priorities.

There are no set guidelines on training and development but most councils offer induction courses to introduce newly elected councillors to the workings and responsibilities of the council and to familiarise them with systems, facilities and the decision-making process. Sometimes these are run in partnership with the IDeA.

A growing number of councils have officers whose job is to provide or organise development opportunities for councillors. This may be by offering development of particular interests and specialisms and could include topics like housing, transport, planning, scrutiny skills, working with the media, presentation skills, enhancing political leadership skills, assertiveness, time-management or speed-reading courses.

In some councils, councillors have regular away days or weekends to discuss strategic and other issues. Others have regular joint events for officers and councillors, to formulate strategy and build good working relationships.

The IDeA offers development opportunities through its Leadership Academy programmes and Local Leadership Academy and information is on the agency's website.

the charter

The Charter for Member Development and the underpinning good practice guidelines, developed by the IDeA and the nine regional employers' organisations, helps councils build their councillors' skill and expertise.

All regions now have their own charters.

regional support

The IDeA has a network of associates bringing top-flight representation and experience to each region. Regional associates are a key link with local authorities in their areas and can put together packages of support and advise on funding issues.

They have a remit to make sure that the services delivered by the IDeA and other local government bodies take account of the challenges faced by authorities in their area. They are also a key liaison

councillor's viewpoint

In the North East, Sedgefield was keen to sign up to its regional charter. Cabinet member Councillor Barbara Graham has always felt passionately that members should be given training and development to carry out the job.

'Although we were rated as good by CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment), they did say that with councillor training we needed to be more focused, particularly in relation to strategic improvements.

Since then we've established a Member Development Group and set aside a budget of £25,000.'

In her 15 years as a councillor, Barbara admits that there is a steep learning curve for newly appointed cabinet members: 'We are all finding that the training and development is giving us a better insight to modern local government.'

It is not just Barbara who sees the benefits of signing up to the charter. All members, including the leader, have a personal development plan. 'We need to show that we take training and development seriously,' she says. 'At the end of the day we want to deliver high quality services through clear democratic leadership. We believe by following the charter approach to training and development we will better meet the demands placed on us as councillors.'

point with CLG (Communities and Local Government), government offices and the Audit Commission. Regional associates can help shape the design of future improvement and development services, and provide a quality check on existing services.

The IDeA also has a network of peers representing the main political parties and independents, and skills and capacity advisers. Contact details are listed at the back of the book.

more information

IDeA Knowledge website. A number of organisations also have more information about the topics covered in this chapter. They are listed at the back of this Guide.

2 civic life

representing the ward

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

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

people's champion

The principal job of a councillor is to represent the ward, but the task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals is a complex one. Some groups are very hard to involve. Generally speaking, the wider their range of approaches to community contact, the more people councillors will reach.

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

- local opinion formers such as action groups and community group leaders, residents' association chairs, leaders of leisure groups, local media, and 'stalwarts' of the community

- highly mobile groups, including students who pass through a community quickly without ever becoming involved in it – in some areas, up to a third of the residents move between one election and the next

- groups that are differentiated by age such as the young and the elderly

- hard-to-reach groups, people with disabilities, members of under-represented minority ethnic communities and the silent majority who do not seek active community involvement.

representation

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

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

- facilitate and empower – people often assume they are powerless to make any difference in their community but councillors will often be able to empower individuals or groups through:

  - listening carefully to the issues involved

  - providing relevant contacts in local government or other services

  - helping to develop a range of achievable solutions to problems

  - facilitating meetings, petitions, surveys and so on

  - offering an overview of a situation

  - encouraging negotiation and compromise between different groups

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

services and contacts

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

snapshot

community champion review

The CCR builds capacity to support councillors in representing and championing communities and responding to challenges. It is not an inspection.

The review:

- engages all councillors in examining their roles and raising their profiles in their wards
- helps Frontline councillors develop skills in influencing and contributing to policy and service improvement
- helps councils understand and respond to the needs of Frontline councillors
- demonstrates that the council is supporting councillors in their community champion roles and is prepared to learn from external sources of support and guidance
- supports increased contact with residents and sustainable improvements at a local level.

A CCR involves initial research, one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders, ward and neighbourhood visits by accredited councillor peers, workshops and a final report.

More information is available from the IDeA.

understanding the ward

New councillors should get to know their wards. They should buy a local map and mark the ward boundaries on it and make sure they have an up-to-date electoral roll. Councillors are entitled to a full copy of the electoral roll, but voters can ask to be excluded from the version available to the general public. The roll is available on paper or in an electronic format that can often be merged with a data management system. This can help considerably with casework management.

ward walk

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

They should report things like broken fences or equipment, potholes, graffiti and faulty streetlights to the appropriate council department and record action taken – useful as a demonstration of achievement. Some councillors carry out ward walks accompanied by fellow councillors or key council officers so they can

councillor's viewpoint

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

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

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

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

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

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

David Logan, one of the member peers who took part, says: 'One of the great things about ward visits is that you get to see the physical environment up close. The environment always has a great effect on the psychology of the people who live there. Physical isolation is a common problem for many authorities, and it can lead to a parochial attitude that adversely affects corporate performance.

In Castle Point's case I was very impressed by the members' local knowledge and their relationships with residents. The problem lay in their ability to get things done at a corporate level. This is often the case with ward walks – they expose corporate weakness in the council as a whole, rather than in individual councillors. They can give a much broader perspective on things than you would expect.'

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

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

- Adapted from a feature in *Councillor* magazine.

make decisions on the spot. A few quick wins will make a good first impression.

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

getting to know people

The council should be able to provide a directory of council officers and other useful contacts such as the police, local MPs, other tiers of government and health bodies, but councillors will need to build up their own directories of key contacts relevant to their area. Councillors in the same ward can share this information to save duplication of effort.

For example, a list of groups in the ward should include community and residents' associations, places of worship, schools and playgroups, neighbourhood watch and leisure or sports groups, local police and fire and rescue services. This will enable councillors to introduce themselves and arrange meetings with others involved in the community and to keep their ears to the ground.

Frontline councillors should also be aware of council property in the wards such as housing, leisure facilities, parks and open spaces, depots, libraries, community centres and so on.

It is also worth knowing the main employers in the immediate area and whether a particular type of industry or business is a major employer of local people. Communities with large commuting populations are likely to use council facilities differently from those where most people work nearby.

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

working with other councillors

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

Councillors from the same political party, or fellow independents, are a valuable resource and may be able to agree a degree of workload sharing. Assuming they are not also newly elected, other councillors will already have a good idea of the main issues in the ward and should have contact with key groups and individuals. They can show new councillors the ropes and introduce them to useful people, but all councillors need to develop their own perspective on things and not rely on the opinions of others.

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

parish and town councils

Councillors should get to know the local parish or town councillors and attend some of their meetings, which often have a slot for public participation. They may also be able to help parish councillors access services in a higher authority. Councillors representing the same area on different councils can work together to resolve local issues.

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

community involvement

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

Some have developed community involvement by:

- introducing area offices so that services are more accessible
- assigning community development officers to groups of wards

- delegating decision-making to parish or town councils
- developing local area committees or town forums
- appointing town centre or community centre managers to work with communities.

See also chapter 3 on community leadership.

area offices

Area offices are usually one-stop shops where people can register any matter they want the council to deal with. They help to co-ordinate local service delivery. Residents may also be able to access services electronically, make payments and gather information at these offices.

community development officers

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

area committees and community forums

A number of local authorities are experimenting with area committees and community forums and there is a range of different models in operation.

Some area committees consist solely of councillors supported by council officers. There is usually an opportunity for public participation, with presentations, petitions and questions encouraged.

In community or neighbourhood forums, committee members include co-opted representatives of community groups as well as councillors. They provide opportunities for citizens to become involved in local decisions.

Area committees or community forums may:

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

getting involved

As part of their work, Frontline ward councillors may become involved in, or lead, local campaigns.

This could involve anything from campaigning for a zebra crossing or more affordable housing, to starting a credit union. There may also be politically motivated campaigns.

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

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

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

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

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

councillor's viewpoint

David Winskill, London Borough of Haringey

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

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

Although we are in opposition, we are, however, united with other councillors on the future of the old Hornsey Town Hall, which is in my ward. Since I became a councillor in 2002, the future of the much-loved grade II listed building has been a high-profile issue around here. There has been a campaign by local residents for the council to hand it over to a local trust. The local residents had to convince the controlling group that the town hall had fantastic potential to be used as a performing arts centre for the whole area. I sat on the Town Hall Community Partnership Board which was set up to develop a new vision for the hall in partnership with council officers. It has come up with feasibility and design options, in conjunction with the architects, which ensures any development is in keeping with the historic and architectural significance of the site, and it has made

plans for a trust to be set up to safeguard community interest in the site.

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

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

I was working as a freelance communications consultant, but being a councillor takes over your life. It is the most rewarding thing that most people will ever do. There are dark moments when there is too much to do and the world feels as if it is caving in. But then a little old lady says thank you for something you've done for her and she gives you a slice of cake and you know that you've succeeded in breaking the log jam somewhere in the bureaucracy.

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surgeries and casework

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

Casework comes through surgeries, letters, phone calls, emails, responses to leaflets and door-knocking. Some councillors find that there is relatively little casework while others have mountains of it. Usually, the higher the level of deprivation in an area or the less efficient the council, the more casework there will be.

If there is not much casework, councillors should find out whether it is because they represent a very self-sufficient community or because their profile is too low. Most residents are unaware that their councillor can help them resolve many issues, and it is up to councillors to let them know that this is part of their role.

surgeries

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

Surgeries enable councillors to:

- meet their constituents
- solve people's problems
- gain support for their work and ideas
- discuss the impact of council policies on the area
- raise their profile
- be an effective advocate for the people and communities they represent.

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

traditional surgeries

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

advantages of a traditional surgery

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

disadvantages

- the location of the surgery will be more convenient for some constituents than for others. Councillors can get around this to some extent by moving the location around the ward but this minimises the benefit of having a fixed time and place for the surgery
- only a small minority of constituents will come to a surgery so the time might be spent more effectively by getting out and meeting people.

premises and safety

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

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

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

Councillors must consider their own safety and shouldn't go to their surgeries alone. If they are not sharing the surgery with other councillors or agencies

managing casework

1. install a dedicated telephone line

- you will be called day and night – use the answering machine or service, especially after normal hours

- make sure that the outgoing message makes clear who you are and what information you want from the caller.

2. know the system – work the system

- use a simple form for casework at surgeries to capture the key facts

- use email – it is the swiftest means of communication within the council

- communicate with the council officers who handle members' enquiries or contact the relevant executive direct, if that is how your council operates.

Members' Casework officers will manage the standard of replies better and ensure target response times are met

- only contact senior directors or the chief executive on major issues

- advertise your surgeries widely in the community and keep them to a regular pattern

- listen to your constituent – then agree the problem and action with them to close down the surgery interview or phone call

- give clear instructions to council officers – either to write to the constituent with a copy for you, or to work through you

- copy the constituent in on what you have sent to officers unless it is confidential

- organise paperwork and computer files but keep it simple

- keep it civil – avoid being rude, overly critical or aggressive to council staff

- don't make assumptions or make rash promises – something may change your perspective on the case.

3. getting the balance right with casework

'It's the system'
Many cases will be about the 'system being wrong' or claims that it has been administered wrongly. You need to ask the right questions and make judgments about the rights and wrongs of a case

- use your advocacy skills – you can change someone's life for the better

- you could influence changes in policy and improvement in service delivery

- look for solutions, not someone to blame.

'I know my rights!'
Some cases will be about constituents 'banging their heads against a brick wall' because they are not getting what they want. You will frequently discover that a policy decision or system is correct and has found against your constituent correctly – but they refuse to accept it

- be honest but firm about what you can and cannot do for your constituent.

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

- trust your instincts – people will sometimes try to use you or avoid telling you everything you need to know and may not be aware of their rights

- trust your judgment – know when to fight a case and when to accept officers' decisions or views as the right response

- look at the bigger picture – trying to by-pass or short cut the system or requesting special treatment for one constituent may make things worse for everyone.

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

- all surgeries have their 'regulars' – be polite but firm and encourage them to help themselves in future

- some constituents may be obsessive or unstable – know your limits and don't be afraid to tell them the limits of your role as a councillor or when their behaviour or attitude is unacceptable

- you may face dangerous situations – you need to take advice from council officers about managing your surgeries and carrying out a risk assessment of the venues.

feedback
After you have made initial inquiries you should keep the constituent up-to-date with progress. They won't know what's going on unless they are told.

key message
Be an advocate but don't take it personally. Seek to influence better decisions for your constituents, but know when to say 'no'.

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

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

advantages of street surgeries
- councillors can gather concerns, opinions and casework from people who would not normally attend a traditional surgery

- councillors are able to gather a more representative sample of opinions by soliciting views and moving around the ward or division than they would be able to by waiting for people to come to them

- councillors can target hard-to-reach sections of the population

- councillors have an opportunity to look around their patch while doing the surgery

- councillors are sometimes shown a problem directly.

disadvantages
- predicting where to find their councillors becomes more difficult

- sharing surgeries with other agencies is not usually possible

- operating in bad weather can be difficult.

publicity for street surgeries
Councillors can obviously use all the communications discussed earlier but it's a good idea to send out a street letter too. By distributing leaflets a few days beforehand, they can tell people when they will be in the area. It can be helpful to mark streets visited on a map to keep a geographical balance around the ward. Councillors shouldn't just turn up unannounced – people need time to formulate their thoughts.

conflict
People who come to see councillors about serious or

intractable problems are often stressed and may be angry. If someone becomes aggressive councillors should:

- be polite and assertive but never be aggressive back as this will only escalate the situation

- offer whatever help and advice they can but not promise more than they can deliver just to calm people down. This will only make the situation worse in the long run.

When someone makes unreasonable or aggressive demands, some councillors use the broken record technique – simply repeating what has been said each time they are invited to respond:

'I understand and I'll discuss your case with the housing officer. I'll ring you next week to let you know what's happening.'

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

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

If people are racist, sexist or offensive in other ways, councillors should not respond but bring the interview quickly to a close. If they are in a building, they should stand up, walk to the door and lead the way out.

If they feel it is safe to do so, they may wish to explain why the remarks made are unacceptable.

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

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

planning and fettered discretion

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

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

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

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

If a councillor is seen to have decided how to vote in advance of a planning meeting, either by their stated support for a particular outcome or by their participation in lobbying, they are said to have 'fettered their discretion' and should play no part in the decision on the application concerned.

To avoid prejudicing their objectivity, councillors must have a full picture of the facts and will need to listen to opposing arguments. They should consider the planning officers' comments and recommendations before making a decision.

In practice this means councillors:

- can meet with and listen to the views of interested parties but should explain that they will keep an open mind until they have heard all the arguments, including those put forward at the planning meeting

- should not say or do anything that would make it appear that they have decided how to vote on an application in advance of the meeting

- who are concerned that it might be alleged that they have fettered their discretion by any discussions they have, should take an officer of the

council with them when they go to listen to the views of other people

- can still decide to get involved in a campaign for or against a particular application but will not be able to participate in the decision-making and should not pressurise other councillors to vote in a particular way.

See also Standards and Ethics

standards and ethics

WARNING: at the time of writing, revisions to the code of conduct expected to come into effect in May 2007 were still under review. Please refer to the Standards Board of England's website for up-to-date advice and guidance at www.standardsboard.co.uk. Elements subject to revision are marked ‡ in the text

The public has a right to expect honest and upright behaviour from its elected representatives. Confidence in local democracy is essential to an open and inclusive society. This can only be achieved when those serving their communities adhere to – and can be held accountable for – the high standards expected of them.

On accepting office, councillors are required to sign the statutory code of conduct, a set of provisions that guides members towards the standards of behaviour expected of them when in office. The Standards Board for England oversees the code of conduct and issues guidance on how to follow the code's rules. The Standards Board can also receive allegations that the code of conduct has been breached and, if necessary, refer the allegation for investigation.

This chapter presents the revised code of conduct as issued by the Government for public consultation in early 2007. As changes are anticipated following the consultation, councillors should be prepared to obtain specific information through the appropriate channels. The Standards Board will publish guidance to accompany the proposed revised code of conduct in due course and it will also be available at www.standardsboard.co.uk.

The Nolan Committee on Standards of Conduct in Public Life reported in 1997 that it found standards of conduct in local government to be generally high. However, the occasional case of misconduct led to a public perception of impropriety and dishonesty in local government. The Nolan Report set out principles to which those in public office should adhere.

Nolan Report principles

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

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

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

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

openness – holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands. Honesty – holders of public interest have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any arising conflicts in a way that protects the public interest.

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

The principles form part of an ethical framework that seeks to modernise and reinforce the democratic process in local government. The framework builds on the principles outlined above and was implemented in Part III of the Local Government Act 2000, which contained provisions for a model code of conduct.

All councillors are required to comply with these provisions and an agreement to abide by the code of

conduct as part of the declaration of acceptance of office for new councillors. The principles should be included as a preamble to the council's local code of conduct.

the Standards Board for England

The Standards Board was setup under Part III of the Local Government Act 2000 as an independent, non-departmental public body. Its role is to promote and maintain high standards of conduct in local government, investigate allegations of misconduct, and oversee the model code of conduct.

The Nolan Report recommended a streamlined and consistent set of arrangements for local government so that the standards expected could be clearly understood by people in public office and the public they serve. Nolan sought to change the negative perception and general mistrust people had of elected representatives.

The Standards Board covers a wide range of authorities including:

- county, unitary, borough and district councils
- parish and town councils
- police authorities
- national park authorities
- The Broads Authority
- fire and civil defence authorities
- passenger transport authorities
- Greater London Authority
- The Corporation of London
- The Council of the Isles of Scilly.

It is solely concerned with the conduct of councillors and co-opted members. Its remit does not extend to the conduct of authorities as a whole, nor of officers.

the code of conduct

All elected members and co-opted members of local authorities are covered by a code of conduct. Each code of conduct must include the provisions of the model code of conduct, although additional local provisions can be added so long as they are consistent with the model code.

To avoid confusing members of the public and elected and co-opted members of more than one authority, councils are encouraged to adopt the model code without amendment.

The code of conduct in general covers individual behaviour such as councillors not abusing their position or misusing their authority's resources. There are also rules governing registration and disclosure of interests. Councillors are bound by the code whenever they are conducting council business or representing the council.

Two provisions of the code of conduct apply whether or not councillors are conducting the business of their authority. They may breach the code if at any time they act in a way that brings their authority or office into disrepute, or use their office to improperly secure an advantage or disadvantage for themselves or others.

general obligations

Under the code of conduct, councillors must:

- treat others with respect
- not do anything that seriously prejudices their authority's ability to comply with any of its statutory duties under equality laws
- not bully any person including other members, officers of the authority, clerks or members of the public
- not intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person who may be a complainant, a witness, or who may be supporting the administration of any investigation or proceedings
- not compromise the impartiality of anyone who works for, or on behalf of, the authority
- not disclose confidential information, or information which they believe to be confidential, unless it is in the limited circumstances outlined under Disclosure of Confidential Information below
- not prevent anyone getting information that they are entitled to
- not use their position improperly to the advantage or disadvantage of themselves or anyone else
- not bring their office or authority into disrepute. At the time of writing, there is ongoing debate about to what extent the code of conduct covers conduct of councillors in a private capacity, outside their official role and functions. Please refer to the

Standards Board's website for more information.

- not seek to improperly influence decisions to the advantage or disadvantage of themselves or anyone else

- only use the resources of the authority in accordance with its requirements

- use the authority's resources for proper purposes only. It is not appropriate to use the resources for political or party political purposes, unless it is lawful and in accordance with their authority's requirements

- take into account the advice from their monitoring officer or chief finance officer when reaching a decision.

disclosure of confidential information

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

- they have the consent of the person authorised to give it

- they are required by law to do so

- the disclosure is reasonable and in the public interest, made in good faith and does not breach any reasonable requirements of the authority.

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

Councillors should also be aware of their authority's policies or protocols regarding whistleblowing and freedom of information and seek advice before making any disclosure.

Councillors should not disclose confidential information on the assumption that the disclosure is in the public interest without first raising their concerns with the appropriate channels prior to making any disclosure. It will be the councillor's responsibility to explain what steps were taken prior to making the disclosure and to justify why the disclosure should be regarded as in the public interest and not a disclosure for political purposes. See also Freedom of Information, Data Protection and Councillors and Communications.

registering and declaring personal and prejudicial interests

At council meetings, each councillor has a duty to declare an interest if it is on the register of interests and if it is either a personal or prejudicial interest.

registering interests

Councillors must register any interests listed in the model code of conduct so that the public, council staff and fellow councillors know which of them might give rise to a conflict of interest.

It will also help protect councillors by demonstrating that they are open and honest in their dealings. Councillors are responsible for deciding whether or not they should declare an interest in a meeting, but it can be helpful to know early on if others think a conflict might arise. It is also important for public confidence that people who are interested in an authority's meetings know about any interest councillors might have to declare.

Councillors must register their interests within 28 days of being appointed by giving their monitoring officer written details of any they need to register. The register of interests must be available to the public at the authority's office at all reasonable hours, but may not be posted onto the Internet without the consent of the councillor concerned.

They are:

‡ financial interests

- the councillor's job and their businesses

- the name of their employer, any firm of which they are a partner and any company of which they are a paid director

- the name of any person – other than a relevant authority – who has helped them with expenses associated with their election of their duties as a councillor

- the name of any 'corporate interest' – any corporate body that has a place of business or land in their authority's constituent area; and in which they have a beneficial interest in shares with a face value worth more than £25,000 or one per cent of the total amount invested in that corporate body by shareholders

- a description of any contracts for goods, services or work between the authority and the councillor, any firm of which they are a partner, any company of which they are a paid director, or any of their corporate interests

- the address or other description of any land in the authority's area in which they have a beneficial interest

- the address or other description of any land which any firm of which they are a partner, any company of which they are a paid director, or any of their corporate interests leases from their authority

Other interests

- councillors' membership of, or position of general control or management in:
  - organisations where they represent their authority
  - other public authorities or organisations which exercise functions of a public nature
  - companies, industrial and provident societies, charities or charitable organisations
  - organisations with a main purpose which includes influencing public opinion or policy, including any political party
  - trade unions or professional associations.

gifts and hospitality

Councillors need to register any gifts or hospitality worth £25 or more that they receive from the same source in connection with their official duties as a councillor. A culmination of small gifts that add up to £25 or more should also be declared.

Gifts and hospitality that are not related to their role as a councillor, such as Christmas presents from friends and family, do not need to be registered, nor are presents they decline.

However, councillors should always consider whether any gifts or hospitality could be seen as being connected to their role. If they are in doubt they should speak to their monitoring officer. A gift or hospitality may create a personal and prejudicial interest in a matter being discussed.

‡ personal interest

A personal interest in a matter is one that can be

reasonably regarded as affecting the individual, their relative or close associate, more than other people in the area. If a councillor has a personal interest, they can stay, take part and vote at the meeting, unless the interest is a prejudicial interest.

A councillor may have a personal interest if it affects an interest on their register or where it affects:

- their partner, relative, or close associate

- their employer, or the employer of their partner, relatives, or close associates

- any corporate body in which they, their partner, relatives or close associates hold shares with a nominal value of more than £25,000 or of which the member or they are a director

- any firm in which they, their relatives or are partners.

If a councillor has a personal interest because of a gift or hospitality they received over the value of £25 and subsequently registered in their register of interests, they may need to disclose the nature or existence of that interest to the meeting depending on how long ago they received the gift or hospitality.

See www.standardsboard.co.uk for guidance on this point.

The matter may affect a councillor's partner, relative or close associate if discussion concerns one of the following organisations in which they, relatives, or close associates hold a position of control or management:

- body where they are a representative or nominee of the authority

- body exercising public functions

- company, industrial and provident society, charity or body directed to charitable purposes

- body which seeks to influence public opinion or policy, including political parties

- trade union or professional association.

Special rules apply regarding disclosing personal interests if it arises from:

- another relevant authority of which the councillor is also a member

- another public authority in which the member holds a position of general control or management

- a body to which the member is appointed or

nominated by the authority.

In that case, the councillor will only need to declare a public service interest if they speak in connection with the issue in a meeting, unless it is also a prejudicial interest.

The onus is very much on the individual councillor to decide, with advice from the authority's monitoring officer, if a personal interest exists.

If a councillor believes they do have a personal interest, they should make their declaration at the beginning of the meeting or as soon as they are aware of the issue being discussed.

They should also say if anything being discussed relates to anything they are required to declare on the register of interests. If the councillor holds a personal interest they can still participate in the discussion and vote. The code of conduct was designed to encourage participation in an open manner, not restrict participation.

‡ prejudicial interest

The test for determining whether a member has a prejudicial interest in a matter is if a member of the public who knew all the relevant facts would view a councillor's personal interest in the issue to be so great it would be likely to prejudice their judgment of the public interest.

If a councillor has a prejudicial interest they must not try to improperly influence the meeting and should not attend a meeting of any authority considering the matter. However, the councillor may request that the meeting provides them with an opportunity to make representations, answer questions or give evidence on a matter on which they would otherwise have a prejudicial interest. This should be done in accordance with the authority's constitution or standing orders.

The code of conduct aims to provide councillors with the same rights as ordinary members of the public to speak on certain matters in meetings, despite having a prejudicial interest. However, that does not mean that the meeting will agree to their request to speak, even if an ordinary member of the public would have a statutory right to speak on the matter.

If members of the public are allowed to speak on the same matter or a councillor has a statutory right to speak, a councillor may also be given an opportunity to speak on the matter, despite having a prejudicial interest. The councillor must leave the room entirely after they have done so or at the request of the meeting's chair and must not try to influence the decision-making any further.

Councillors must use their own judgment when deciding if they have a prejudicial interest and when there is doubt ask their monitoring officer for advice. However, councillors will not have a prejudicial interest in a matter if that matter relates to, among other things:

- housing if they hold a tenancy or lease with the authority, as long as the matter does not relate to their particular tenancy or lease

- subsidised school meals, transport and travelling expenses if they are a parent or guardian of a child in full-time education or they are a parent governor, unless it relates particularly to the school their child attends

- statutory sick pay from their authority

- any member's allowance or payments

- member's indemnities

- bestowing the title of freeman

- setting the council tax.

Also, a councillor will have a prejudicial interest if they are part of an overview and scrutiny committee considering a decision taken by another committee of which they were involved.

See www.standardsboard.co.uk for up-to-date guidance on this section.

complaints and investigations

Anyone who believes that a councillor has breached the code of conduct can make a written allegation to The Standards Board. On receiving a complaint The Standards Board's referrals unit will assess the allegation and decide whether it should be referred for investigation.

The Standards Board may refer the allegation to be investigated by an ethical standards officer or for local investigation by a monitoring officer or a nominated deputy.

If it is referred to the local level, the monitoring officer

must arrange the investigation and a hearing of the allegation by a standards committee.

The hearing must take place within three months of the investigation's completion.

See Standards Committee Hearings below.

investigations

If an allegation against a councillor is passed for investigation to an ethical standards officer, the councillor's monitoring officer will be informed that a complaint has been received and misconduct alleged. The councillor to be investigated will also usually be informed.

Notification will only be delayed if it might delay or harm the investigation. If an allegation is not investigated The Standards Board will notify all concerned.

When an investigation is undertaken the ethical standards officer can reach one of five findings:

- there is no evidence of a breach
- no further action should be taken in relation to the matters investigated
- the matter be investigated locally and determined prior to ceasing an investigation or at the end of an investigation refer the matter to the standards committee for determination
- the matter requires neither investigation nor determination; instead, the officer can issue a direction to an authority to resolve the matter
- the matter should be referred to the local standards committee of the principal authority concerned or to the Adjudication Panel for England.

the Adjudication Panel for England

The Adjudication Panel for England is constituted separately from The Standards Board. It was established under the Local Government Act 2000 to hear and adjudicate on matters concerning councillors' conduct. When the Panel finds misconduct has occurred, it can decide on the suspension of a councillor or a co-opted member for up to one year, disqualification for being or becoming a member for up to five years, or to take no disciplinary action.

standards committee hearings

Completed investigation reports can be sent to monitoring officers for a standards committee to decide whether or not a councillor has failed to follow the code of conduct. Following a hearing, the standards committee can make one of the following findings:

1 the councillor has not failed to follow the authority's code of conduct

2 the councillor has failed to follow the authority's code of conduct but no action needs to be taken

3 the councillor has failed to follow the authority's code of conduct and should be penalised.

If the standards committee finds that a councillor has failed to follow the code of conduct and that he or she should be penalised, it may do any one or a combination of the following:

- censure the councillor – the only penalty available when dealing with someone who is no longer a member of the authority
- restrict the councillor's access to the resources of the authority for up to three months, which could include limiting access to the premises
- suspend or partly suspend the councillor for up to three months
- suspend or partly suspend the councillor for up to three months on the condition that the suspension or partial suspension will end if the member apologises in writing, receives training, or takes part in any conciliation that the standards committee orders.

Conciliation involves an independent person helping the relevant people try to reach an agreement on the matter.

standards committees

Standards committees have seven functions. They must:

1 give the council advice on adopting a local code of conduct

2 monitor the effectiveness of the code

3 train councillors on the code, or arrange training

4 promote and maintain high standards of conduct for councillors

5 help councillors follow the code of conduct

6 adjudicate on cases referred by The Standards Board

7 decide whether to grant dispensation requests from members.

Standards committees must have at least three members, of whom at least one must be an independent lay citizen and at least one must be a councillor. Local authorities operating executive arrangement may not include the directly elected mayor or leader on their standards committee, and a member of the executive may not be its chair.

Standards committees of English district and unitary councils are also the standards committees for the parish councils within their boundaries, and in these cases must include at least one parish member, although Standards Board guidance states a preference for at least two members.

Communities and Local Government
www.communities.gov.uk

The Committee on Standards in Public Life at
www.public-standards.gov.uk

The Standards Board for England at
www.standardsboard.co.uk

The Adjudication Panel for England at
www.adjudicationpanel.co.uk

Local Government Association at www.lga.gov.uk

National Association of Local Councils at
www.nalc.gov.uk

snapshot

- Chelmsford Borough Council keeps its councillors informed about what's going on via a specially designed portal called the Members' Zone
- information about the London Borough of Islington's four area committees is available through the Areas On Line section of the borough's website, which features discussion boards that gather opinions on local issues
- for South Norfolk District Council, getting closer to the people means connecting parish councils to the district and the county. Connecting them to the Internet has provided community resources in more than 100 separate parishes
- consultation is a way of life for councils. Bristol City Council has made it easy for residents to find out what consultations are happening and how they influence council decisions
- Basildon District Council has encouraged its young citizens to design their own website through which to voice their opinions
- citizens in the London Borough of Camden can watch and listen to councillors in council meetings via live webcasting from the council chamber.

councillor's viewpoint

Cllr Julie Morris
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

'It may seem easier to represent your residents when your party is in control but there is plenty that can be done for them in opposition. When you challenge majority party policies, you have to make sure that your arguments are clear and truly representative of residents' views. Keep residents up-to-date on issues that may affect them and let them know you are at their service.

The methods we use to keep our residents informed and engaged are tried and tested. We publish a regular newsletter, liaise with the local press, keep our website up-to-date, and hold surgeries and consultations. If you are a new member and not getting a response to these techniques, don't give up. It may just take some time for residents to feel comfortable with you.

One example of the contact we have with our residents was when the council had a choice of two traffic-calming schemes. We targeted 200 households along the proposed route prior to the release of the official council documents. By delivering tick-box questionnaires in person and asking people to place the completed forms sticking out of their letterboxes, we got a great response. As well as gathering opinions towards the traffic scheme, we collected useful data for our next campaign.'

www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk

freedom of information

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

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

1 all councils must adopt and maintain a publication scheme, setting out details of information they will routinely make available, how the information can be obtained and whether there is any charge for it

2 all councils must comply with requests for the information they hold unless an exemption from disclosure applies. Councils normally have a maximum of 20 working days to respond to a request but there are circumstances when this time limit can be extended.

For more information visit the Information Commissioner's website at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.

data protection

The Data Protection Act gives people rights regarding personal information that others hold about them and imposes controls on individuals and organisations that use personal information. The Act applies to councillors in the same way that it does to council employees and covers paper records and computerised systems using equipment owned by councillors or provided by the council.

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

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

The Commissioner is at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.

snapshot
data protection – key principles

Personal data must be:

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

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

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

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

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

6 processed in accordance with the rights of data subjects.

snapshot

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

LABGI (Local Authority Business Growth Incentive)
This scheme enables councils to retain some of the proceeds from growth in non-domestic taxes to reward economic development activities. The final details of the formula that determines how much an authority can retain were still awaited at time of going to press.

efficiency review
Local authorities will already have completed their forward-looking annual efficiency statement. This statement outlines where the council anticipates it will make its efficiency savings, both cashable and non-cashable. Members should approve this statement and be aware of all the implications of the proposals.

When holding and processing personal data about individuals in the course of council business, councillors are covered by the council's notification.

If the data is to be used for other purposes – for political activity for example – councillors are required to notify the Commissioner. Notification costs £35 a year. Councillors using personal data must keep it secure and misuse of data is a punishable offence.

The council's notification will include details of the information it will make available to councillors. This encourages disclosure of information that councillors need to do their job properly. Councillors should talk with their council's data protection officer and check the council's notification to make sure they are covered. This is particularly important when the data is of a sensitive nature such as ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, political allegiance and so on.

Broadly speaking, under Schedules Two and Three of the Act, councillors can process data if:

- the data subject has given consent to the processing

- the processing is necessary for a contract

- the processing is necessary to protect the data subject's interests

- the processing is necessary – a) for the administration of justice, b) for the exercise of any functions conferred on any person by or under any enactment, and c) for the exercise of any other functions of a public nature exercised in the public interest by any person

- it is necessary for legitimate interests of the councillor or the data subject or if the Secretary of State makes a particular order.

finance and the budget

The revenue and capital budgets of a local authority represent two of the ways in which councillors can make their policies and strategies come alive. The principles, processes and formulas of local government finance are fairly straightforward: income is received from a variety of sources and spent on services that benefit local people.

The budget year starts on 1 April each year and finishes on 31 March the following year. New councillors will join the council after the revenue and capital budgets for the year have been agreed but there is a role for councillors in their first year in monitoring the budgets and ensuring they are spent on delivering the council's policies and strategies.

Revenue and capital budgets are expressed in monetary terms but cover all the resources of the council – money, employees, assets and so on.

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

- politically led

- policy led

- aimed at redirecting the way existing services spend

- an aid to cross-departmental working.

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

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

Capital expenditure is money spent on the:

- acquisition, reclamation, enhancement or laying out of land

- acquisition, construction, preparation, enhancement or replacement of roads, buildings and other structures

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

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

sources of funds
Most income comes from:

- general government grant, which councils can spend as they wish

- specific government grant, which must be spent for

hot topic – Lyons Report

The long awaited Lyons Report on the future funding of local government was published on 21 March, Budget day. It was commissioned in 2004 to explore ways in which local government could and should be funded in the future.

Sir Michael Lyons' report calls for a new top rate council tax band, along with a new bottom rate to cut bills for those in the cheapest properties. Sir Michael, former chief executive of Birmingham City Council and now chairman of the BBC Trust, says that council tax is seen as unfair.

He wants the burden on pensioners to be relieved by raising their savings limit to £50,000 and council tax benefit paid automatically as a rebate, so that £1.8bn in unclaimed benefit reaches the poorest.

The report also says councils should be able to charge householders for how much rubbish they throw away and levy a local tourist tax.

Sir Michael asks the Government to consider giving councils a fixed proportion of income tax and consider introducing local income tax or a re-localisation of the business rate, which is currently collected locally and distributed nationally.

He acknowledges that some suggested reforms called for greater public support and understanding than currently exists and public sympathy for the idea of a local income tax may not be sustained once voters realise how much it would cost them.

As Sir Michael's report was published, Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, Chairman of the LGA, said it gave the Government the best opportunity in years to introduce an urgent overhaul of the way local services are funded. He warned that this must go above and beyond changes to council tax banding and called for an independent commission to supervise government funding of councils.

Sir Sandy said the council tax system is unfair, unsustainable and in desperate need of wholesale reform. 'After years of government review, local government calls on ministers to introduce an urgent and radical reform of the council tax system,' he said. 'Council taxpayers do not deserve purely cosmetic changes which fiddle with such distractions as banding.

'Taxpayers have been hit by a double-whammy of above-inflation increases in council tax forced up by a shortage of government grant and cutbacks in some key services, such as the provision of adult social care.

'At the same time, business has been contributing less and less. If businesses paid the same share of local taxation as they did when council tax was introduced, the average household could be around £250 better off each year.

'What's needed is wholesale, radical and far-reaching reform that will provide a fairer system of funding local services.

'Local people and local councils are tired of having to watch the annual wrangle over how much money central government is going to give to authorities and how much council tax will have to be paid.

'We are calling for an Independent Commission which would depoliticise the council tax system by making sure that government grants to councils meet the full cost of the government's new legislation, new policy and new demands imposed on councils and council taxpayers.

'Britain's towns and cities, once the industrial and economic powerhouses of the world, have fallen behind their European counterparts. Restoring the link between local government and local business would help realise the largely untapped economic potential of our towns and cities and make sure businesses made a fair contribution to their local community.

Ministers have been pledging more devolution and more decentralisation. Lyons' final report presents an invaluable opportunity for government to match their words with deeds.'

The Government has ruled out changes to council tax bands until after the next General Election.

www.lga.gov.uk

case study

Runnymede Borough Council in Surrey has published a glossary of terms on its website to help residents and councillors understand the terms used for different aspects of income and expenditure.

Asset Rentals See *Capital Charges*.

ANCT (Assumed National Council TaxT) The difference between Total Assumed Spending and Aggregate External Finance is approximately the amount that would be raised in council tax if local authorities as a whole spent at the level of their *Formula Spending Shares*. Dividing this total amount by the total council tax base produces an assumed national tax rate. This then gives the standard level of council tax for a band D property if all authorities spent at the level of their Formula Spending Share. This amount is used to work out how the Revenue Support Grant should be shared between authorities. Formerly known as Council Tax for Standard Spending.

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

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

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

Capital Expenditure Expenditure on *capital assets*.

Capital Receipts Receipts from the sale of *capital assets*.

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

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

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

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

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

FSS (Formula Spending Share) The amount calculated by the Government as a way of dividing up the national Total Assumed Spending between local authorities. This is not an assessment of the council's real need to spend but an assessment of its relative entitlement to *Formula Grant* compared with all other authorities.

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

HRA (Housing Revenue Account) A statutory account that deals with matters relating to council

housing, the cost of which is borne by the tenants and government subsidy.

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

National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) See *Business Rates*.

Precept The annual demand made on Runnymede as billing Authority by Surrey County Council and the Surrey Police Authority.

Rate Poundage (Business Rates only) Also known as the *Multiplier*. This is the amount that is determined each year by the Government which, when multiplied by the rateable value, establishes how much is levied on each business property. The Local Government Finance Act 1988 restricts the annual increase in the multiplier to the movement in the retail prices index.

Reserves These are balances in hand that have accumulated over previous years and are held for defined purposes. The level and purpose of the reserves are regularly reviewed by the council.

Revenue Income and expenditure relating to the day-to-day running costs of the Authority.

RSG (Revenue Support Grant) A government grant to make up the shortfall between a local authority's *Formula Spending Share* and the amount it would receive from Assumed National Council Tax and redistributed business rates.

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

www.runnymede.gov.uk

the purpose it is given

- charges the council sets for some of the services it provides, like leisure facilities
- council tax
- business rates that are set nationally, collected locally, but then redistributed by central government to councils on a population basis.

The biggest sources of income are RSG (Revenue Support Grant) and the business rate grant. A government-determined formula decides how much each council receives from these grants.

central government
Central government plans public spending on a three-year basis reviewed every two years. The Spending Review 2004 determined overall levels of public spending for 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08. The review took the proposed level of spending for 2005/06 as its starting point. The Government then determined the spending for the financial years 2006/07 and 2007/08 for all public services including local government.

The total amount of local government spending the Government is prepared to support is known as TAS (Total Assumed Spending). In 2005/06 the TAS figure for councils in England came to more than £79billion.

The funding of local authorities is based on the idea of equalisation. Government grants to individual local authorities are intended to take account of relative spending needs and the resources that can be raised locally. Councils with particularly high needs or a low tax base receive more in central support than councils with relatively lower needs or a larger tax base.

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

The council must be clear about what it is trying to do. It must have a broad strategy that sets down what it is trying to achieve. The budget enables councillors to:

- review spending priorities

- monitor actual spending
- control spending by service departments and budget holders
- enable redirection of resources
- plan ahead.

Budgets can also be used to:

- identify gaps in provision
- forecast future demands
- identify financial options.

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

the budget cycle

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

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

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

The revenue budget and the council tax level must be approved by a statutory date, usually around 10 March each year. It is normal practice for the capital budget to be approved at the same meeting.

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

strategy and policy

Councils need strategies and policies to enable them to lead their communities, deliver services and promote well-being. They need to be clear about what they want to achieve, so that they – and their communities, central government and inspectors – can judge how successful they are in achieving those objectives. They should prioritise what they want to achieve, to make the best use of resources to meet the needs of local people. They also need to be able to demonstrate value for money.

Strategies should explain how the council intends to achieve its vision. Policies should explain the actions that will be taken in different circumstances to do this.

Councillors are at the heart of this. They determine what the council should be trying to achieve and are ultimately responsible for making it happen. The executive – or cabinet – is responsible for developing strategy and for the overall policy approach of the council. In district councils that have adopted fourth option structures, this responsibility may rest with full Council or be delegated to a policy committee. Frontline councillors also contribute to the development of strategy and corresponding policy through their involvement in overview and scrutiny.

Every council has a duty to develop a community strategy, in consultation with partners, which sets out how it will promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area served. Councils normally do this by forming LSPs (Local Strategic Partnerships) with their partners to help develop and implement the strategy. In areas with significant deprivation, councils must establish LSPs to tackle neighbourhood renewal.

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

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

partnership to deliver them. LAAs cover all county and single-tier areas in England. The Government intends to place LAAs on a statutory footing from April 2008, with each containing around 35 targets.

In addition to the community strategy, councils will have a Best Value Performance Plan and, typically, corporate or strategic plans which show how they intend to deliver elements of the strategy, improve their services and modernise the organisation. Council policies should underpin the delivery of the plans.

It is obviously important that council strategy and policy are informed by the views of local people. There are many different mechanisms and techniques available for identifying the views of local people. They range from traditional customer surveys through to more innovative approaches such as citizens' panels or juries, focus groups, referendums and targeted surveys.

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

Councils should have a rigorous approach to policy development, with competing options fully evaluated on the basis of robust evidence, before decisions are finalised. In this context, overview and scrutiny plays a valuable role by gathering evidence and providing a forum where policy options can be evaluated. Councillors therefore have an important role in ensuring that council policy is realistic and based on sound evidence and rationale.

When developing policies, councillors will consider any legal implications, government policy, community needs and aspirations, party political issues, and the council's resources and capacity. A risk assessment may also be required. Councillors influence and determine the development of a council's strategy and policy through:

- full council
- the executive or cabinet
- overview and scrutiny

- participation in area forums and committees
- casework
- involvement in advisory groups
- local community groups
- membership of a political group.

It is insufficient to simply develop and approve strategies and policies. They need to be implemented with vigour. Councillors need to check that action is being taken and the desired results are being achieved through performance monitoring. If they are not, they should consider what else needs to be done and performance-manage delivery.

More information for councillors about strategy and policy is available on the IDeA Knowledge website.

overview and scrutiny

Overview and scrutiny in local government is an essential part of the councillor's role as a representative of the people. The majority of councillors have been engaged in overview and scrutiny since councils changed their system of governance following the Local Government Act 2000. Whether involved or not, every councillor will be affected by it.

The overview and scrutiny function is a statutory power and a duty. It enables backbenchers to hold the executive to account and to review policies and services on behalf of the public. It is the most effective way for councillors to examine the executive and those responsible for the delivery of services – to fulfill the council's responsibility for ensuring community well-being.

why does scrutiny matter?
Council policy and the quality of services provided must reflect the needs of citizens and councils to have community-planning processes to ensure the priorities of the council reflect the priorities of the local community. Scrutiny matters because it provides checks and balances between elections that protect the public from an over-powerful executive.

At a time when fewer and fewer councillors are executive members, the majority who fulfil the scrutiny function should be supported in making an

snapshot

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

- one local authority maintains a pool of 52 local co-optees who take part in the work of its scrutiny and select committees. These additional members are provided with training and support, and given access to IT facilities to maximise their ability to participate

- local authority overview and scrutiny committees have made important contributions to the self-assessment aspect of councils' CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment) by the Audit Commission

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

effective contribution, perhaps taking a lead from the Westminster model of select committees and learning from good practice elsewhere.

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

External challenge makes an enormous contribution to driving public service improvement.

what is scrutiny?

Overview and scrutiny is the mechanism by which public accountability is exercised in local authorities. Councils make decisions on behalf of the public and spend public money. They make decisions about the future management of public services, such as health, education and transport, that affect the daily lives of constituents. Public scrutiny is what representation really means – holding executives and services to account for decisions taken on behalf of the public and in the public interest.

how can we get it right?

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

1 scrutiny should provide a 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers and decision-makers

- this raises questions for party political groupings – opposition groups should not oppose for the sake of it nor should party loyalties prevent constructive scrutiny.

2 scrutiny enables the voice and concerns of the public and its communities

- as consumers of public services as well as electors, the public must be engaged in scrutiny processes that help them become more discerning and informed and this should include people like school governors.

3 scrutiny is carried out by 'independent minded governors' who lead and own the scrutiny role

- its independence from the executive is legitimised by full council and it is vital that councillors act as champions for the value and potential of scrutiny, actively promoting its status and credibility throughout the organisation.

4 scrutiny should make an impact on the delivery of public services

- to do this effectively, councillors should develop

an understanding of scrutiny's position within the corporate planning cycle, timing interventions to have maximum impact on key decisions such as budget setting and service planning.

Scrutiny also plays an important role in assuring the quality of services by monitoring performance management systems, questioning the appropriateness of targets and the adequacy of resources.

Councillors involved in scrutiny do not make decisions but do have a powerful political tool that can be used effectively for the public good. For more information visit the Centre for Public Scrutiny at www.cfps.org.uk.

scrutiny – expanding the role
The wider uses of scrutiny have come from local

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case study

Nottingham: how the city council could better support the LSP

In 2004, the Nottingham LSP had been having problems. The board suspended itself and a fresh start process commenced. One of the overview and scrutiny committees had started a review of partnership work and it prioritised looking at how the city council could better support the LSP.

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

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

Recommendations were made on strengthening the council's role, clearer communication from the LSP, improved definition of the priorities of the partnership, and performance management. After a positive response to the report from the leader of the council, the report went to the new LSP board, which has agreed to take forward many of the recommendations.

The work helped councillors to understand the LSP better and helped the council see where to target resources.

- First published in *A wider conversation – effective scrutiny of local strategic partnerships*, Jo Dungey, IDeA/LGIU, 2007. Printed copies may be purchased via the IDeA Knowledge website or downloaded free of charge.

initiatives, using the right to investigate any issue of concern to the area. Specific powers to scrutinise health services have been added to this. More recently, the Police and Justice Act 2006 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, likely to become law during 2007, are expanding the powers of scrutiny.

This will encourage scrutiny of the LSP (Local Strategic Partnership) and its sub-partnerships and there will be a particular emphasis on Local Area Agreements. Even before they gain further powers, councils are showing what can be done to lead a dialogue with other service providers and bridge the democratic deficit.

performance and inspection

The statutory duty of 'best value' currently remains the driving force behind the evolving reform agenda for local government. Introduced in the Local Government Act 1999, the 'duty of best value' requires councils and other public sector authorities to: 'Make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.'

The Government intends to revise the best value duty so that it will no longer be a requirement for councils to carry out best value reviews or publish a best value performance plan. Councillors may still consider these as best practice and undertake them in their own way, depending on the circumstances. The future focus will be on securing public participation, commissioning and competition.

The Local Government White Paper, Strong and prosperous communities, and subsequent Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill announced the intended introduction of a single performance framework and a single local services inspectorate.

They set out the Government's vision for improving the quality of life for all citizens – including a new performance framework that combines national and local needs and expectations. The new framework should support the drive for further improvement in local services through deregulation, devolution and decentralisation.

The proposals include rationalisation of public service inspectorates from eleven to four covering:

- local services
- children and learners
- health and adult social services and operation of the Mental Health Act
- justice and community safety.

If agreed, the local service inspectorate will combine the current functions of the Audit Commission and the local authority inspection work of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in England and act as gatekeeper for all inspections affecting local authorities.

Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, the Government intends to try out a new CAA (Comprehensive Area Assessment), to replace the current CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment), and to introduce a new duty on best value authorities to involve local people in ensuring services are responsive to citizens' views.

what best value means

Local authorities are required to monitor their activities in line with best value legislation and must devise plans for improvement. They have to look at things like cost and value for money issues and whether services meet council priorities and the needs of citizens. Councillors have an important role to play in managing the performance of their council.

They provide:

leadership
- for the CPA inspection and subsequent ownership of the recommendations
- of the policy framework and programming of best value or service reviews
- of individual best value or service reviews to ensure they are genuinely challenging and completed on time
- of difficult policy proposals and decisions coming out of reviews
- of performance issues raised by best value performance indicators and the council performance management systems.

monitoring and scrutiny of

- performance against targets

- the implementation of best value or service reviews

- representation and consultation

- local views ensuring that they are heard as part of best value reviews

- the development of local performance indicators and target setting.

communication

- about the work and performance of services to citizens, staff, partners and other councillors.

accountability

- service priorities, targets and performance.

One other element of the performance management regime is audit and inspection, backed by a wide range of sanctions for authorities that fail to meet requirements. The performance plan, for example, is subject to a detailed audit by the council's external auditor.

CPA provides clear and concise information about each council's performance on a scale from zero to five stars for single tier and county local authorities and weak to excellent for districts.

High performing councils receive extra freedoms and flexibilities while those performing less well are required to plan improvements and may suffer intervention. Councillors should study their CPA report and be aware of the council's response.

More information concerning best value and CPA is published on the IDeA Knowledge and many other websites.

councillors and communications

Modern communications for councils and councillors increasingly reflect the approaches taken by commercial organisations. This means that everything a council or councillor does is believed to affect the way the public perceives them. Some call it reputation management, some call it marcoms, an abbreviation of marketing communications, and some call it corporate branding. Whatever the name, it means that the council's and councillors' reputations will be

affected by citizens' perceptions of just about everything including:

- delivery of key services

- media coverage

- responding to citizens' needs

- civic signage

- maintenance of civic sites and buildings

- litter and graffiti

- safety on the streets

- low crime rates

- good healthcare, education and transport

- sport and entertainment facilities

- flourishing neighbourhoods

- their place in the community

... and so on.

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

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

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

publicity guidelines

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

Strict guidelines set out the roles and responsibilities of council press or communications officers. For example, they are not allowed to write or send out press releases on behalf of individual councillors –

their job is to represent the council to the media and other audiences from a corporate point of view, reflecting the policy decisions the council has made.

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

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

The need to communicate begins with the election campaign and continues throughout the councillor's career, whether they remain in opposition, on the backbenches or attain leadership positions.

Communication is a two-way process: as well as letting people know what they have been doing, councillors will need to listen to constituents and organisations in their area.

who needs to know?
The different groups councillors need to communicate with include:

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

Different audiences may need to be approached and addressed in different ways. For example, if there is a major change in housing policy, the things staff will need to know will be different from the information the media will be interested in. This is known as taking a different angle on a story, but it doesn't mean changing the facts.

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

Some audiences will have broadband Internet access, some will have modems, which are slower, and some will have very limited or no access to email or online services – so councillors will need to use a variety of communications techniques and tools to reach them.

communications tools

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

useful sites
www.blogger.com; www.typepad.com; www.sixapart.com/movabletype; www.pcmag.com.

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

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

email
Councillors use email to share information directly with residents interested in a particular issue, leaders of community organisations and groups of residents who have set up a newsgroup or email list. Email is direct and two-way and allows councillors to be seen to be in touch, share information and offer support to local people. Some councillors set up an e-newsletter. This can be a regular update of activity, campaigns and voting record, which is emailed straight to residents who have asked to receive it.

It is important to note that when sending e-newsletters, councillors should give recipients the opportunity to decline future editions.

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

websites

Many councillors now have their own websites, or at least their own section of a website. They can carry background information about the councillor, their achievements, contact and surgery details and attendance records. Advertise the website address in all communications to encourage people to come and have a look. If information about a councillor is carried on more than one site, it is important that simultaneous updates take place so that the information is consistent and unambiguous.

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

newsletters

Councillors should get to know the local community newsletters and contact their editors to see whether they would be willing to publish contributions, either on a regular or an occasional basis. As long as a column is used to let people know what's going on locally and the content is kept free of party politics, many editors will be happy to help.

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

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

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

These days, newsletters are published in printed form, as emails, on blogs and as Internet downloads.

local media

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

top tips

creating a successful blog:

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

- keep it simple and keep your entries short

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

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

- publicise your blog – include your web address on your business card, email signature, letterhead and any publications you produce.

Councillor Stella Creasy, from the London Borough of Waltham Forest, says: 'In the past I emailed information about activities and issues to hundreds of residents to keep them informed of things going on in my ward of Lea Bridge. The blog archives stuff I've done so rather than me having to find old emails to re-send, I am able to direct people to my blog.

- It also allows people to comment on things that are going on so they can participate in discussions about issues of concern in the local area. I see it as an extension of the other work I do in the community, such as public meetings and street surgeries.

- Hopefully, as residents become more familiar with the site, it can be a focal point for discussion and information about life in Lea Bridge, as well as a way for residents to keep a tab on what I'm doing.'

Stella Creasy's weblog is at:

www.leabridgelife.blogspot.com

build up a trust so that you can talk confidently both on and off the record.

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

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

If in doubt, say nothing.

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

communications planning

Although they call it news and make it seem spontaneous, the majority of stories carried by newspapers, radio and television have been planned well in advance. News organisations have forward planning diaries that tell them what is happening, where and when, up to six months or more ahead. Local media will know when the council is sitting, when courts are sitting, when school sports days are taking place and when the local flower show is on. They know because the organisations tell them.

Many councillors put together a rolling communications plan, mapping out the messages they want to send to their constituents and when they want to send them. These plans can be very simple – just a few notes on the calendar will serve to remind

councillors what to do and when.

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

Good communications reflect achievement and signal intent.

writing press releases

Councillors should make sure news releases contain news. The fact that they have spoken on issues at council is not generally enough. Human interest and topical local stories are usually welcome but councillors should always check before they pass constituents' details to the press. The political group may also want to ensure councillors are not contradicting local party policy on any given issue. Press releases can be mailed in printed form or emailed. Floppy discs and similar data storage devices are rarely used these days, although CDs and DVDs are used when large amounts of data are concerned. CDs and DVDs are useful for archiving casework and other important activities.

A good press release will concentrate on:

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

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

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

If councillors study the media they can see how they present their stories – the editorial style, tone of voice and so on – and learn how to present information in the same way. Experienced press officers write several versions of a press release to reflect the editorial stances of different media.

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

the council and the press

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

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

Some councils have protocols governing the issue of press releases. Councillors should check whether their authorities have them and follow them if they do. The leader of their political group will probably appreciate a copy of a release or briefing on any interview that has taken place.

When journalists follow up a story they are likely to call other people to support the points expressed or criticise them. It is therefore well worth letting fellow councillors, officers, or members of outside organisations who might be called, know what is going on.

more information

The IDeA Knowledge website contains more information on communications for councils and councillors. It includes:

Connecting with Communities – a free online resource available on the IDeA Knowledge website, covering everything from how to put together a communications strategy to communications with residents, partners and staff.

The Business Case for Communications: a concise review of why investing in communications makes sense. The publication can be downloaded from the Connecting with Communities Toolkit or can be ordered free by calling the Communities and Local Government free literature line on 0870 1226236.

Five Years of Communications: a MORI report about local government communications, with key issues and trends to focus on. The publication can be downloaded from the Connecting with Communities Toolkit or by calling the Communities and Local Government free literature line.

3 community leadership

local government White Paper: strong and prosperous communities

CLG, the department for Communities and Local Government, published Strong and Prosperous Communities, its Local Government White Paper, in October 2006. It has nine chapters, plus annexes on its implications for:

- community safety
- health and well-being
- the economy
- housing and planning
- children, young people and families
- the third sector
- vulnerable people
- climate change.

The substantive chapters cover:

- responsive services and empowered communities – including a 'community call for action' across local public services, a duty for councils to consult, and giving a community the 'right to buy' its assets
- effective, accountable and responsible local government – enabling structural reform in shires, all-out council elections and single-member wards
- strong cities and strategic regions – including permissive powers to devolve authority to city regions with elected mayors
- local government as strategic leader and place-shaper – including a duty for LAA (Local Area Agreement) partners to co-operate
- a new performance framework – setting the framework for the 'daughter' of CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment) from 2008
- efficiency in transforming local services – enabling services to be designed around the user
- community cohesion – encouraging a clear focus on this in places that face cohesion challenges.

There are strong themes of strategic leadership, engagement and representation, and the framework for assessing performance and encouraging improvement running throughout the White Paper.

Many of the ideas contained in the White Paper follow from proposals contained in the document Driving Improvement: a new performance framework for localities, which the LGA (Local Government Association) and the IDeA published in March 2006.

The White Paper clearly sees enhanced LAAs as central to local governance and performance management in the future. The IDeA has been working with the CLG in developing ideas on this policy issue and is actively supporting the roll out of LAAs in many areas.

Underpinning much of the White Paper is an enhanced recognition of the role that Frontline councillors play in engaging local citizens, advocating for them, brokering effective service delivery and holding local public services to account. The IDeA's work supporting and developing councillors continues to be of critical importance in helping councils to take advantage of the proposals in the White Paper.

Councils will have copies of the White Paper available for councillors. It is also available on the CLG website at www.communities.gov.uk.

community leadership

This section is concerned with councillors' roles in community leadership and in building strong, cohesive societies. It is a guide to the legal framework for community leadership and cohesion, identifying the characteristics of good community leaders and areas of good practice. It also explains the role of partnerships between councils and other organisations, the new arrangements for children's social services, adult social care and the NHS, and the growing importance of voluntary organisations in delivering local services.

successful community leaders

Responsibility for community leadership rests with councillors, so it is imperative that they work with local communities to develop and strengthen this role. Recognition for good, effective community leadership has to be earned – it cannot be conferred through the ballot box alone.

To be successful community leaders, councillors need:

- democratic legitimacy

hot topic: community call for action

The Local Government White Paper builds on the Police and Justice Bill by introducing the concept of a Community Call for Action across all areas of local government. It will give councillors a key role in addressing residents' concerns about crime.

Ward members will be at the front line of new plans enabling the public to force council action on safety issues that concern them.

The CCA would create new mechanisms allowing people to 'trigger' action from councils and their local partners concerning crime and disorder problems.

The Police and Justice Bill 2006 will give ward members a central role in monitoring the work of their councils and other local agencies. The CCA will be a last resort for people who cannot get issues resolved through any other means, and ward councillors will be their first point of call.

Ward members will be at the front line of new plans enabling the public to force council action on safety issues that concern them.

Once they have considered the issue they can refer it to the overview and scrutiny committee, though members will usually be expected to resolve the matter by other means first.

Overview and scrutiny will be able co-opt other agencies to help them consider matters and produce recommendations to the relevant authorities.

Councillor Richard Kemp, deputy chair of the LGA, says: 'Anything that encourages people to question the status quo and seek a wider understanding of the way in which government works should be welcomed.

'I doubt, however, whether the CCA will have that effect. Already 80 per cent of the queries that I deal with at my advice centre do not relate to the work of the council.

'What constituents want is not always legal, affordable or desirable, so I spend a great deal of my time reducing expectations and explaining why the public sector does what it does. My real concern is that the publicity for these measures will unleash a series of expectations which are simply undeliverable and that the result will be to stir up resentment about councillors and their role through meaningless interventions.'

Sir Ron Watson, vice chair of the LGA's urban commission, said: 'The programme must have some way of filtering out the "usual suspects" in any community. There are always small numbers of people who will use every avenue available to try and address issues they feel aggrieved about. They will simply go from one body to the next until they get the answer they want.

'Some consideration also needs to be given to the question of whether the process will have statutory powers. Little has been said about how any final recommendations could be implemented, particularly if councillors are seen to be passing judgment on areas where they have no direct responsibility.

'You could also argue that this process is the wrong way around. If more power was devolved to local government there would be less need for more methods of redressing public grievances – these grievances would be less likely to occur under a more democratic system.'

Stephen Houghton, a lead member peer at the IDeA, welcomed the proposals. 'Any measure that places the role of the ward member at the heart of the community has to be welcomed,' he said. 'It is at this level that I expect the majority of calls to be resolved and that I believe it will be relatively rare for matters to proceed to the scrutiny process. There are questions still to be answered but these should be addressed through consultation with stakeholders.'

• A version of this snapshot was first published in *Councillor* magazine.

councillor's viewpoint

the impact on councillors

Councillor Graham Chapman, Nottingham City Council

The Local Government White Paper recognises the role of Frontline councillors in engaging local citizens. There are many proposed benefits for councillors, but there are major obligations too. Councillor Graham Chapman looks at the possible implications.

Since 1997, the relationship between councillors and central government has been like a roller coaster ride. First there was hope, then chastisement with Tony Blair's 'one strike and you are out' speech in Scarborough in 1998.

With the Local Government White Paper Strong and prosperous communities, we have reconciliation, even approbation.

The reasons are firstly, council performance has improved and the Government recognises it.

Secondly, the Government has an agenda of regeneration, competitiveness, and social engineering. It cannot deliver this on its own.

Finally, I suspect ten years of power has taught the Government a lesson in humility. There is an appreciation that councillors, like MPs, get a press they do not deserve. It is felt local government – and the overall integrity of councillors in this country – should be valued, not denigrated.

To its credit, the Government seems prepared to trust us more. But it is intent on extracting concessions. The benefits conferred on us are many, but so are the obligations.

There have been years of ambivalence from government about who are the key players in local partnerships. The White Paper has made it clear – the key players are councillors, not officers or partners. Moreover, local

partnerships are to be extended to cover not only economic development and regeneration but also anti-social behaviour, climate change, and social exclusion.

That is not all. We have been designated 'champions of local communities'. This means we have to work hard to bring local groups and partners together.

Ultimately it is the elected member who is allowed to speak out on the community's behalf on planning and licensing. It means that we will be used as community advocates for community safety problems. The 'call for action' may also be extended to other responsibilities such as regeneration, equalities and planning. We can also, with fewer restrictions, introduce by-laws.

The responsibility for community cohesion and social inclusion will not simply remain part of our council-wide enabling responsibilities. The White Paper suggests it may also be part of our personal obligations as local councillors in wards that may or may not be one-member.

The White Paper extends not only our obligations and powers but also our level of accountability. We will become more accountable to the public, who are getting more choice, more involvement and more rights. We are also expected to filter out vexatious complaints and behaviour and at the same time be 'strong and visible'.

A final obligation dressed up as a concession, is to sort out the remaining issues of unitary status. Rather than a central diktat, the remaining two-tier councils are given the opportunity to negotiate with neighbouring councils the best configuration for their area.

It would be churlish not to recognise the honest intention of the White Paper and indeed the integrity of much of the

thinking. But it does beg a number of serious questions.

The first, what about the commitment members will be expected to provide? There is a danger that rather than encouraging new people to stand, the much extended role and new demands will act as disincentives.

The White Paper does say that it will set up a review of 'incentives and barriers' but it cannot create the one commodity in most precious supply for most councillors – time. This is especially true if it wishes to attract younger members with jobs and/or families to consider. This is an unavoidable contradiction that no review can resolve.

The second is the level of day-to-day support members will require. This will mean expansion of secretarial facilities, administrative, research and communication support. Is the public willing to pay for this expansion of posts that will inevitably be portrayed as 'unproductive'?

A third question is 'where do MPs fit into all this?' Don't they represent the public? Don't they have an informal duty to call to account non-council public bodies? I can see scope for duplication and conflict.

Finally what about the training necessary to fulfil this role of universal man or woman? This is what I would like to concentrate on. Little attention is given to it in the White Paper. A cursory read of the White Paper will illustrate the extent of the skills required.

executive members need to understand:
- spatial and social economics on a local and regional scale
- the factors that determine regeneration and sustainability
- how to manage partnerships and deal with other agencies, not just as members but as professional colleagues
- the functions of various partners, for example the RDAs (Regional Development Associations)
- understanding social cohesion and sustainability
- macro-economics in order to locate their area's role in the global economy – this is particularly important for leaders of larger authorities

Members of future unitary authorities and those contemplating joint service arrangements need to understand:
- the pitfalls and opportunities
- decision-making, conflict resolution
- complexities of disaggregation
- knowledge of new services
- the role of commissioning

Frontline members, especially those on main scrutiny panels, need:
- some outline understanding of all the above
- more detailed knowledge of the police, PCTs (Primary Care Trusts), LSCs (Learning and Skills Councils) and RDAs
- technical skills to help them in the community call, and advocacy roles – licensing, planning, law, and conflict management
- more sophisticated communication skills.

Some would argue this is already the bread and butter of the daily councillor existence. But at the moment we can almost pick and mix what we do and how intensively we do it. In the White Paper there is an obligation. What's more, the expectation is ratcheted up.

response to the training challenges
The response to the training challenges posed by the White Paper could be threefold.

The boundary discussion could hijack the whole debate. We in local government have an infinite capacity to discuss structure at the expense of substance. This could mean that the changes needed to support the new councillor role will be lost in the heat generated by boundary discussions.

It could become another growth opportunity for the 'training' industry.

Official local government organisations could lead a co-ordinated response. This would provide a proper framework.

The Government has given us the opportunity we've been asking for. I'm not one of the conspiracy theorists who think we are being set up to fail. It's up to us now to respond.

- the ability to build effective partnerships with other local organisations and communities

- a commitment to community engagement and empowerment

- the ability to respond effectively to local priorities

- a sound understanding of local governance arrangements

- an understanding of the local community and the groups and organisations within it

- access to key people in other agencies within that community

- access to officers and key people within the local authority.

Communities comprise a rich diversity of citizens, community groups and other organisations, many of which will want to be involved in their own development. Local authorities are a focal point for the development of their communities and councillors are in an ideal position to enable and facilitate development.

councillors and community leadership

Contrary to popular belief in some quarters, community leadership is not a new thing for councillors – it lies at the heart of the local democratic process and has done so for a century or more.

So, if community leadership is not new, what's all the fuss about? Why the emphasis on this aspect of the role of councils? Why the array of guidance, seminars and other forms of support aimed at councillors?

The answer is that today's councillors face new challenges and opportunities. The world of local governance is a rapidly changing and complex one. The profile of councils and the respect the public has for them have been on the wane. A fresh focus on their community leadership role provides opportunities to make the most of recent legislation and give communities more influence over their own destinies.

The legislative framework in which councils operate has changed significantly in recent years.

The power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of communities should free councils from the legal and procedural constraints that

have shackled their ability to innovate and respond to local needs. The duty to produce a community strategy combined with the establishment of local strategic partnerships provides a vehicle for establishing and delivering a shared vision for local areas.

While community leadership has always been part of what local authorities provide and are expected to provide, it is now firmly established in statute. The Local Government Act 2000 enshrined the community leadership role in law. It gives councils a new power 'to do anything' to promote the well-being of their area as a whole – encouraging councils to look beyond immediate service delivery responsibilities to the wider economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas.

It requires councils to develop a strategy for their communities with local people and partner organisations.

what is community leadership?

Councillors are in key positions to make things happen but need the skills and motivation to succeed. The Local Government Association in its publication Powerpack, using the new power to promote well-being, suggests that effective community leaders exhibit at least eight particular characteristics (see Snapshot).

Councillors face a real challenge in balancing the various elements of their community leadership role. In particular they will need to think about the meaning of leadership.

Leadership in this context does not mean taking centre stage – it means creating conditions that encourage, empower and facilitate the actions of others. Councillors need to develop the skill and experience to do this effectively.

In shire areas, county and district councillors need to explore their respective roles and those of parish and town councillors.

The growth in the number of organisations and agencies active at a local level has made community leadership more important and at the same time more difficult. If the priority is to enable local authorities to identify and meet their own needs, the concept of

snapshot

characteristics of effective community leadership

- **listening to and involving local communities**

Councillors cannot describe themselves as leaders if they are not in touch with the communities they purport to represent. They need to be in touch with all parts of their communities, including parishes and neighbourhoods, young people and minority ethnic groups.

- **building vision and direction**

Local communities face a complex and diverse set of problems and challenges. They want to know that all the relevant organisations in their area – public, private and voluntary – are working together towards shared goals.

- **working effectively in partnerships**

Councillors have to work with the whole gamut of local organisations and interests in shaping a long-term vision for the areas they serve.

- **making things happen**

Community leadership is about making things happen on the ground – about delivering outcomes for local people. Vision, direction and effective partnership are only useful if they deliver real change.

- **standing up for communities**

Local people want to know that their elected representatives really are considering the needs of the whole community and making sound judgments rather than popular choices. This advocacy role can involve speaking out for local people on major issues affecting the community and acting on behalf of specific groups of individuals, including transient communities.

- **empowering local communities**

Community leadership is about creating an environment in which other leadership roles can develop and fostering the development of active citizenship. Councillors have to lead and stand back at the same time, investing in the growth and development of communities so they are able to govern themselves.

- **accountability to communities**

Community leadership involves being accountable to local people through the ballot box and through the development of active, on-going relationships with them – for example, by listening to and being accountable to local communities through citizens' juries, people's panels and area forums.

- **using community resources effectively**

Communities, councils and partners have a wide range of resources they can call on. Community leadership is about ensuring they are used effectively to meet local priorities, delivering the best outcomes for local people and actively seeking new ways of promoting the well-being of their area.

community leadership has to be taken seriously. Councillors have to demonstrate their ability to fulfil the leadership role and convince local partners that there is something in it for them.

Community leadership goes beyond the services delivered by the council.

The focus of community leadership must be on the whole range of public services delivered locally, together with contributions from the private, voluntary and community sectors.

It must be framed around a shared vision backed up by a shared commitment to delivering and supporting its implementation. This really is about partnership working, although the responsibility for taking difficult decisions – for example, on issues where consensus cannot be reached – lies with councillors and cannot be avoided.

community leadership framework
Part One of The Local Government Act 2000 sets out the Government's agenda for developing community leadership.

It establishes the role of local authorities in community leadership and sets a new purpose for local government, which should be the starting point for the introduction of new political management structures and the test for their effectiveness.

Part One contains a package of measures to strengthen and support councillors as community leaders. It includes:

- a duty to develop a comprehensive strategy for promoting well-being – the community strategy
- new powers to work in partnership – in particular, establishing local strategic partnerships
- broad powers to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of communities
- power for the Secretary of State to remove legislative obstacles to the promotion of well-being
- power for the Secretary of State to remove statutory requirements on local authorities to produce plans.

Taken as a whole, the provisions in Part One represent a legal framework to support councillors as community leaders over the next decade and beyond.

what does this mean?
Part One provides practical mechanisms for:

- demonstrating effective community leadership
- developing a sense of vision or direction
- integrating the work of various agencies at the local level
- monitoring and review.

This and other policies – including new political management arrangements, the strengthening of local democracy, establishing a new ethical framework, simplifying capital finance, strengthening local accountability, introducing an element of local discretion in business rates and improving services through best value – offer a statutory basis for local authorities' leadership role in community governance.

the duty to develop a community strategy
The Act places a duty on principal local authorities in England and Wales to produce:

- a community strategy to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas to achieve sustainable development. Government guidance recognises that local authorities themselves are best placed to decide how to implement the duty in their areas. It is expected that the strategies will reflect local needs and build on local circumstances.

The guidance also suggests that the community strategy will have to meet three main objectives:

1 to provide for local communities' articulation of aspirations, needs and priorities

2 to co-ordinate the actions of public, private, voluntary and community organisations

3 to shape and focus existing and future activities of these organisations to meet community needs.

The LGA (Local Government Association) sees community strategies as requiring:

- outward focus on the needs of the community as a whole, not just the particular issues for which the authority has statutory responsibility
- the integration of forward planning processes between and within public authorities in the area
- shared assessment of the immediate and future needs of the area

case study
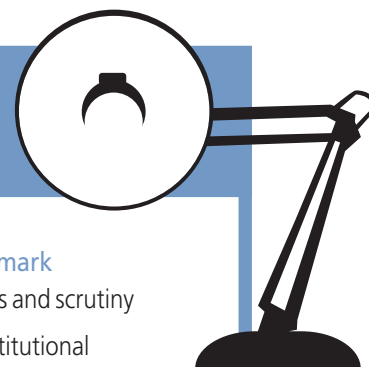
The IDeA's LGIP (Local Government Improvement Programme) benchmark identifies the core elements required for effective community leadership:

- constitutional arrangements and scrutiny
- ethics, standards and conduct
- customer and citizen focus
- communication
- consultation and participation.

Using the LGIP benchmark, councils undergo a week-long Peer Review of their performance and activities.

From the results of these reviews the LGIP team has concluded:

'Councils are most effective when their political and managerial leaders focus their energies on engaging residents and partners in developing a common understanding of the future needs to their area. It is clear from the reviews that senior officers and members sitting in meetings with each other cannot drive change. It requires them to get out and about and engage with the people who deliver change at the front line.'

In essence, the LGIP reviews have found that effective community leadership is about establishing good working relationships, collective focus, genuine engagement, listening to many voices, visioning, clarity of expression, making time for others, driving change, and more. Learning how to deploy all of these simultaneously is critical to the long-term success of a community leader.

elements of the LGIP benchmark

- constitutional arrangements and scrutiny

An understanding of the constitutional arrangements needed to give citizens effective representation and to promote the interests of all sections of the community, along with the capacity and commitment to create the internal and external structures and

processes required

- ethics, standards and conduct

The promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by councillors and staff and the integration of an ethical framework into the council's corporate governance arrangements.

- customer and citizen focus

An outward focus on the needs of those who are the reason for the authority's existence, with political and management structures, resource allocation, systems and processes organised to this end.

- communication

Listening to and encouraging feedback and continuous dialogue with all sections of the community. Convincing, influencing and using various media appropriately and sensitively, and building and maintaining communications networks.

- consultation and participation

Creating specific and purposeful opportunities to listen to the views of users, the community, partners and so on as a way of learning how to improve the authority's performance in responding to their needs and interests and, where appropriate, involving them even more actively in decision-making, service specification and redesign.

- shared objectives for the way in which an area is to develop towards a long-term, sustainable future

- analysis of the resources available and required to implement community aspirations

- actions and activities to which partner organisations and stakeholders commit

- ongoing partnership approach to the achievement of these objectives, the implementation of strategies, review and learning

- measurement of progress

- full involvement of the community and partner organisations in identifying objectives and preparing, delivering and implementing these strategies.

See the section on Partnerships.

the community leadership role in promoting community cohesion

The community leadership role of local authorities is enshrined in two Acts – the Local Government Act 2000 and the RR(A)A 2000 (Race Relations Amendment Act). While the Local Government Act provides a legislative basis for local authorities to act as the stewards of social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas, both Acts outline the statutory duty of local authorities to promote good community relations, and stronger, more cohesive communities within their localities. Taken together, they provide an imperative for councillors to promote, influence and demonstrate impact at local, regional and national levels.

A specific duty on schools to promote community cohesion will come into effect this Autumn, strengthening the existing duty to promote good race relations.

The Local Government White Paper, placed a strong emphasis on the role of councils in promoting community cohesion and there is an expectation that consideration of equality, diversity and community cohesion is integral and cross-cutting within every Council's LAA.

Like most aspects of civic life, community cohesion is something people ultimately generate themselves but it is for councillors, along with their officers and partners, to support and facilitate it.

Failure to comply with the RR(A)A's Positive Duty to 'promote good community relations' can lead to a non-compliance order and legal sanctions, so it is important for councillors to understand the power and potential of their responsibilities in this area.

what is community cohesion?
Community cohesion incorporates and goes beyond the concept of race equality and social inclusion. The National Guidance for Cohesive Community (December 2002) defined a cohesive community as one where:

- there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities

- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued

- people from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities

- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds.

Understanding of community cohesion, and the complexities of our diverse, dynamic communities, is developing all the time. The Government is therefore seeking to build on the definitions above, in consultation with local authorities, partners and national bodies.

The Government's Commission on Integration and Cohesion produced its interim statement in February 2007 and is due to produce its final recommendations in June 2007.

Among its wider interim recommendations, the Commission has acknowledged the central community leadership role of councillors as vital to understanding and meeting the needs of all local communities, and in promoting community cohesion: 'It is for local authorities – as the stewards of overall social, economic and environmental well-being – to find pragmatic approaches in their local areas. Elected members also have a key role to play in their neighbourhood and ward roles in connecting with residents, and in supporting local communities in shaping the place in which they live. The "community call to action" in the recent Local Government White Paper will give added importance to the Council's

mainstream scrutiny function and the transparency of decision making.'

Issues around community cohesion came to the fore following the disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001. The Home Office led the initial policy response, which produced the Cantle report and led to other policy initiatives, including the Community Cohesion Pathfinders and the selection of 'promoting community cohesion' as a beacon theme in 2003–04.

The Cohesion and Faiths Unit at CLG now has the Government lead, and community cohesion is a central ministerial responsibility of the Secretary of State.

Visit www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk for more information on the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

Visit www.communities.gov.uk for more information on community cohesion on the CLG website

what is at stake?

The findings of key ministerial inquiries on community cohesion (Building Cohesive Communities: A report of the Independent Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion, Home Office 2002) show that weak community cohesion commonly occurs when:

- there is polarisation and a sense of dislocation between communities

- residents have a lack of civic identity with the area

- people live in fear and ignorance of each other

- local people are disengaged from local decision-making.

Community cohesion is at the heart of LAAs (Local Area Agreements), as a cross cutting theme that can be transposed across all four blocks:

- children and young people's services

- safer and stronger communities

- healthy communities

- local economic development.

More important for councillors, studies show that cohesion is at risk in areas where there is a lack of community leadership, both in terms of the council itself and the communities it serves.

While it would be too simplistic to say that community disturbances occur solely because of a lack of community leadership by local politicians, evidence from a wide range of local authorities has emphasised the importance of understanding, representing and meeting the needs of all local communities.

A council's achievements in building community cohesion are now evaluated as part of its CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment). CPA inspection includes questions on user diversity across its key lines of enquiry and the assessment includes a section on safer, stronger communities. The Audit Commission, which carries out CPA, looks at such things as a council:

- demonstrating an understanding of local community cohesion issues

- developing a strategy for achieving improvements in partnership with other agencies and stakeholders

- identifying and creating local indicators relevant to the locality to baseline and monitor levels of community cohesion

- promoting respect between communities, addressing myths and encouraging dialogue and co-operation

- integrating cohesion and diversity principles into mainstream matters such as housing, neighbourhood renewal, community safety and education.

the benefits of building strong, cohesive communities

Citizens say that being able to live in strong, safe communities, with good neighbours and good services that reflect their needs, improves their quality of life and gives them a stronger sense of identity with their locality.

There are a number of reasons for and benefits from building strong, inclusive and cohesive communities. Councillors promoting cohesion say that the benefits include:

- strengthening political and managerial leadership

- integrated strategies and sharper customer focus

- mainstreaming and refreshing the equalities agenda

- laying the foundations for long-term sustainable and civically active communities
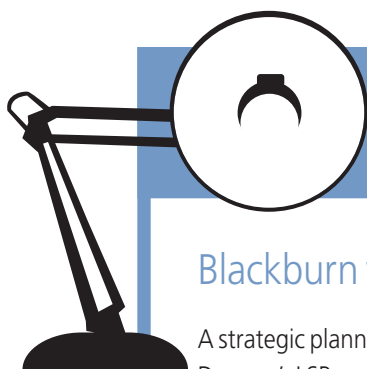
case study

Blackburn with Darwen

A strategic planning away day for Blackburn with Darwen's LSP enabled them to identify and discuss their community cohesion strategy. This event, attended by 50 partners from a range of organisations and groups in the area, led to proposals for LSP joint working and a draft community cohesion strategy incorporating five key objectives:

1 to strengthen leadership and commitment from all sectors of the community across all age groups to drive meaningful participation for everyone

2 to promote respect and pride in a diverse Blackburn with Darwen, developing a civic identity that includes people from different backgrounds

3 to design and implement a multi-agency protocol for recording and monitoring anti-cohesion behaviour and tackling discrimination, racism and hate crimes

4 to promote equality of opportunity and social inclusion

5 to build positive relationships between people from different backgrounds and cultures.

As a follow-up, the IDeA conducted a series of 12 'blind spot' consultations for Blackburn's LSP with different groups from the Blackburn with Darwen community. This involved scrutiny members in sponsoring workshops and attending as observers. The process enabled local people to test the draft community cohesion strategy and identify any issues that concerned them.

A Belonging to Blackburn with Darwen Charter, which the IDeA helped the council to develop, was launched by the Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, the Blackburn with Darwen Partnership and the IDeA.

Blackburn with Darwen later revisited its community plan and undertook a forward strategy exercise.

It also re-launched its Belonging to Blackburn campaign to strengthen citizenship and a shared future, and rationalised two of the LSP's forums on stronger communities and community cohesion and social inclusion into one new group, the People and Communities Forum.

For more information on the IDeA's work with Blackburn with Darwen, and to view a range of other case studies, toolkits and support materials, visit the IDeA Knowledge website's community cohesion pages.

- more focused partnership roles and outcomes

- narrowing the gap between 'indigenous', 'settled' and 'new' communities

- combating ignorance and conflict while enriching people's lives.

Councils say tackling cohesion challenges is hard work but the risks of not doing it are too great, sowing the seeds for discontent, extremism, and acute dislocation. The PET (Preventing Extremism Together)
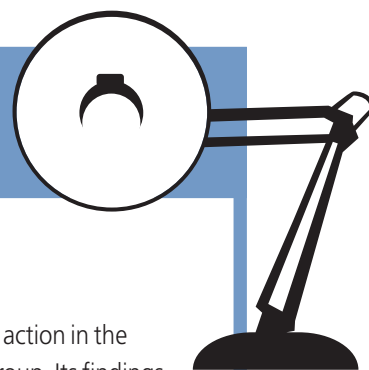
report and action plan identifies steps local government, councillors and communities can take together to ensure communities are reassured and kept safe.

key challenges for councillors

Community cohesion poses real challenges for councillors in terms of:

1 securing commitment to, and ownership of, the

evaluation

The IDeA carried out an evaluation of the effectiveness of cohesion reassurance and action in the aftermath of the 7 July, 2005, London bombings for the Pan-London Stakeholder Group. Its findings suggest that reactive cohesion reassurance in a time of crisis is only achievable when partners have demonstrated a commitment to proactive community leadership and partnership working outside the crisis itself.

community cohesion agenda

2 understanding the dynamics of local communities

3 demonstrating appropriate leadership

4 managing complexity to ensure effective mainstream delivery of community cohesion.

1   securing commitment and ownership

Despite the definition provided by the National Guidance, it is essential that the local approach to community cohesion is developed and owned by local agencies, organisations and communities. It is the councillor's responsibility to ensure that this is achieved. Across the country, councillors are working in partnership with others to integrate the issues with their community strategies and corporate and service planning systems, to demonstrate commitment, develop new approaches, and sustain progress.

Because of its broad nature, community cohesion can sometimes be a difficult concept to understand.

Partners may already be working to break down cultural barriers between communities or promote equalities, but they may not necessarily see where this fits into the wider community cohesion agenda. Councillors are well placed to ensure that community cohesion is understood and actionable in the work of the council and its partners.

In the case of the West London Alliance for Community Cohesion and the East Lancashire Partnership, councillors are actively promoting cohesion at local and sub-regional levels. Elsewhere, as in Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and the

London Borough of Southwark, councillors have been working with local communities to define what community cohesion means to their residents and users, to create a vision for the future on how cohesion might look and feel, and building consensus on what constitutes positive impact.

By using the community's own language and vision to refresh corporate and community plans, councils have been able to monitor and 'cohesion-proof' decision-making and policy direction.

In addition, by working closely with LSPs, councillors are actively developing community and neighbourhood renewal strategies that make a wider contribution to the social, economic and civic well-being of the area. In places where LSPs and neighbourhood renewal areas do not exist, other strategic partnership bodies can facilitate involvement and secure ownership. Accountable bodies can be set up specifically for strategic cohesion and should always have links with the council and its strategic forums.

2   understanding the dynamics

Councillors have a key role to play in building cohesive communities at neighbourhood or ward level. Councillors can convene local forums that bring together different community interests as a mechanism not only to feed into the council's decision-making process, but also to address misunderstanding or conflicts between different groups. One example of this could be where wards in rural areas contain many small and isolated villages

and, perhaps, transient communities too. In such cases, councillors will need to work through the relevant governance structures, such as parish councils, to promote community cohesion and to monitor and tackle tension and conflict.

For more information on conflict resolution, see the publication *Community Conflict, Causes and Actions,* by Lemos and Crane, and subscribe to the members' RaceAction:Net website.

Most local authorities have been working with their local partnerships to agree on a vision for their area. It is important that local people are able to contribute to, understand and support this vision. The vision should include principles such as inclusion and equality and should explain the benefits of diversity and how it can make a place stronger and more vibrant.

This resonates strongly with CLG's Ten Year Vision for Local Government and the Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities. They present community cohesion as an integral pillar of sustainable communities, achieved through: vibrant local leadership, new localism, civic renewal, regeneration, mediation of community conflicts and stronger, safer communities.

3   demonstrating leadership

Strong leadership involves countering individuals or groups that aim to exploit or create tensions between communities. Good leaders will find imaginative ways to engage with communities and create a sense of belonging within an area. This will build resilience among people who may be targeted by political or other extremists. Leaders with knowledge of the local area should know when to exert influence and when to let others share responsibility.

A range of partners across the public, voluntary and private sectors can help councillors in this. A firm but fair approach will create an environment where people are free to voice opinions and disagree on issues while maintaining mutual respect and confidence in the leadership.

Councillors must be receptive to new ways of thinking and working, and be prepared to engage with new and different players in different ways:

- being versed of their legislative duties and ensuring

compliance with codes of conduct, ethics and probity

- ensuring community cohesion is embedded in the council's corporate framework and reflected in service plans

- scrutiny of policy and procedures, monitoring, reviewing and contributing to policy development

- contributing or championing an overall strategy for community cohesion as members need to be seen to drive this, and residents often identify their community cohesion role models as councillors and people visible in their communities

- involving communities in shaping services that will not only meet their needs, but that will also build bridges within and across communities, and bring segregated communities together – bridging and bonding

- working with and recognising the contribution of partners and the voluntary, community and faith sectors

- working with and managing the media so that sensational, negative stories and myths that present a poor public image of your locality and which can erode a sense of identity and well-being are minimised, exposed and challenged by consistent corporate messages

- recognising, valuing and using the diversity of experience, knowledge and skill available in the voluntary, community and faith sectors

- ensuring all council services deliver to community cohesion targets and are self-regulated and scrutinised for community cohesion outcomes

- enhancing civic leadership and conflict resolution within and across communities as shown by the Oldham Peacemaker project and other neighbourhood renewal initiatives.

Local political and community leaders have a crucial role in encouraging unity across divided communities by holding discussions and planning communications. Strong leaders will not be complacent about myths that pose a threat to community harmony and will take the lead in explaining the benefits of diversity and integration.

This may involve responding directly to local leaflets or media articles that might raise tensions between
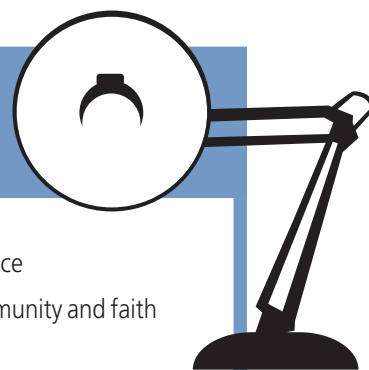
Many councils have ensured that there is a lead councillor with responsibility for community cohesion issues.

This may be a sole responsibility or combined with other subject areas, such as equalities.

For example, in Rochdale, Councillor Zulfiqar Ali is cabinet member for housing and community cohesion.

Within days of the terrorist bombings in London 2005, Councillor Stephen Alambritis, the lead for community cohesion in the London Borough of Merton, set in train a number of activities between the council, the local police, and community and faith groups. These included:

- opening a book of condolence
- holding meetings with community and faith group leaders
- leafleting by police and community wardens, promoting harmony and a joint message from all faiths
- multi-faith prayers at the local mosque
- discussions at 21 July meeting of the Merton Partnership LSP in relation to community cohesion and young people

In the London Borough of Enfield, the cabinet member for community safety and the voluntary sector provides councillor leadership on the issue of community cohesion and drives its work forward. Other cabinet members address community cohesion within their specific areas of responsibility, ensuring a coherent corporate approach.

communities. Frequently, these can be based on misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the facts. As leaders of communities, councillors have the opportunity to address myths head on and to protect those from vulnerable communities by pointing out the facts.

See Councillors and Communications in chapter 2.

community leaders
Generally, views differ when gauging the role of community leaders. Councillors often need to rely on the views of 'community representatives' when there is neither the time nor resource for broader consultation. Councillors should seek to work closely with community representatives who are democratically elected, such as parish or youth council members, and with those who are less formally elected, such as members of tenants and community associations, neighbourhood watch groups and resident panels.

This work should dovetail with the inclusion mechanisms for an area's community strategy – which should also be developing the knowledge base and capacity of unaffiliated community members and more formally recognised representatives.

4 managing complexity
In terms of regulation and performance management, community cohesion and partnership working will become more prominent in future inspection regimes. There will therefore be stronger links between the community leadership and scrutiny roles of councillors.

The Cohesion and Faiths Unit has developed performance indicators for community cohesion in consultation with local authorities, the IDeA and other partners.

In addition, some interesting findings have begun to emerge from the Citizenship Survey (Local Boost

2003), where there is strong statistical correlation between high levels of community cohesion and certain analysis factors such as: levels of crime; similar life opportunities; sense of community; perceptions of diversity; and political trust.

bringing community cohesion to life

The Home Office devised a model of Seven Steps to Community Cohesion, derived from the experience of the councils that participated in its community cohesion Pathfinder programme. The recommended seven steps that can enable councillors to bring cohesion to life are:

1 demonstrating leadership and commitment

2 building partnership around a common vision

3 programme planning and management

4 engaging communities

5 changing perceptions

6 recognising the importance of community cohesion to the local economy

7 achieving sustainability.

scrutiny

The Communities and Local Government statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny already encourages scrutiny committees to seek views from as many communities and interested parties as possible, to get a balanced picture of effects of policy and executive decisions. In particular, an overview and scrutiny committee can conduct reviews of how certain decisions have affected a particular community or area, taking advice from area committees or forums, or other community groups and representatives.

Scrutiny provides an opportunity to

snapshot

The IDeA helped to produce national practitioner guidance, Community Cohesion – An Action Guide, which is a good source of best practice for councillors and officers alike.

Until now there has been no guide designed specifically for local authority leaders and chief executives even though the leadership role is among the most crucial factors for successful cohesion. As part of the national community cohesion advisory group, the IDeA has worked with the LGA to produce the Updated National Community Cohesion Strategic Guidance for chief executives and lead members. Launched in February 2006, the guidance is in two parts:

1. a guide looking at some of the key themes and approaches such as definitions of cohesion; developing a vision; statutory responsibilities; measurement; links between central and local government and civil renewal

2. a casebook of examples of how local authority leaders and chief executives have contributed directly to their authority's work to promote cohesive communities, using different leadership styles and approaches.

Copies can be downloaded from the LGA website.

case study
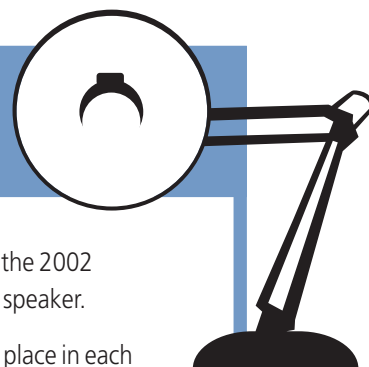
West London Alliance

Among the councils exploring ways of building good practice on community cohesion, the WLA (West London Alliance) – Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow – won Cohesion Pathfinder status from the Home Office.

'One of the reasons we bid for Pathfinder status was to demonstrate the range of good practice that already exists,' says Claire Codling, WLA community cohesion co-ordinator. 'We also wanted to demonstrate that, in London, communities are generally well integrated and have avoided the problems experienced elsewhere.'

Councillors have come to play a vital role in the initiative although the initial Pathfinder programme did not include member training. 'As we began working we realised that this was a significant gap and that members should be involved in our work,' says Codling. So the WLA invited the IDeA to become involved in the project and use its expertise in member development to get the ball rolling.

The initial training was held in Hounslow, where the basic material was tested at a major community cohesion event at which Ted Cantle,

author of the Cantle report on the 2002 disturbances, was the keynote speaker.

Workshops subsequently took place in each borough and, overall, 90 councillors from the six WLA members took part in the IDeA's customised workshops.

They helped them get to grips with the background and concept of community cohesion and also gave them opportunities to begin applying community cohesion principles to priority projects in each borough.

One unexpected benefit to emerge from the workshops was the effectiveness of cross-party working, with one chief executive remarking that it was one of the first times they had witnessed such co-operation between members of different political persuasion.

The councils involved are now developing and implementing their individual responses to the challenges of community cohesion. For example, Ealing set out to discover what was going on in the borough and what factors had to be taken on board, while Harrow set up a reference group to play a virtual scrutiny role in ensuring community cohesion was addressed in local strategic partnership work.

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consider the impact of policy proposals and service issues and allows non-executive members to address cohesion issues and bring their perspectives to bear on executive decisions. Through scrutiny, facts about controversial local issues can be explored and presented, helping counter misinformation that can undermine cohesion.

This has proved to be the case with refugees and asylum seekers.

The LGIU (Local Government Information Unit) and the IDeA have produced detailed guidance on conducting scrutiny of community cohesion issues, which is available from the IDeA Knowledge website.

conclusion

Community cohesion is about ensuring that effective mechanisms are in place to:

- realise, capture and achieve the shared values of a

diverse mix of geographical, cultural and special interest community groups

- effectively deliver services that tackle common obstacles different communities experience in relation to access and take up of services.

Leading communities is about enabling communities to face issues, deal with problems and realise aspirations in the most effective ways for them. It involves working in partnership with local people and organisations to create a shared vision of the future and then making it happen. It requires looking outwards and learning from other places that are doing this well.

The IDeA is working with partners to update the National Guidance on Community Cohesion to help councillors access best practice and further information.

Community relations are complicated – often there are many different and competing needs to meet, with increasingly limited resources and this can lead to frustration. But the community leadership role of councillors is central to community cohesion. With their democratic mandate, councillors can secure ownership, broker compromise, alleviate tension and build consensus to help their communities with confidence. There is no denying it – the challenge is great but ultimately it can yield even greater rewards.

more information

Developing Community Strategies Toolkit on IDeA Knowledge website

Community cohesion resources and case studies on IDeA Knowledge

Commission on Integration and Cohesion

Communities and Local Government website

Institute of Community Cohesion

Leading Cohesive Communities (IDeA and LGA) – a two-part guide for leaders and chief executives and lead members (February 2006)

Trailblazing in cohesion: a toolkit for evaluating cohesion outcomes, from fire modernisation activity (IDeA and Cheshire Fire and Rescue Services, March 2006)

Gypsies and Travellers Strategy (CRE 2004–7)

Preventing Extremism Together (August 2006, HO Cohesion and Faiths Unit Office website)

Cohesion and young people – A practical toolkit (Blackburn with Darwen Council/Unison/IDeA, October 2005)

Making Community Leadership Real, New Local Government Network, April 2005 at www.nlgn.org.uk

Community Cohesion: An Action Guide, LGA/IDeA/HO Practitioner Guidance, Nov 2004 at www.lga.gov.uk

Scrutiny and Community Cohesion, LGIU, February 2005

HO interactive CDROM from Community Cohesion Pathfinders programme, Home Office Cohesion and Faith Unit, February 2005

Community Conflict, Causes and Action, Lemos and Crane, October 2004, at www.raceactionnet.co.uk

Community Cohesion Pathfinders Action Learning Dissemination Report, Vantage Point for the Home Office Community Cohesion Unit, 2003

Building a Picture of Community Cohesion in LSPs, Home Office Community Cohesion Unit, 2003

Community Cohesion National Guidance, LGA, December 2003

Community Leadership – What is it? LGA, March 2001

Powerpack: using the new power to promote well-being, LGA, December 2000

Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services: Chapter 2, Leading and Empowering Communities, December 2001

Building Cohesive Communities: A report of the Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion, Home Office

Community Cohesion: A report of the Independent Review Team, Home Office

In Defence of Councillors, Matthew Taylor with Paul Wheeler, IPPR/IDeA, 2003

Reducing the Electoral Appeal of Racist Candidates in

explaining the acronym maze

YOT – Youth Offending Teams

HimP – Health Improvement & Modernisation Programmes, a health responsibility of Primary Care Trusts but often in concert with local authorities

HimPlets – more local versions of HimPs, commonly found in district council areas in two-tier areas

LSPs – Local Strategic Partnerships

F&Fs – freedoms and flexibilities

NDCs – New Deal for Communities

NRF – Neighbourhood Renewal Fund

CEN – Community Empowerment Network

NMO – Neighbourhood Management Organisation

Local Government, LGIU briefing number 3, 2004

partnerships

Partnerships and discussions about them are to be found everywhere in local government and are of increasing importance, both internally and externally. Making them work effectively and considering the roles of councils and councillors are some of the most important challenges facing local government. Many councillors involved in partnerships may not have had the opportunity or time to think about how partnerships work and how to make them work effectively. There is also a degree of cynicism around, but most councillors see the fairly obvious advantages and are often enthusiastic about becoming involved. They also recognise the personal, political and financial challenges presented by working more closely with others.

Many acronyms appear in any quick review of partnerships. Apart from the array for existing partnerships, there are many more general ones. How about a dish of YOT, HimP and the HimPlets, LSPs, F&Fs, NDCs, NMOs and CENs with a side order of NRF

(see snapshot: explaining the acronym maze)? Anyone who has been around local government for even a short time will have at least a passing acquaintance with this lot.

They usually have partnership boards and rather complicated reporting structures that can, in the worst cases, slow activity down to a snail's pace. However, the best partnerships avoid death by committee and are enlivening and, in some cases, genuinely life-changing bodies, bringing the best parts of a range of different organisations or groups together.

The range of possible partnerships within the full spread of local authority operations and activities is virtually limitless. Partnerships can be huge or tiny, local or regional, successful or not. And that's just the formal ones. If you add the plethora of partnerships at a genuinely local level, where councillors work with their communities, the range becomes vast.

local strategic partnerships

LSPs drive community planning and neighbourhood renewal agendas. As the now defunct ODPM put it: 'The guidance on Local Strategic Partnerships recognises that tackling issues like crime, jobs, education, health and housing requires a range of local organisations to work in partnership with local communities.'

LSPs are single bodies that bring together different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors to work more closely together. They are advisory bodies without executive powers, are non-statutory and are aligned with local authority boundaries. This means that individual partners will remain responsible and accountable for decisions on their services and resources.

LSPs are expected to operate within the context of regional frameworks and develop effective links with sub-regional partnerships and the government office for the relevant region.

The guidance outlines government thinking on why working in partnerships is important. It says: 'Local authorities have many of the responsibilities and powers needed to bring about improvements in their communities. But other public services, local people,

business, and the voluntary and community sectors also need to be given opportunities to contribute.

Complex problems need concerted and co-ordinated action. Partners need to ensure they work effectively together across all of their activities. They need to be able to do so in ways that avoid duplication and wasted resources.'

The establishment of an LSP is intended to provide a framework for different organisational processes and getting a wide range of agencies, organisations and community interests to:

- build consensus around an agreed vision for the future
- see their own interests in the context of a bigger picture
- encourage the development of sustainable communities
- identify conflicting objectives and needs
- build trust and closer working relationships, where appropriate
- develop a clear understanding of each partner's role and responsibilities
- review existing strategies and plans
- audit existing partnership and consultation arrangements
- share data and analysis
- share resources and provide a co-ordinated response to community priorities
- shape and focus existing and future activities of agencies
- produce the community strategy.

It is important for councillors to remember that while there is a duty on local authorities to produce community strategies there is no such duty on any other public, private, voluntary or community organisations.

The Government published its guidance on LSPs in 2001 and consulted between December 2005 and March 2006 on their future role, how they are organised and make decisions, how they are accountable for what they do and their capacity to produce and deliver Sustainable Community Strategies and LAAs (Local Area Agreements). This

snapshot

partnerships

the risks

political

- letting go – loss of power
- lack of clarity for members and for the public – increased confusion
- identity crisis – what are we responsible for?
- difficult to challenge decisions made by 'partnerships'.

financial

- costs of servicing partnerships
- professional 'opportunity costs' (i.e. while they are servicing partnerships they are not doing something else)
- skewing of budgets
- finding matched funding.

personal

- loss of personal power
- time
- stress
- yet more meetings, yet more paperwork
- learning various new sets of language
- culture shock.

the benefits

political

- shared decisions – shared ownership
- sharing the blame when something goes wrong
- increased awareness of community needs using different perspectives
- more community interaction
- increased trust and understanding
- increased intellectual capital
- more inclusivity.

financial

- savings made by not duplicating effort
- more likely to attract third-party or matched funding
- economies of scale.

personal

- respect
- profile
- improving personal knowledge and understanding
- satisfaction of doing things right.

consultation fits in with the Government's 10-year vision for local government.

costs

One issue that always needs to be considered is who pays? The responsibility for establishing LSPs lies firmly with local authorities and although the costs of service delivery remain with service providers there are still significant costs of administration, communication and so on that need to be met. In Telford, for example, the three big public players – health, police and the council – have established a three-way funding and support system, using secondments to get things established.

who should be involved?

Another issue is representation. Initially, many LSPs invited 'the usual suspects' along to get things going. But working with these various groupings to gain a proper mandate and ensure accountability can be difficult. Who do they represent and how do they ensure they are representing all the various groups in the sector?

The publication of CLG's new guidance concerning LAAs and LSPs is expected in autumn 2007. It is anticipated that this will enhance the role played by councillors in their LSP.

Current government guidance says councillors should be involved in LSPs because they:

- set the strategic direction of the council's services
- are in a position to ensure that the interests of the local community come first
- should be properly included in the LSP process and committed to delivering their part of any agreed strategies or action plans.

Different practices have emerged regarding the number of people on an LSP. What is important is that there is a real opportunity for councillors to demonstrate their community leadership without undermining the input of community and voluntary sector groups.

LSPs and their links with community leadership and community strategies are going to be a crucially important factor in much of what local authorities can do in the not too distant future.

key Internet resources

The IDeA Knowledge website has a large collection of resources on all aspects of partnership working, in its LSP section at www.idea.gov.uk.

The Local Government Association offers a range of resources, including case studies of LSPs, at www.lga.gov.uk. From the home page, click on Our Work, then on Better Local Government, and finally on Local Strategic Partnership.

Quest-Net's Local Strategic Partnerships online is particularly strong on CENs and community involvement in LSPs generally at www.quest-net.org.

The ODPM published a national evaluation in January 2006, which is now available on the CLG website.

local area agreements

LAAs are made between local and central government via government offices. Their aim is to meet local needs while achieving national priorities and standards. Local area agreements seek to:

- provide intelligent and mature discussion between local and central government, based on a clear framework and shared understanding of national and local priorities
- improve local performance by allowing a more flexible use of resources, to achieve better outcomes and devolve responsibility
- enhance efficiency by rationalising non-mainstream funding and reduce bureaucracy
- help local partners join up and enhance community leadership.

Through LAAs, councils, representing their partners and communities and the local government office, agree to implement major change concerning:

- children and young people
- safer and stronger communities
- healthier communities and older people
- economic regeneration and employment.

The key elements of local area agreements include:

- simplified funding for safer and stronger communities
- a performance reward grant for a small group of particularly challenging targets, previously known

as Local Public Service Agreements

- a strengthened national strategy for neighbourhood renewal
- a stronger role for government offices.

See the IDeA Knowledge website's Local Agreements Network pages or contact the Network's helpdesk on 020 7756 7611 or info@localagreements.net.

children's services, adult social care and the NHS

children's services
The 150 top-tier councils across the country were first required to set up social services departments under legislation passed in 1972. Prior to that, care services to help children and adults in need were organised by various public services. The social services legislation brought in integrated social services departments together with the statutory post of Director of Social Services.

More than 30 years on, these arrangements changed fundamentally with the creation of children's services departments to co-ordinate the activities of councils in support of all children and their families and a major rethink on adult social care.

Children's services councils across the country are now getting to grips with the scale of the changes brought about as a result of the Children Act 2005 – and there is no single model or approach recommended by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills). What is expected is that the new arrangements – which have to be in place by 2008 but in most councils were established by 2006 – will integrate education and children's social services, with a requirement to have a Director of Children's Services and a lead councillor with the same brief.

Every top-tier council was also required to produce a children and young people plan, outlining how the council and its local partner agencies, through a children's trust, will work towards achieving the five outcomes of the Act. These are:

- being healthy

- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving
- making a positive contribution
- achieving economic well-being.

Councillors should be aware that the arrangements for the new children's departments raise complex governance issues. Each authority, in addition to ensuring its services for children are adequate and fit for purpose, must ensure they are scrutinised.

Services are increasingly provided by third-party organisations in the health, voluntary and private sectors and they must be co-coordinated, safe and accessible to users. As the new children's departments emerge, they face funding issues following the separation of the old LEA (Local Education Authority) non-schools children's budgets and the children's element of social services departments. In most councils, expenditure on children by social services far exceeds the indicative government spending formula, so there may be difficult negotiations as to what the precise funds transfer will be, and how ambitious plans for the reform of Frontline services can be in the early stages.

These problems have the potential to be highly contentious so councillors should do all they can to avoid confrontational situations. The new children's departments offer huge potential for improved services but they could be undermined if, in their creation, there was a sense of winners and losers.

One continuing issue for children's services authorities will be balancing the education agenda with better support for children, young people and families.

These are by no means incompatible, although the largest part of the budget will be passed directly to schools and governors. The extended delegation of responsibilities to schools, and the changes to councils' roles as children's services authorities following the implementation of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, could reduce their effectiveness as strategic bodies commissioning the full range of services needed to meet all five outcomes of the Act.

Department for Education and Skills at www.dfes.gov.uk

Every Child Matters at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

IDeA Knowledge website

adult social care

The creation of children's services departments has required councils to look at the future shape of adult social care and the role of Directors of Adult Services, also created as part of the Children Act. Again, no single model or set of arrangements is required and councils are taking different approaches – particularly in unitary authorities where combining adult services with housing and other related departments is an option.

Reorganisation on the scale expected over time scales that are relatively short is giving rise to issues concerning capacity and culture in many councils. As the changes are planned, consulted upon and then implemented, it is vital that provision continues for those already receiving assistance.

Maintaining continuity during change is a key 'ward' responsibility for all councillors.

The Department of Health published a Green Paper, Independence, Well-being and Choice, concerning adult social care services, in March 2005 – along with draft guidance on the new post of Director of Adult Social Services. It also brought out a series of associated publications on the future shape of other care services, particularly those for older people and those with disabilities.

It may surprise councillors to learn that the DWP (Department of Work and Pensions) is responsible for leading and co-ordinating central government's involvement in services for older people who, within the new adult services, are the largest single group needing support.

This doesn't mean that the DWP is responsible for local service delivery but it has been recognised that the various government departments have not necessarily made it easy for people to access the services they need.

the White Paper

The Green Paper was followed in January 2006 by the White Paper, Your Health, Your Care, Your Say, which set out the new direction for community health and social care services. This is based on three themes:

1 putting people more in control of their own health and care

2 enabling and supporting health, independence and well-being

3 rapid and convenient access to high-quality, cost-effective care.

For people using social care these are summarised as:

- ensuring they have more control

- giving them more choices and helping them decide how their needs can best be met

- giving them the chance to do the things that others take for granted

- giving the best quality of support and protection to those with the highest levels of need.

Central government's agenda for local councils in dealing with what were previously known as adult social services is similar to its approach to children. It requires a broad, preventative process including local and independent arrangements as well as direct provision.

Historically, adult care provision has been dominated by the needs of older people as they become more dependent in their later years. However, councils also had responsibilities concerning mental health, learning disabilities, and physical, sensory and other functional losses. To some extent, these different provisions operated in isolation from each other – although where this was not the case the results appeared better.

The new agenda breaks down the barriers, involves those who use or need the services and seeks innovative solutions. In future it will be unacceptable for organisational boundaries to inhibit or disadvantage ways of providing care that are preferred by those who need the service. While resources will always affect how much support is available, they will be used in more flexible ways.

This could mean that a council will develop a number of different ways of delivering care appropriate to needs, and councillors have an important role in this. The Government's vision for adult care is now clear and, broadly speaking, there is much agreement among officers and councillors and the political parties.

At the heart of the new approach is the personalisation of services for individuals. This means there will be increasing involvement by people who use the services in deciding how they would like to be supported and this is expected to happen in a number of ways.

Councils are expected to show ever-increasing flexibility when dealing with a person in need. It is argued by the Department of Health that one of the ways of achieving this is through direct payments. This is where the needs of an individual are assessed and costed so they can take responsibility for organising their own care using the money the council would have spent.

This has proved particularly beneficial for people with physical disabilities and younger people and is also showing great promise for people with learning disabilities. It is now seen as a universal approach and is available for all other categories of adult social care. Carers, too, can receive direct payments for the support services they need. The Government is pressing councils to increase the number of individuals with direct payments.

Individual budgets give the same control but without the service user managing the money or staff directly. They should prove popular with those daunted by the full direct payment system.

The Government is asking councils to involve groups and representative bodies in the planning of services. This can be very powerful, not only in making services more relevant but also by achieving a higher level of ownership by those who require the service and their carers. The Government wants user groups themselves to become service providers and there are excellent examples of this in many localities.

Councils have been given a clear mandate and the responsibility for engaging others, especially local NHS commissioners and providers in this new inclusive agenda.

These changes are challenging and exciting. They offer councillors considerable influence over the provision of services affecting their ward or their particular interest area.

Over the next few years, councils will need to increase the number of major consultation exercises they undertake as new provisions are proposed. In most instances councillors will either lead or be significant contributors.

Service users may not at first welcome the radical change proposed by the Government. For example, one of the Government's plans is to reduce the dependency on residential care of people with high-level need in older age. The closure of a residential home, however well considered, has always caused much public debate.

With more user involvement and improvement and with all the information readily accessible, the changes will prove particularly challenging to implement.

Another pressure councils will face in the next few years concerns the future of their own workforces. Councils have varied enormously in the extent to which they have used external service providers or externalised their previously in-house staff. Even if government proposals develop slowly, there will be a shift away from directly employed workforces and this will raise issues of confidence, morale and concern among directly employed staff.

Another key area is budgets. For more than 30 years, local government social services departments have tried to provide more and more with fewer and fewer resources to meet growing needs. This has involved the use of eligibility criteria, cash limits on programmes of care, and other mechanisms to avoid overspend. The new agenda of user choice carries with it not just risk but the potential for the over-commitment of budgets in unsustainable ways.

local government and the NHS

The NHS locally is a key partner with local government in shaping and delivering public services. In most parts of the country the organisational arrangements changed in 2006. There are a smaller number of PCTs (Primary Care Trusts), and efforts have been made by the NHS to align them better with council boundaries.

PCTs commission services from providers in the NHS such as GPs, dentists, pharmacists, opticians, and acute and community trusts, some of which have gained or are seeking more independence as Foundation Trusts.

During 2007 it is anticipated that GPs will play a more

snapshot

ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services) was launched in February 2007. It is the national leadership association in England for statutory directors of children's services and other children's services professionals.

It works closely with Ministers, government officials, the community and voluntary sectors, local government organisations and other key local and national agencies on the implementation and implications of The Children Act 2004 and the Change for Children programme, the children's workforce, local authority and school inspections.

Its members specialise in considering, developing, commissioning, leading and managing children's services in all the diverse ways in which they are provided.

Through its members, ADCS ensures a vigorous presence in all areas concerning education, children's social care and safeguarding.

They are actively involved in the strategic planning, delivery, commissioning and management of services for children and young people including adolescents, children at school, in children's centres and nurseries, children in need of different types of protection and care – residential, fostering or adoption – as well as young offenders, teenage parents and vulnerable families.

www.adcs.org.uk

snapshot

ADASS (Association of Directors of Adult Social Services) was launched in March 2007. It represents all the Directors of Adult Social Services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The association brings together tremendous breadth, depth and accumulated experience on all issues covering managerial policy and professional activities of adult social care departments and cross cutting issues with children's services departments.

Its members are jointly responsible through the activities of their departments for the well-being, protection and care of thousands of elderly and disabled people through the use of direct services and voluntary agencies, private companies and other public authorities.

www.adass.org.uk

active part in planning and commissioning services, through practice-based commissioning. PCTs also provide services such as public health, health visiting, community nursing and equipment.

The White Paper, Your Health, Your Care, Your Say, sets out plans to shift the emphasis of the NHS from acute intervention towards care closer to home and better support for people with long term conditions. This will be challenging to implement given the considerable financial pressures in the NHS. It has been welcomed by local government as it should help the NHS be a better partner locally in providing children's services and in promoting better health and community care.

One key driver is the requirement for directors of adult services and their local directors of public health to carry out assessments of the needs of their area and develop plans to meet them. This will build on the action plans set out in the earlier White Paper on public health, Choosing Health. The IDeA is supporting this during 2007–8 with a new work programme on local government's contribution to better public health.

Councils have a responsibility to scrutinise the effectiveness of the NHS in their area. There is a legal requirement for councils to set up health overview and scrutiny committees and for NHS managers to co-operate fully in their work. Scrutiny provides an opportunity for them to better understand their role in reducing health inequalities and to comment on proposed changes to the NHS in their area.

more information
Department of Health – www.dh.gov.uk

IDeA Knowledge website

councillors and the voluntary and community sector

Working with local and national voluntary organisations and with community and neighbourhood groups is a significant part of every councillor's role:

- voluntary organisations are key partners, delivering services and contributing to the quality of life in an area
- voluntary and community organisations enable service users and local residents to express their preferences and priorities – sometimes called 'voice and choice'
- many councils are taking action to devolve powers to neighbourhood groups, giving them influence over the places where they live
- involved and engaged communities and citizens contribute – alongside councillors – to improving the accountability and responsiveness of services and re-engaging people with government
- social networks and community action help to build and sustain cohesive communities.

why do councillors want engaged communities?

to improve services and outcomes
- voluntary organisations provide important local services, often on a voluntary or self-help basis, or funded by trusts, the lottery or regeneration monies. These services make a big contribution locally and the aim of partnership working is to ensure they are co-ordinated and are complementary to statutory services
- voluntary organisations are significant providers of statutory services, contracted by councils, health services or other agencies. They bring additional benefits to users because of their knowledge and experience of the issues they are dealing with
- local groups help shape, design and improve delivery of services. They improve access to services through advice and information activities, or signposting people to the right place to get help.

to enable community engagement
- an engaged community and active citizens are essential to the quality of life in an area – and

snapshot

The Lyons Inquiry identified four roles for councillors. They all rely on and sustain good working relationships with voluntary and community organisations:

- engager – work with local groups to understand and promote local preferences and influence decisions
- advocate – speak up for the local community and challenge political and managerial decisions
- mediator – reconcile different views in the area and explain the hard decisions that have to be made by the council
- political entrepreneur – support and generate social networks, engage people in civic and public life and promote community action to solve problems.

In the near future, councils, LSPs (Local Strategic Partnerships) and local VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) organisations will be developing a single community engagement strategy, combining the repealed requirements to consult on the local development framework, the community strategy and the local area agreement.

although councillors have a responsibility to encourage citizens to participate, this is not something they can do on their own. Local voluntary groups are the main way that people come together. They can also help councillors to make contact with marginalised and disadvantaged groups of residents

- the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill 2007 proposes that all councils should have a 'duty to secure participation' of citizens and communities, by consulting, engaging and involving them in decision-making

- the VCS can play a significant role in the scrutiny function of local government. Councillors can promote overview and scrutiny as one of the ways for the voluntary and community sector to lobby the local authority, alongside other methods such as the proposed Community Call for Action

to build social networks and cohesion

- if people get on with each other and feel they belong, they are more likely to get involved, help each other and take responsibility for things that need doing locally. Volunteering is the bedrock of an engaged community and councillors can do a lot to support volunteering initiatives

- councillors can encourage groups in their area, not just to get organised on their own behalf but also to engage with groups in different areas or with different perspectives, which helps to improve understanding and reduce conflict. They can help new residents 'plug in' to existing activities and support groups – such as sports clubs, environmental clean-ups, neighbourhood festivals and so on – whose activities help with integration and cohesion.

working with the VCS

partners in delivery

The VCS – or Third Sector as it is often known – includes not only small community groups but also major national and local voluntary organisations and social enterprises. They are important partners locally because:

- the VCS has representatives on the LSP as well as other thematic partnerships such as crime and disorder partnerships, or the Children's Trust.

- they will be consulted and involved in drawing up the community strategy and the LAA (Local Area Agreement)

- they will often be responsible for delivering services that are included in the LAA

- neighbourhood working will include local voluntary and community groups – often in a decision-making role.

For these reasons, councils and government fund the VCS to build its capacity so it can fulfil its role. Futurebuilders and Capacity Builders initiatives and specific volunteering funding streams are all nationally funded programmes to help VCS organisations improve their performance and accountability.

local area agreements

The VCS has to be consulted about the priorities and targets to be included in the LAA and is expected to play its part in delivering services that will achieve the agreed outcomes. Many of the funding streams that once went direct to fund the VCS are now routed through the LAA.

LAAs are a very important element in the council's relationship with the voluntary sector.

funding the VCS

This is an area where many councils are reviewing their strategy and approach, alongside partners. Specialist sources of finance, such as neighbourhood renewal funding, are being included in mainstream funding mechanisms such as the LAA.

Many local groups are getting grants from their council and other funding sources. Small grants are an essential source of support for local activities,

especially those that bring benefits to social networks and community participation.

Recently, new performance and financial pressures have led to VCS organisations' funding being tied to specified services and local community strategy priorities – often with requirements to report on performance and show value for money. Formal tendering processes or a negotiated service agreement makes this relationship subject to monitoring and regulation.

Councils also recognise that local organisations need fair funding if they are to flourish. Infrastructure bodies such as the Council for Voluntary Service, Community Empowerment Networks or Volunteer Centre, as well as other groups, are called on to act as partners alongside other public and private sector organisations. These activities also need adequate funding.

Most VCS organisations aim to have a mix of funding streams, with three-year-plus contracts, external funds from the lottery or charitable trusts and small grants for time-limited initiatives. This gives them independence as well as stability.

the compact

Ninety eight per cent of local areas have a compact between the council and the VCS (mirroring the national compact signed between the Government and the VCS). This is the jointly agreed basis for the relationship between the council and the VCS. It contains agreed codes of practice and undertakings on both sides about communications, funding, procurement, consultation and policy appraisals. In some areas, the compact also includes the PCT (Primary Care Trust) and other LSP partners.

building trust

Developing dialogue and close working relationships between voluntary and community organisations and councillors is no longer an optional extra for either party. It requires building trust and a spirit of co-operation.

A councillor's role will be strengthened by seeing community groups as part of the democratic life of the community, which can help them become accountable and representative, and to work

productively for the good of all residents.

VCS organisations are now moving away from seeing themselves as 'less than equal' partners and are taking up the opportunities offered, building their skills and capacity to act on behalf of their communities and memberships.

Trust building is helped by:

- ensuring there is mutual gain from engaging and dialogue

- understanding each sector's distinctive features and differences

- having a shared understanding of partnership, its costs and benefits

- creating processes and dialogue that are open and accountable

- ensuring effective communication, consultation and feedback of outcomes

- involving groups in the early stages so they can influence the development of policy rather than react after the event – thereby avoiding mistakes and minimising unrealistic expectations from new projects

- ensuring all partners co-ordinate their consultation activities and share information

- dealing with issues of voluntary and community sector accountability and legitimacy with sensitivity.

key Internet resources

The IDeA Knowledge website includes a section on working with the Voluntary and Community Sector (see Improving your Council).

The section on Neighbourhoods, Communities and Devolution (see Improving your Council) also contains material on the role of councillors in relation to the devolution of powers to communities and neighbourhoods.

LGA, IDEA, LGIU, NAVCA, NCVO and Urban Forum have a joint vision statement that sets out what a good local authority would look like when it is working well with the voluntary and community sector.

What 'good' looks like: local authorities working with the third sector (December 2006)
www.lga.gov.uk/OurWork

The CLG (Communities and Local Government) website – Creating Better Communities–contains links to a variety of policy and practice publications. See particularly

Creating Better Communities
www.communities.gov.uk

Together We Can action plan
www.togetherwecan.info

4 useful contacts

IDeA contacts

ihelp
ihelp@idea.gov.uk

East of England
Regional associate: Dennis Skinner 07747 791754

Directorate assistant: 020 7296 6531

IDeA senior peers: Sal Brinton (South LD), Howard Sykes (North LD), Graham Chapman (Lab), Malcolm Grimston (Cons), Frank Rosamond (Ind)

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Regional associate: Jo Webb 07733 113251

Directorate assistant: 020 7296 6286

IDeA Senior peers: Richard Kemp (LD), Stephen Houghton (Lab),Susan Dungworth (Lab), Glen Sanderson (Cons), Milner Whiteman (Ind)

IDeA regional skills and capacity adviser: Paula Grainger 07900 910106

regional organisations

Advantage West Midlands
3 Priestley Wharf
Holt Street
Aston Science Park
Birmingham B7 4BN

Tel: 0121 380 3500

www.advantagewm.co.uk

East of England Regional Assembly Employer's Support
Flempton House
Flempton
Bury St Edmunds
Suffolk IP28 6EG

Tel: 01284 728151

www.eeglc.gov.uk

East of England Development Agency
The Business Centre
Station Road
Histon
Cambridgeshire CB4 9LQ

Tel: 01223 713900

www.eeda.org.uk

East Midlands Development Agency
Apex Court
City Link
Nottingham NG2 4LA

Tel: 0115 9888300

info@emd.org.uk

www.emda.org.uk

Local Government East Midlands
The Belvoir Suite
Council Offices
Nottingham Road
Melton Mowbray
Leicestershire LE13 0UL

Tel: 01664 502555

www.emrlga.gov.uk

Local Government Yorkshire and Humber
18 King Street
Wakefield WF1 2SQ

Tel: 01924 331631

www.lgyh.gov.uk

Other regional organisations and regional offices of national organisations are listed on the IDeA Knowledge website.

London Councils
59 Southwark Street
London SE1 0AL

Tel: 020 7934 9999

www.alg.gov.uk

London Development Agency
Palestra
197 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8AA

Tel: 020 7593 8000

www.lda.gov.uk

North East Region Employers Organisation
Nelson Street
Gateshead
Tyne and Wear NE8 1NX

Tel: 0191 490 0155

www.nereo.gov.uk

North West Employers Organisation
6th Floor Delphian House
Riverside
New Bailey Street
Manchester M3 4AA

Tel: 0161 834 9362

www.nweo.org.uk

Northwest Regional Development Agency
PO BOX 37
Renaissance House
Centre Park
Warrington
Cheshire WA1 1XB

Tel: 01925 400100

www.nwda.co.uk

One NorthEast
Stella House
Goldcrest Way
Newburn Riverside
Newcastle Upon Tyne NE15 8NY

Tel: (0191) 229 6200

enquiries@onenortheast.co.uk

www.onenortheast.co.uk

South East Employers
Newfrith House
21 Hyde Street
Winchester
Hampshire SO23 7DR

Tel: 01962 840664

www.seemp.co.uk

South East England Development Agency
Cross Lanes
Guildford
Surrey GU1 1YA

Tel: 01483 484200

seeda@seeda.co.uk

www.seeda.co.uk

South West of England Regional Development Agency
Sterling House
Dix's Field
Exeter
Devon EX1 1QA

Tel: 01392 214 747

enquiries@southwestrda.org.uk

www.southwestrda.org.uk

South West Provincial Employers
Dennet House
11 Middle Street
Taunton
Somerset TA1 1SH

Tel: 01823 270101

www.southwest-ra.gov.uk

West Midlands Local Government Association
Regional Partnership Centre
Albert House
Quay Place
Edward Street
Birmingham B1 2RA

Tel: 0121 678 1010

www.wmlga.gov.uk

Yorkshire Forward
Victoria House
Victoria Place
Leeds LS11 5AE

Tel: 0113 3949600

www.yorkshire-forward.com

national organisations

Association of Directors of Children's Services
Association for Directors of Adult Social Services
ADSS Business Unit
Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Tel: 020 7072 7433

team@adss.org.uk

Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)
2nd Floor Washbrook House
Lancastrian Office Centre
32 Talbot Road
Old Trafford Manchester M32 OFP

Tel: 0161 772 1810

www.apse.org.uk

Association of London Government
591/2 Southwark Street
London SE1 0AL

Tel: 020 7934 9811

www.lhu.org.uk

Audit Commission
1st Floor Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Boundary Committee for England
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW

Tel: 020 7271 0500

www.boundarycommittee.org.uk

British Quality Foundation
32–34 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2QX

Tel: 020 7654 5000

www.quality-foundation.co.uk

Cabinet Office
Admiralty Arch
London SW1A 2WH

Tel: 020 7276 1766

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Centre for Public Scrutiny
Layden House
76–86 Turnmill Street
London EC1M 5LG

Tel: 020 7296 6835

info@cfps.org.uk

www.cfps.org.uk/home/contact.php

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)
3 Robert Street
London WC2N 6RL

Tel: 020 7543 5600

www.cipfa.org.uk

Chartered Management Institute
3rd Floor 2 Savoy Court
Strand
London WC2R 0E2

Tel: 020 7497 0580

www.ocula.mangers.org.uk

Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Tel: 020 7944 4400

www.communities.gov.uk

Cohesion and Faiths Unit
Communities and Local Government
7/H9 Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Tel: 020 7944 4400

www.communities.gov.uk

Commission for Racial Equality
Saint Dunstan's House
201–211 Borough High Street
London SE1 1GZ

Tel: 020 7939 0000

www.cre.gov.uk

Commission of the European Communities
Windsor House
9–15 Bedford Street
Belfast BT2 7EG

Tel: 028 9024 0708

www.cec.org.uk/ni

Community Development Foundation
Unit 5, Angel Gate
320–326 City Road
London EC1V 2PT

Tel: 020 7833 1772

www.cdf.org.uk

Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
Centre Point
103 New Oxford Street
London WC1A 1DU

Tel: 020 7395 8247

www.cbi.org.uk

Environment Agency
Rio House
Waterside Drive
Aztec West
Almondsbury
Bristol BS32 4UD

Tel: 08708 506506

www.environment-agency.gov.uk

European Parliament Information Office
2 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AA

Tel: 020 7227 4300

www.europarl.org.uk

Foundation for IT in Local Government (FITLOG)
4 Nightingale Lane
London N8 7QU

Tel: 020 8347 7778

www.fitlog.com

House of Commons Public Information Office
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Tel: 020 7219 4272

www.parliament.uk

House of Lords
Information Office
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW

Tel: 020 7219 3107

www.parliament.uk

Housing Quality Network
8–9 York Place
Scarborough
North Yorkshire YO11 2NP

Tel: 01723 350099

www.hqnetwork.org.uk

Institute of Chartered Secretaries and
Administrators
16 Park Crescent
London W1B 1AH

Tel: 020 7580 4741

www.icsa.org.uk

Institute of Employment Studies
Mantall Building
Falmer
Brighton BN1 9RF

Tel: 01273 686751

www.employment-studies.co.uk

Institute of Local Government (INLOGOV)
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 414 5008

www.inlogov.bham.ac.uk

Institute of Personnel Development
151 The Broadway
Wimbledon
London SW19 1JQ

Tel: 020 8971 9000

www.cipd.co.uk

Institute of Public Finance
No 1 Croydon
12–16 Addiscombe Road
Croydon
Surrey CR0 0XT

Tel: 020 8667 1144

info@ipf.co.uk

www.ipf.com

Institute for Public Policy Research
30–32 Southampton Street
Covent Garden
London WC2E 7RA

Tel: 020 7470 6100

www.ippr.org.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York
North Yorkshire YO30 6WP

Tel: 01904 629241

www.jrf.org.uk

Library of Local Performance Indicators
1st Floor Millbank Tower
Millbank SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7166 2266

www.local-pi-library.gov.uk

Local Authorities Coordinators
of Regulatory Services (LACORS)
Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Tel: 020 7665 3888

www.lacors.gov.uk

Local Government Association
Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Tel: 020 7664 3000

www.lga.gov.uk

Local Government Centre
Warwick Business School
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL

Tel: 024 7657 2546

www.warwick.ac.uk

Local Government Chronicle

Greater London House
Hampstead Road
London NW1 7EJ

Tel. 020 7874 0200

www.lgcnet.com

Local Government Employers

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Tel: 020 7187 7373

info@lge.gov.uk

www.lge.gov.uk

Local Government Information Unit

22 Upper Woburn Place
London WC1H 0TB

Tel: 020 7554 2800

www.lgiu.gov.uk

Local Government International Bureau

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Tel: 020 7664 3100

www.international.lga.gov.uk

Local Government Ombudsmen

10th Floor, Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

Tel: 020 7217 4620

www.lgo.org.uk

London Housing Unit
Association of London Government

591/2 Southwark Street
London SE1 0AL

Tel: 020 7934 9811

www.lhu.org.uk

The Municipal Journal

32 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SS

Tel. 020 7973 6404

www.municipalyearbook.co.uk

New Local Government Network

First Floor
New City Court
20 St. Thomas Street
London SE1 9RS

Tel: 020 7357 0051

www.nlgn.org.uk

Office for National Statistics

1 Drummond Gate
London SW1V 2QQ

Tel: 0845 601 3034

www.statistics.gov.uk

Office for Standards in Education

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

Tel: 020 7421 6800

www.ofsted.gov.uk

Planning Officers Society

Wycombe DC
Queen Victoria Road
High Wycombe
Bucks HP11 1BB

Tel: 01494 421501

www.planningofficers.org.uk

Policy Studies Institute

50 Hanson Street
London W1W 6UP

Tel: 020 7911 7500

www.psi.org.uk

Public Private Partnership Programme (4ps)
Layden House
76–86 Turnmill Street
London EC1M 5LG

Tel: 020 7296 6777

www.4ps.gov.uk

Public Sector People Managers' Association
Hadleigh Court
81 Sea Road
Westgate
Kent CT8 8QG

Tel: 07808 712359

www.ppma.org.uk

Social Care Association
Thorton House
Hook Road
Surbiton
Surrey KT6 5AN

Tel: 01304 330062

www.socialcaring.co.uk

Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM)
PO Box 121
Northampton NN4 6TG

Tel: 01604 674 800

www.socitm.gov.uk

Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)
Hope House
45 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 3LT

Tel: 020 7233 0081

www.solace.org.uk

Society of Procurement Officers
Business Information Publications Ltd
Park House
300 Glasgow Road
Shawfield
Glasgow G73 1SQ

Tel: 0141 332 8247

www.sopo.org

Standards Board for England
1st Floor Cotton Centre
Cotton Lane
London SE1 2QL

Tel: 0845 078 8181

www.standardsboard.co.uk

Stationery Office
The Publications Centre
PO Box 29
Norwich NR3 1GN

Tel: 0870 600 5522

www.tso.co.uk/

useful websites

www.clip.gov.uk
The Central and Local Government Information Partnership (CLIP) was set up to enable central and local government to work together to develop an efficient and effective infrastructure for policy development, implementation, monitoring and reporting.

www.elgnce.org.uk
Evaluating Local Governance: New Constitution and Ethics is a group that looks at the working of new council constitutions and the integral new ethical frameworks.

www.idea.gov.uk
The Improvement and Development Agency's site which is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government.

www.info4local.gov.uk
This site provides the first online, one-stop gateway for local authorities to get quick and easy access to local government-related information that is published on the web sites of central government departments and agencies.

www.ipf.co.uk/essentiallearning
e-essential learning brings flexibility by providing online training.

www.laria.gov.uk/index.htm
Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) is a supportive network for those conducting or commissioning research.

www.lfg.co.uk
www.localknowledge.co.uk
Both sites are run by the Local Futures Group, a consultancy that helps local authorities develop future scenarios and understand socio-demographic, economic and environmental trends in their area.

www.local-government.net
Local-government.net offers you Internet access, free email and a website containing news, information, interactivity and links to a range of sources for the local government and public sector community.

www.lga.gov.uk
All the latest news and information about English local government from the Local Government Association.

www.wlga.gov.uk
All the latest news and information about Welsh local government from the Welsh Local Government Association.

www.lgmn.org.uk
The Local Government Management Network's purpose is to address the changing needs of local government managers by helping them keep up to date with appropriate skills and knowledge by raising the profile of management in local government and by promoting high standards.

www.local-regions.detr.gov.uk
The ODPM's local government pages, beacon councils, best value, new political management arrangements etc.

www.parliament.uk
Provides information on the current work of Select Committees plus records of Hansard.

www.societyguardian.co.uk
public sector news, analysis and comment.

www.syniad.gov.uk
Providing advice, guidance and support for local government in Wales.

www.ukonline.gov.uk
Government information and services online.

www.ukresilience.info/home
The UK Resilience provides links to government and non-government sources on a wide variety of emergencies and crises that can affect the UK, plus emergency planning guidance and government information.

www.pamis.gov.uk
Parliamentary Monitoring and Intelligence Service This service keeps subscribers fully informed of parliamentary activities across the whole range of service functions and provides information on specific local issues of interest to individual authorities and organisations.

www.upmystreet.com
Type in the relevant postcode for a wealth of social and economic information.

www.yougov.com
YouGov.com intends to promote open government by making service providers more accountable, developing the mechanism of best value and creating a new partnership between government and its stakeholders, the citizens.

councillor's guide 2007/08

Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA)

The IDeA works for local government improvement so councils can serve people and places better.

We use experienced councillors and senior officers, known as peers, who support and challenge councils to improve themselves.

We enable councils to share good practice through the national Beacons Scheme and regional local government networks. The best ideas are put on the Knowledge website.

Our Leadership Academy programmes help councillors become better leaders who can balance the diverse demands of people living in the same community.

The IDeA also promotes the development of local government's management and workforce. We advise councils on improving customer service and value for money. We help councils work through local partnerships to tackle local priorities such as health, children's services and economic development.

The IDeA is owned by the Local Government Association and belongs to local government. Together we lead local government improvement.

More information: IDeA Knowledge at www.idea.gov.uk.

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE