

# The Voice of the Councillor

## Executive Summary

July 2017

The Local Government Research Unit at De Montfort University, in partnership with The Municipal Journal, launched a Commission to conduct an independent review of the role and work of the councillor and of the contribution made by councillors to the governance of their communities and the country.

The research conducted and the evidence received has been organised under six headings where councillors spoke to us about specific aspects of their work, as follows: The Council, beyond the Council, in response to central policy change, about perceptions, about the Job and when they spoke as a parish or town councillor. This summary provides an overview of some of the key findings within these themes:

### Speaking about the Council

- Across local government there is a clear imbalance of resources and support provided to different types of councillors – leaders and executive councillors, back-benchers, scrutiny members and members of the majority and minority group(s) and these different levels of support re-enforce differences and distance between types of councillors and undermine councillor effectiveness in aspects of their work.
- The executive invariably has greater access to resources and support from the council in its work than the overview and scrutiny function. Without parity of resources and esteem with the council executive, scrutiny will be hindered in its ability to hold the executive to account and to provide a forum within which all councillors can contribute to policy development and good governance and scrutiny needs to be adequately resourced to undertake its role.
- The political party group remains an important decision-making and policy development forum for councillors, but with the work of party groups conducted in private there are negative effects on openness, transparency and accountability of political action.
- Without sufficient access to information, or support in obtaining information, councillors are constrained in what they can achieve across a range of their responsibilities and functions. There is a need to strengthen the powers of councillors to demand and receive information from their council and to do so in an accessible and usable form.
- There is considerable variation across local government in the range and quality of training provided to councillors and its appropriateness for the roles and duties councillors have to undertake. All councillors require high quality training and development programmes as a part of the overall support provided to them by their councils.
- Council constitutions are yet to be fully established as an accepted part of the culture of local government or seen and respected as a document which provides

protection for all councillors, establishes operating relationships between councillors and officers, or as a document which cannot be changed at the whim of the ruling group. There is a sense of a lack of purpose to council constitutions.

### Speaking beyond the Council

- An increasing aspect of the work of the councillor is interacting with a vast range of public, private and third sector organisations, beyond the council which operate with different purposes, objectives and priorities to the elected council, and which spend public money and develop public policy, without clear lines of accountability to the public.
- The interaction councillors have with external bodies, in fragmented networks of organisations, operates on a council-wide, strategic level and also on a ward or division-wide, functional level.
- Councillors are now investing considerable time in either seeking explanations and justification from external bodies and questioning and critiquing what they do in order to hold them to account; or are negotiating with external bodies and attempting to influence the decisions that are taken by others to bring them into alignment with the council's own policies and priorities.
- Councillors often experience resistance from external bodies to their attempts to secure information and data or for engagement with organisations when they are developing policies and formulating decisions.
- Simply holding elected office is insufficient to guarantee councillors access to appropriate information within a range of bodies, who take important decisions that impact on the development and well-being of the communities councillors represent.
- Councillors' proximity to the public is a unique feature of their office, and the public recognise few boundaries between themselves and the councillor.
- Councillors often receive inadequate support from their councils for the range of interactions they have with the public.

### Speaking in Response to Central Policy Change

- Councillors expressed frustration at the level of central government interference in their day-to-day activities and in their ability to shape the policy and decisions required to meet local needs. This frustration cuts across the political spectrum.
- Councillors are seeking greater local autonomy and discretion in undertaking their activities. There is a desire among councillors for central government to set broad frameworks within which they can then operate, without the need for detailed regulation and control.
- Greater engagement between central and local government in policy development that affects local government would enable the local knowledge and expertise of councillors to be brought to bear on central policy concerns.
- The pace of devolution needs to be extended and consideration given to how devolution to English local government can operate on a par with devolution to Scotland and Wales.

- Devolution has yet to signal a fundamental change in the relationship between central and local government and there is a need for devolution to be an organic and open-ended process, to replace the centrally driven approach.
- All devolution deals need to be based on the principle of double devolution to town and parish councils to ensure that decisions are taken and services provided, where appropriate, as close as possible to the communities concerned.

### Speaking about perceptions

- Councillors are concerned about the perceptions held of them by three specific audiences: the public, the media and Westminster and Whitehall and any inaccurate views held about the powers, functions, responsibilities and abilities of councillors can undermine both their office and what it can achieve.
- There is a need for a wide ranging public campaign – for both the public and media – to raise awareness of the role of the councillor and to encourage a wider range of people to put themselves forward for election to their council to widen public participation and engagement with local government.
- Central government requires a clearer view of the challenges councillors face and the constraints they have to manage when it comes to undertaking their roles and responsibilities.

### Speaking about the Job

- There are two main motivating factors that stimulate councillors to stand for election and to continue to seek re-election: the desire to promote and pursue the ideals and policies of their political party; and, to contribute to the governance and development of the locality.
- Community governance, community development and well-being, promoting and protecting the interests of a specific locality are at the heart of the concerns of councillors, but so too, for those from a political party, is defending the interests of that party and building its support base.
- There is a concern among councillors that their population is not a microcosmic or sociological reflection of the wider community and there is recognition among councillors of the need to encourage greater diversity in their numbers.
- The consequences of greater diversity for the practices and purpose of traditional representative democracy has yet to be fully thought through and there is a need to ensure greater diversity does not result in fractured and sectarian local politics.
- The workload of the councillor is increasing and they face greater demands on their time and commitment, greater weight and complexity of the work they must undertake and an increasing need for them to be able to respond to the demands made on them from the council itself and from local communities.
- The support councillors receive from their council in order to undertake the range of their responsibilities, inside and outside the council, is not consistently adequate across the country and without adequate support councillors will have to commit more of their own time and resources to meet the increasing demands made upon them.

- The current remuneration system for councillors is in need of a thorough review to ensure that it is fit for purpose and to ensure that it recognises the demands made on councillors and the expectations of their office.

## Speaking as a Parish or Town Councillor

- It is very clear that parish and town councillors experience similar pressures to those at the principal level in terms of the tensions in their roles, the work that they undertake, the expectations they face, the increasing time demands made upon them and the increasing complexity of their work.
- Parish and town councillors require the same support mechanisms, training, research and administrative infra-structure as principal authority councillors but parish and towns, like all of local government, are facing resource demands that place a strain on meeting those support needs.
- Parish and town councillors face an equally complex set of external relationships with organisations that they must seek to influence and hold to account, but among those bodies are also the principal councils themselves.
- The relationships parish and town councillors are able to develop with principal authority councillors and officers require the investment of time and of resources but are among the most important set of relationships that need to be nurtured beyond the parish and town council.
- There is a need for more research into:
  - what is needed to support parish councils in their work and to assist in developing their capacity to govern
  - understanding how double devolution can be best structured, designed and delivered to improve the quality of life of local communities
  - the merits and processes of extending parish government to un-parished parts of the country, including urban areas
  - what can be done to encourage more people to stand for election to parish level government.
  - relationships between parish government and principal authorities and how to strengthen working relationships between parish and town councils and principal authority partners.
- There is considerable appetite among parish and town councillors for double devolution and for being part of the negotiation of devolution deals. The variation in size and resources across parish and town councils however, means that such an appetite is tempered in some cases by what it is practically possible for the parish or town council to receive from devolution.
- The existence of councillors who sit on a parish and town councils as well as a district and or county councils means that loyalties can be strained for that councillor. Strained loyalties can and do mean that twin and triple hatted councillors may often be operating with the policies and decisions of another council in mind when they conduct parish and town business.
- As with principal authority councillors there is a need for a national review of remuneration for parish and town councillors.