

The Voice of the Councillor

Recommendations

July 2017

Speaking within the council

We heard from councillors that operating within their council involves navigating a complex set of relationships made more difficult by the partisan nature of English local government. We also heard of the resource imbalance between types of councillors: leading councillors, backbenchers and majority or minority group members. There is a clear need for equality of support and resources for all councillors and we therefore recommend that councils should:

1. Ensure that adequate administrative, secretarial and research support is provided to all councillors irrespective of their position within the council or their membership of the majority or minority groups and that adequate resources are extended to support Overview and Scrutiny.
2. Allow councillors access to all information held by the council, on request and in a form that is useable and understandable. Councils should provide a 'House of Commons library' style access to information.
3. Provide quality member training and development programmes to all members and encourage all members to undertake such programmes.
4. Support council leaders (including parish and town councils) in producing an annual 'state of the locality' report and provide opportunities for all councillors, the public and the press to debate the report.

In addition:

5. A task force be created of representatives from the Local Government Association, the Department of Communities and Local Government, the National Association of Local Councils, citizens and academics to review if, generally across local government, constitutions are fit for purpose in ensuring good governance and to suggest changes.

Speaking beyond the council

We were told by councillors that an increasing aspect of their role and workload involves interacting with a range of public, private and third sector agencies and organisations outside of the council. The purpose of such interaction is to negotiate with or influence the

decisions and policies of other bodies and to hold such bodies to account. Recognising these new and developing roles for councillors, we recommend that:

6. Freedom of information legislation should be extended to allow councillors and scrutiny committees, to call for, and receive, information from any public or third sector organisation.
7. Councils work to ensure that all councillors are provided with sufficient resources and support, by their councils, to be able to effectively conduct their community leadership role within their wards and divisions.

Speaking to central policy change

Councillors spoke about the constant change in central government policy and the detail of government regulation. They expressed the need for a clearer separation of roles between central and local government and for a settled relationship. Councillors, across the political spectrum, expressed a support for government policies on devolution and an appetite for accelerating the devolution process. As a result, we recommend:

8. The Department for Communities and Local Government, the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils should launch a consultation on the regulatory burden facing local government with an aim to reducing that burden.
9. Councils should be enabled to propose devolution deals, at any stage, and all proposals should be resolved within six months of submission to the government. All devolution proposals should incorporate the principle of double devolution to parish and town councils and community groups where appropriate.
10. Councils should be given sufficient opportunities to comment on any policy, legislation, regulation or proposal from central government before it is implemented.

Speaking about perceptions

Councillors expressed concern about how they were perceived by the public, the media, Westminster and Whitehall and how inaccurate views of their roles serve to undermine what could be achieved. Drawing on the good practice of many councils in explaining the role of the councillor and in encouraging people to stand for election we recommend that:

11. All councils should provide web-based information to explain the role and function of councillors and provide regularly updated information on the work of their own councillors
12. Councils consider extending the Local Government Association's **#ourday** event to an additional **#ourschoolday** event in which councils and councillors and the Local Government Association engage with schools and colleges.

13. Local and central government should embark on a significant programme of shared secondments between each other and as far as possible ensure civil servants seconded to local government are working closely with councillors.

Speaking about the job

Councillors told us about the multifaceted nature of their job, the increasing workloads and expectations they face and the complexity of the political, organisational and social environment within which they operate. Councillors are clearly professional in the approach they take to their activities and in overseeing and directing large corporate entities and budgets in local government. There are still a series of important structural questions about the nature of the councillor's job which can no longer be avoided and consequently, it is recommended that:

14. An independent inquiry be held into the current councillor remuneration system and time off for public duties.
15. A best practice guide to how councils can most effectively support councillors should be created.
16. Building on the Local Government Association's 'Be a Councillor' programme, councils be encouraged to develop a local public information scheme before each election to stimulate public interest in council candidacy.

Speaking as a parish or town councillor

We heard specific messages from parish and town councillors which indicated the differences in their roles compared to those of principal authority councillors and heard about the very specific issues that relate only to parish and town councils. Consequently, it is recommended that:

17. A national independent inquiry be undertaken by National Association of Local Councils to fully understand the relationship between parish and town councils and principal authorities with the aim of identifying best practice and producing a national framework for parish-principal relationships.
18. The parish and town council statutory right to be consulted on planning matters be extended to all statutory policies, strategies and plans resting with principal council executives.
19. As far as possible parish and town councils avoid appointing to a chair or vice-chair of a town or parish council councillors who also sit on principal authorities.
20. The power of principal councils under the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to conduct Community Governance Reviews be abolished.