Local Governance Research Unit
The Municipal Journal

The Voice of the Councillor

Final report of the De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission

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Foreword from Clive Betts MP

Councillors are vital to the democratic health of their local communities and to the country as a whole and they underpin our democratic system. Councillors oversee multi-million pound budgets and direct the development and delivery of the public services provided by complex organisations. The decisions they make and the policies they formulate and agree have a long-term and profound effect on the quality of life of individuals and of communities and councillors help to shape the long-term future of those communities. At the same time councillors will be active within their communities, working alongside them to solve local problems and provide help and support to local people.

People expect a great deal from their councillors, and rightly so. The public want their councillors to ensure good public services and provide a decent area to live in; they want councillors to build strong and cohesive communities; the public want their councillors to operate to high standards of behaviour and to be accessible, visible, responsible and responsive to public demands. Above all the public want their councillors to provide good and effective local governance. Not only do councillors face demands from the public they also face demands from the government and from a wide range of other public service provides with whom they must interact to ensure that the decisions others make reflect the needs and priorities of local people.

If our councillors are going to continue to make a powerful contribution to the quality, vitality and effectiveness of our local democracy then there has to be national conversation about the roles and tasks of our councillors and how we can better support them in meeting the demands they face. We need to discuss openly, the pressures councillors experience and the support and powers they need to be able govern our communities as effectively as possible. We need to value our councillors and the office of councillor and be clear about how it can be strengthened. The report sets out what councillors themselves have told us about their work and about the changes needed to our local democracy. 'The Voice of the Councillor' is the start of a debate that will lead to real and positive change for councillors, communities and citizens alike.

Clive Betts MP, Sheffield South East

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Thanks

We would like to thank all those councillors who have given up their time to attend the workshops we organised as part of the research and those who took the time to submit written evidence. Councillors input to, and enthusiasm for, the work of the commission is greatly appreciated and the project could not have been completed without the cooperation of councillors across the country. We would also like to thank those council officers and staff from other organisations who gave up their time to arrange and support the workshops.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) provided considerable support for the work of the commission and ensured that parish and town councillors were fully engaged in our research and our thanks are extended to all at NALC.

We would also like to thank #DMULocal for the financial support provided for the work of the commission, which was invaluable in enabling us to extend the remit of our work and in completing our research.

The authors of the report would also like to sincerely thank our commissioners, whose advice, guidance, support and expertise were vital to the work we undertook to produce this report and the other material that will flow from it. The commissioners must be particularly thanked as they were unpaid and received no remuneration for the time they gave to the commission and the work they did on its behalf. Their input came from their belief in local government and local democracy and we hope the production of this report goes some way to repaying them for their input.

Our sincere thanks must also be given to colleagues from the Local Governance Research Unit at De Montfort University – specifically, Cllr Tim Cheetham, Alistair Jones and Mark Roberts for giving up their time to attend roundtables, support the work of the commission and read and give comment on various drafts of the final report. Any remaining errors or omissions are solely our own.

We promised all our respondents and those that attended roundtable events the utmost confidentiality and anonymity and that we would not identify any individuals, so as to provide a forum within which they could openly express any views or criticisms that they wished us to hear. So, we do not produce a list of those who submitted written evidence or attended workshops, but would like to express our sincere thanks for the time, effort and concern they took to provide us with such valuable, insightful and revealing information. Indeed, much of the evidence we received was very revealing of the workings of council politics and included very detailed accounts of incidents and activities within particular councils. To avoid accidently identifying respondents, where the identity of a council and even a councillor, would be obvious to the internal observer, we have not quoted from such material. Such material has however, informed the writing of this report.

Where we have provided elaborative and direct quotes we have given the political and council affiliation of those making the comments. In our roundtables however, it was not always possible to identify the affiliation of the councillor from whom we have taken a quote. In those circumstances the term 'affiliation unknown' will be used after the quote.

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Summary

Councillors operate in a shifting and complex environment where they face increasing demands on their time and focus from their council, the government, the community and local citizens and from a complex range of external organisations. Much is expected of our councillors in governing their areas and in addressing and solving multiple and intricate local problems as well as the local manifestation of national problems. Yet, the powers and responsibilities of councillors are increasingly out of step with the nature of their work set as it is within a broader sub-regional, regional, national and international context.

Central government, of all political colours, has shown itself unwilling to fully release the potential of councillors to govern their areas and somehow seems to see the office of councillor as inadequately formed and shaped to meet the demands it faces. Even in the negotiations for forging devolution deals, the centre is still reluctant to fully grasp the implications of localism and devolution to ensure that councillors have the powers to respond to rapidly changing political, economic and social forces. New problems and new demands require new solutions and councillors can only meet those challenges if they have the support, resources and powers to do so. It is therefore vital that we listen and respond to the messages councillors send about their experiences of governing their localities.

The inquiry did not only focus on principal authority councillors but also heard from parish and town councillors who told us that they experience very similar pressures and challenges to their counter-parts on district and county councils. The solutions and suggestions we draw from our inquiry apply as much to parish and towns councillors as they do to principal authority councillors.

We identified four areas of change that would enable councillors, on all types of council, to be better placed to respond to the challenges they are facing in governing their communities: first, councillors should have the right to demand and receive information and data, in a usable form, from the council of which they are a member and from a range of external bodies. Second, councils should structure themselves organisationally so as to support all councillors in the work they do within the council, within their communities and with the vast array of external organisations with which they now interact. Third, efforts should be redoubled across and beyond local government to ensure the public, the media and the government are fully aware of the realities of the work of the councillor. Fourth, the political parties and central government should fully commit to localism and devolution and recognise that an irreversible shift in the relationship between central and local government is necessary to improve the governance of the country.

While councillors require organisational support, training and resources they also require the appropriate powers to take the necessary actions to improve the quality of local life and governance and to operate effectively beyond the boundaries of their council areas. We expect much of our councillors but seem reluctant to give them the tools to get on with the job and this report is designed to inform a debate which ensures that reluctance is overcome.

1   Introduction

The Communities and Local Government Select Committee of the House of Commons published the final report of its inquiry into the role of the councillor, on 10th January 2013. That report – 'Councillors on the Frontline' – was the foundation stone on which the work of the De Montfort University Local Governance Research Unit (LGRU) and the Municipal Journal's Councillor Commission was laid. As part of the Committee's inquiry, which led to the publishing of 'Councillors on the Frontline', Professor Copus (Director of De Montfort University's Local Governance Research Unit) organised a series of workshops for councillors to discuss their work. Those workshops resulted in an enlightening and open discussion about the experiences of being a councillor. The Councillors on the Frontline report had as its main points of focus the developing community role of the councillor; the question of the representativeness of the councillor population; the barriers that prevented citizens from standing for election and remaining councillors after election and, the support councillors required to conduct their business. The detail of the committee's report revealed the painstaking work required to fully appreciate various aspects of the work and roles of the councillor.

After the General Election in 2015 and the re-establishment of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee in the new parliament, its newly reappointed chair, Clive Betts MP, and Professor Copus agreed to create a new councillor commission. That commission was to continue to explore the changing roles, responsibilities, functions and tasks of the councillor and a wide range of other aspects associated with being and staying a councillor. While Clive Betts MP supported the work of the commission and encouraged councillors to participate in its work, the commission was to be totally independent of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee. The commission would appoint its own commissioners, design its own research and work programme, seek its own funding, conduct its research and produce a final independent report to be presented to the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee.

The commissioners who were invited to join the commission received their invitation for many reasons: their wealth of local government experience, their closeness to the office of councillor (with four commissioners either having served, or still serving, as councillors) and their commitment and dedication to local government.

Our approach to the research is set out in detail in section three. It is commonplace for commissions, inquiries and indeed academic work to seek to explore answers to a set of pre-determined questions that are the focus of the investigation. There are sound principles and reasons for setting research questions as they shape the nature of the work in hand and provide answers of interest to those asking the questions for purposes they wish to achieve.

We decided on a different approach to that normally employed by commissions, inquiries and academic work. We decided against developing a set of overarching questions to which we sought answers because those questions were of special interest to the commission. Rather, our broad approach was to listen to what councillors wanted to tell us, what they wanted to be known about their experiences and work as councillors, the issues of concern they wanted to highlight, the areas they thought required policy change and the aspects of being a councillor that mattered to them. We took this approach to help us understand what would help councillors be more effective in their roles.

Our approach revealed some fascinating insights into the world of the councillor which we would have missed had we adhered to a more conventional approach. More details of the research design are given below, but the authors at least would suggest to our academic colleagues the heresy that they experiment more with moving away from the structures of set research questions. The authors found it a liberating, revealing and very productive approach, as the report will show.

It was the absence of set inquiry questions and our willingness to listen to what councillors had to say that led us to the title of this report: The Voice of the Councillor. The approach also gave rise to the structuring of the report with each section title reflecting that councillors are 'speaking' about aspects of their office and the work it entails.

The report is also called 'The Voice of the Councillor' because one of our councillors attending a roundtable commented: '*this is marvellous because no one has ever bothered to ask us before about what it is like to be a councillor and now I can say my piece*'. It is to her that the title is dedicated.

Unlike other inquiries that preceded our work, we were not bound a timetable set by a body that instructed the work to be undertaken and when and how it should be undertaken. We did not restrict ourselves to a set research period followed by a report. Rather, we took our time, taking evidence, in one form or another, throughout the whole of 2016. We could have carried on longer and the temptation to do so was considerable. It was only the requests of those that had submitted evidence to see the results of our work that meant we had to, reluctantly, end the research and produce this document.

In light of the findings presented within this report, the commission has developed a set of recommendations which aim to support and strengthen the office of councillor at all levels of local government so as to further improve local democracy. It must be noted that, as with most collective endeavours, not all commissioners agree with each and every recommendation, but the commissioners have agreed the overall recommendations made within this report. The recommendations can be found at the end of each section as well as at the end of the report as a complete list.

2   Aims of the Commission

The quality and effectiveness of local government and local democracy rests on the contribution made to them both by councillors as elected representatives. The office of councillor is one of the most fundamental political positions in any democracy and it is the political office through which localities, and the communities within them, are able to give expression to local priorities, values and opinions. Councillors live in close proximity to those they govern, represent and serve. Councillors are part of the communities about whom, and for whom, they make political decisions that will have lasting consequences for local well-being and they live within the areas and communities whose future development they oversee.

The Local Government Research Unit, in partnership with *The Municipal Journal* launched the Councillor 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 Commissions aims were to:

- listen to and report what councillors wanted the public, policymakers and the media to know about their office and what they could and couldn't achieve as a councillor;
- provide the policymakers that take decisions about the structure, function, role and purpose of local government and democracy, with a better understanding of the office of councillor and of the contribution councillors make to their communities;
- further public and policy debate and understanding about local government and local democracy;
- explore and consider the roles, functions, tasks, responsibilities and powers of the councillor so as to assess their relevance and effectiveness in enabling councillors to sustain a viable system of local democracy, local leadership and local government;
- examine the daily experiences of the councillor in their office as a politician and representative;
- understand how far and to what effect councillors can shape their communities and the actions, activities and policies of private and public organisations operating within and beyond the boundaries of the council;
- identify what was required to make councillors more effective and to support them in their work;
- examine councillors' views about the quality of support they received from their councils in conducting their activities and examine ways of strengthening and enhancing the role and status of the office of councillor.

3   Our Approach

Introduction

It was always intended that the approach taken to our research would be a qualitative one which would be expected when producing a report entitled 'The Voice of the Councillor'. Our aim was to listen, analyse and report the main messages and themes that are of importance to councillors. To do that it was necessary to prompt discussion among councillors and listen to the debate. The rest of the section briefly sets out the approach that we took to the research and to collecting our material.
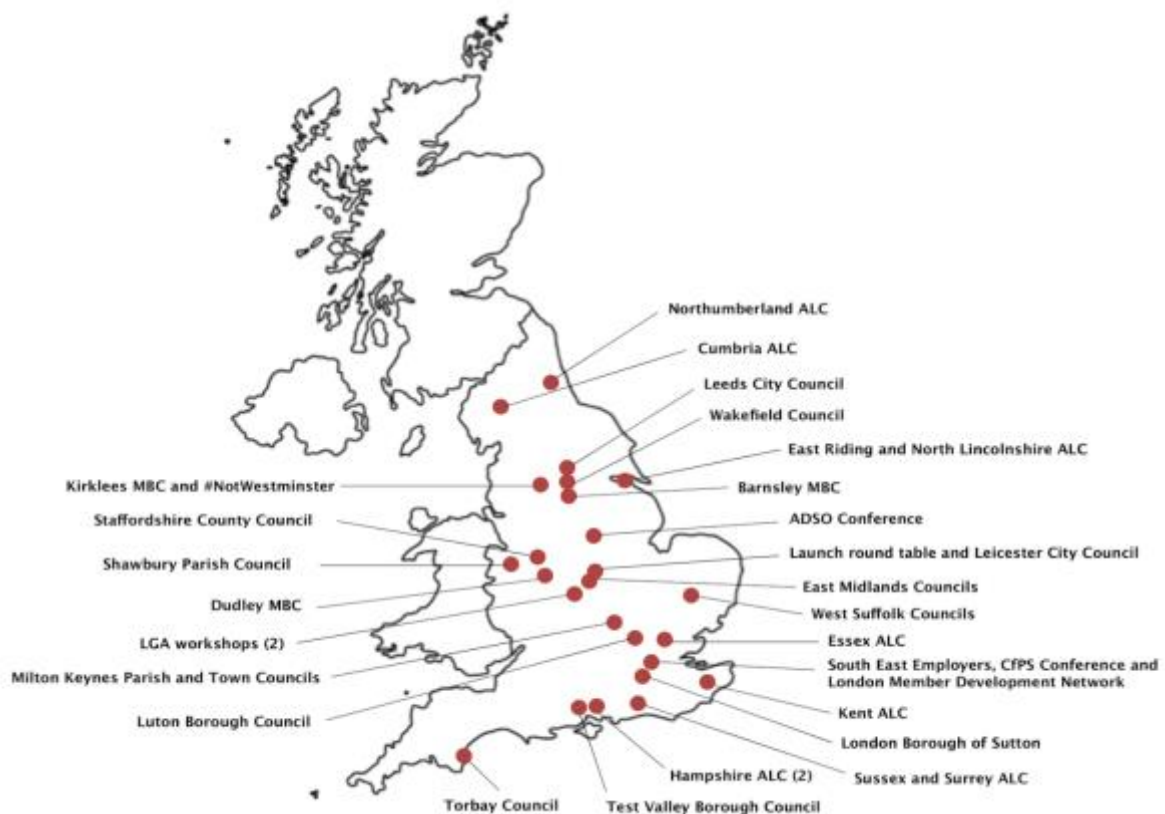
Desk Research

As part of the research undertaken for the report the relevant national and international academic literature as well as policy papers from government, think tanks and other sources, was surveyed for what such material has to say about the challenges facing councillors. That literature is referred to, in the report, where it provides additional material that helps to develop and clarify the points being made by councillors and where it shows evidence of the generalisability of the statements that councillors made or of the discussions that were undertaken. We did not conduct a systematic or thorough literature review as part of the research as that would have detracted from the aim of allowing councillors the space to speak about the issues which were of importance to them and may have overly shaped our approach to the research. The report does however, employ academic and policy material to elaborate and illuminate the issues being discussed where appropriate.

How we listened

In total the commission ran 31 roundtable events across England, engaging with over 300 councillors. Figure 1 below demonstrates the geographical spread of the roundtables. The roundtables were run similarly to unstructured focus group interviews, whereby commissioners used a set of flexible, open-ended probes with a guided group, resulting in an interactive dialogue and discussion. In addition to the fact this format is similar to the type of group interactions the participants are used to in their role as councillors, the cascading effect that is typically produced during this type of interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) allowed for insightful explanations and explorations of values, ideas and experiences. Furthermore, this interview format 'can be transformative' (Tracey, 2013: 167) in that it allows for participants to learn from one another, develop new ways of thinking and find resolution and clarity on issues that concern them. In addition to the roundtable discussions, the commission also took written submissions of evidence from councillors. In total, we received 128 written submissions.

Figure 1. Map of roundtables

Northumberland ALC

Cumbria ALC

Leeds City Council

Wakefield Council

East Riding and North Lincolnshire ALC

Kirklees MBC and #NotWestminster

Barnsley MBC

Staffordshire County Council

ADSO Conference

Shawbury Parish Council

Launch round table and Leicester City Council

East Midlands Councils

Dudley MBC

West Suffolk Councils

LGA workshops (2)

Essex ALC

Milton Keynes Parish and Town Councils

South East Employers, CfPS Conference and London Member Development Network

Luton Borough Council

Kent ALC

London Borough of Sutton

Hampshire ALC (2)

Sussex and Surrey ALC

Torbay Council

Test Valley Borough Council

The commission took a flexible and open approach to roundtable interviews; while there was a list of open-ended questions and prompts, there was no strict or prescriptive outline of the topics to be discussed. The approach we took to our research ensured councillors were able to tell us what they felt was most pertinent to their role. Moreover, the way the commissioners worked with councillors has ensured the findings of the commission's research has been shaped by those councillors. As the title of the report suggests, the aim of the commission was to ensure councillors have a voice. In allowing for guided discussions that were also open and flexible, we feel the commission has enabled 'The Voice of the Councillor' to be sufficiently heard.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) worked with us on a 'parish stream' looking at the work and role of England's 80,000 parish and town councillors. NALC conducted an online survey of its members in the summer of 2016 which aimed to seek the views of parish and town councillors in relation to their roles and responsibilities. The findings from this survey complimented the roundtable research we conducted with parish and town councils across England. The commission also engaged with councillors on Twitter by posing regular questions and collecting answers, using #CllrCommission. The approach was successful in capturing ideas and thoughts from extremely busy councillors who use Twitter actively for their council duties.

Why listen to councillors now? Why Another Commission?

Councillors operate within a rapidly changing environment and are faced with responding to constantly emerging pressure for change. Globalisation, Europeanisation (and now de-Europeanisation), urbanisation and austerity, for example, require councillors to deal with the local and regional manifestation of factors that are not confined to one locality. As councillors are required to continually rethink their role and to accomplish new tasks and responsibilities and to respond to new and emerging pressures, there is always a need to understand how the office of councillor changes to ensure the holders are in possession of the powers and responsibilities to best govern their areas.

The world has changed since the Communities and Local Government Committee published its report – 'Councillors on the Frontline' – and since the Commission chaired by Dame Jane Roberts reported in 2007. Official inquiries and commissions over the decades have provided detailed, sophisticated and in-depth analysis of the work of councillors but such reports can only provide a snapshot in time of the experiences and pressures with which councillors are dealing and often in the context of the needs and policies of any one government. Unless we are able to provide councillors and the office of councillor, with a stable and settled local government system within which to operate, it will always be necessary to periodically review and report on the world of the councillor.

As an independent inquiry, we recognised the need to provide an assessment of the work of the councillor that may provide responses to long-term issues and also stimulate an ongoing, rather than periodic, debate about what we need from those we elect as councillors. In so doing, it was to councillors that we turned so as to listen to and reflect on their experiences and to learn the lessons that may provide stability and certainty to a political office shaped and buffeted by external pressures, the main source of which is from central government. If we do not come to a settlement about the role and office of councillor then we will continue to spend decades reviewing and inquiring while our councillors quietly get on with the job that faces them, more often than not with inadequate support and powers.

Thus, the time is always right to listen to councillors and what we must do from the findings of this report is to grasp, firmly, some of the nettles that we confront in understanding how best to organise our local democracy. We present the evidence and make a series of recommendations that present the nettles that must be grasped: some will be provocative and controversial, others less so. But, it is the provocative and controversial issues that must be resolved; otherwise yet another report will be explaining why it is timely to listen to its findings as councillors continue to operate with an ongoing series of difficulties and barriers. The recommendations made here are aimed at empowering, liberating and freeing councillors to get on with the job of representing, governing and serving our communities in the most effective way possible.

4   Speaking about the Council

Introduction

The council to which we elect our councillors is a dual-purpose body: it is a politically representative institution which operates as the foundation to any healthy, well-functioning democracy; and, it is a vehicle through which the public services, vital to modern industrial welfare states, are organised, provided, commissioned or overseen. These two broad central purposes of local government do mask however, the complexity of local government as an organisation, but they also capture the two interrelated council worlds that the councillor must navigate.

Being a councillor means the running, or taking part in the running, of a large, complex, multi-faceted organisation, which has its own separate administrative and managerial structure. The interaction councillors have with the managerial and administrative staff of the council is shaped by the type of councillor they are – leading member, majority group member, opposition member for example; by the nature of the subject matter being explored – strategic policy issues, casework, ward based concerns; and, by the setting in which the interaction occurs – formal council meeting, informal discussion, or a forum which is external to the council.

The council is a politically representative and elected body, and councillors and council meetings are the vehicle for the legitimate expression of the views, opinions and priorities of local citizens.

Our corporations represent the authority of the people. Through them you obtain the full and direct expression of the popular will, and consequently any disrespect to us, anything which would depreciate us in the public estimation, necessarily degrades the principles which we represent.

Joseph Chamberlain, 1874

Local government has a legitimate governing role within and across the community. Consequently, it is the setting for political interaction and decision making that reflects the ideological and policy preferences of councillors. Some 90% of principal authority councillors in England are elected as candidates from either the Conservative and Labour Parties or the Liberal Democrats. Party politics looms large in the relationship councillors have with the council. What became clear very quickly from the evidence we collected however, is that parish and town councils are far from as party politicised, yet even at the first tier of local government – the parish and town – national political party councillors are found working alongside councillors

independent of party. The national political parties do not however, have the penetration into parish government that they do at the principal authority level and the effects of this are explored later.

The rest of the section explores what councillors have told the commission about the interactions they have that are set within the council of which they are a member.

Relationships within the council

It is not surprising the dynamics of the relationships councillors forge with officers and other councillors, especially while present at the council, loom large in the day-to-day experiences of council work. How councillors relate to each other and to council officers has a fundamental influence on the way they conduct their council business and their effectiveness in that role. It is apparent from the evidence there are four dimensions to the relationship councillors have with other councillors and with officers. That dimension depends on the position the councillor holds on the council. In other words, are they a:

- leading member
- scrutiny chair or vice-chair
- majority group councillor, or
- minority(s) group(s) councillor.

All councillors are not equal, nor are they treated equally by other members and importantly, by officers of the council. The report takes each of these types of councillor to explore how they relate to other councillors and officers.

Leading members

Council leaders and executive members (or committee chairs in non-executive councils) are in receipt of the greatest support for the duties they have to perform and that support comes from officers and other councillors. While that may seem unremarkable and expected given the nature of the work of leading members in directing the council, the resource imbalance creates a distance between this group of members and other councillors, particularly in terms of access to information. Moreover, the closeness between leading members and senior officers, and the working partnership they develop, increases the distance between leadership members and other councillors (see, Leach and Wilson, 2000).

Leading members themselves recognise the distance between them and what are normally members of their own group (rather than members of other political groupings) and there are two responses to such distance. First, leading councillors put in place strategies to close the gap between themselves and their group colleagues, which goes beyond their appearance at group

meetings: open door policies, regular meetings with backbenchers, use of social media to provide updates and information, open officer briefing sessions and meetings between cabinet members and backbenchers. All of these may be employed to ensure backbench members are informed and involved.

The second strategy is to ignore the distance and carry on working closely with officers in the running of the council and policymaking. Such an approach also comes with an expectation that other councillors will support the leadership when required, or with the view that other councillors expect the leadership to lead and time spent engaging with other councillors is time taken away from working with officers to run the authority.

It was explained by a councillor that:

> *Amongst the failings of many leaders is the unwillingness to take risks with new members and put talent onto their cabinet immediately after an election. It's much harder to do this after one or two years but the gamble is worth taking* (Conservative County Councillor).

Two very different leadership cultures display themselves when it comes to the obvious distance between leadership members and other councillors: a collaborative collective culture; and an individualised leadership approach. While it might be expected for these leadership cultures to display a political difference, largely they did not and the evidence received suggested that such patterns cut across the political divide.

Leading members are very clear in their recognition of the distance between themselves and other members and their closer relationships with senior council officers. Even those members who strive to overcome the distance see it as an expected and inevitable result of the different roles and positions played by different types of councillor. Where strategies are put in place to overcome the distance, they are not always successful.

As one council leader summed it up:

> *I see the managing director every day; he was an internal appointment and had been at the council for a while. I see second tier officers throughout the week. It's a close working relationship and we are at meetings and events outside the council with other organisations, too. I see these officers more than most members because members aren't in [the council offices] everyday. I always make myself open to members but I'm always going to see more of officers during the day* (Labour Borough Council Leader).

Thus, closeness between leading members and senior officers is also recognised as an expected and inevitable result of the different roles and positions played by different types of councillors.

The relationship is only seen as problematic if it is felt officers are dominating the policy process, withholding information, or providing inadequate information to support members in their work. The relationship between leading members and senior officers is one that is prone to shifts between being collaborative or conflictual around specific issues, but it is a relationship that works best when based on openness, trust and honesty between the two sets of players and where each is clear of the others' roles, purposes and objectives (see, Rhodes and t'Hart, 2014).

It is an irony of the experience of the councillor that when the relationship between leading members and officers is at its best, other members can feel most excluded from the process of policy development and decision-making. That view was summarised, thus:

> *Some local authorities treat members like machines (in officer led authorities) for outcomes, rather than as people to obtain the best results...officer led authorities have run down the traditional democratic structures* (Independent Borough Councillor).

In our research, while we came across examples where the relationship between senior members and senior officers had deteriorated, or where those relationships were not as healthy as both partners would like, we did not receive a single example from a leading member of receiving insufficient support from senior officers or the council more generally. There is firmly established in local government a 'ministerial' cadre of leading councillors supported and serviced by senior officers and distinct from the rest of the council members.

The arrival of executive leaders and cabinets in local government however, only served to formalise and bring into the open a distinction in member roles which had already developed as a result of close working relationships between council leaders and committee chairs and senior officers. The formalisation of council executive leadership has simply made the imbalance in relationships, resources and influence between councillors even more obvious.

Scrutiny chair or vice-chair

The chairs and vice-chairs of Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) committees have not replaced the traditional committee style chairs as powerful, leadership councillors; rather, O&S chairs lack the same level of access to officers and resources when compared to executive members. Moreover, the relationship O&S chairs and vice-chairs have with executive members is not one of parity

within the council and O&S chairs attest to feeling marginalised, lacking in support and with insufficient access to the most senior officers. That view was condensed by one councillor into this simple point:

> *We [scrutiny chairs] don't have the resources because we don't matter as much as the leadership* (Labour Borough Councillor).

As would be expected in local government, the pattern of relationships between O&S chairs and vice chairs and executive councillors and officers varies across the country, as does the resources O&S chairs and vice-chairs receive to support their work. But in no case did the research find the resources and officer links for O&S chairs and vice-chairs to be on a par with the executive. An O&S chair summed up the frustration of many of her colleagues when she commented:

> *We should ensure that there is full independent financial support for the scrutiny role which is ring-fenced and in proportion to the size of the authority* (affiliation unknown).

Although the relationships between O&S chairs and vice-chairs with councillors on their committees is closer than that between executive members and senior officers, a distance still exists between O&S chairs and vice-chairs and other members. That distance comes from the mere occupation of a council position and from the additional support given to O&S chairs and vice-chairs compared to other councillors. It is not such a distance however, that O&S members feel unaware of the work of committees on which they sit, or other committees (if they wanted to be informed of that work). Rather, the realities of a councillor holding any sort of council office, separates the holder from other members.

It is however, the interaction of party politics that creates the greatest distance for councillors from O&S chairs and vice-chairs. An opposition councillor sitting on an O&S committee with a majority group chair and vice-chair commented:

> *There is no real scrutiny of the cabinet as most of the time the committee chairs just protect the executive and its members. They [O&S chairs and vice-chairs] see their role as making sure the cabinet have it easy and most of them seem to think if they make it easy for the cabinet they might get promoted to it* (affiliation unknown).

Councillors of the same party group as O&S chairs and vice-chairs recognise the office of 'chair' or vice-chair' carries with it not only a set of responsibilities but also an enhanced access to officers and executive members, as well as official recognition of the office and a special responsibility allowance. The result is all councillors, irrespective of group, can come to see O&S chairs and vice-chairs as part of the machinery of the council. There is a danger in the relationships that O&S chairs and vice-chairs have in that they can become distanced from the

main body of councillors to whom they should have a greater relationship than with the executive.

Chairs and vice-chairs of O&S are a vital bridge between the executive and the main body of councillors and they need to act as a channel of the voices of the members to the executive rather than an attenuated version of that voice (Coulson and Whiteman, 2012). Certainly, there is a weakness in the way O&S relates to the executive, where it does not provide all members with sufficient space or resources to question, challenge, seek justification from, and effectively hold the executive to account.

A summary was provided by a councillor who commented:

> *Many new members are disillusioned after a short time by sitting on scrutiny committees that simply watch over other people's decisions...a typical comment is 'I didn't get elected to come and watch paint dry'. In some cases, a member can go for weeks and not have a reason to attend the council offices* (Conservative District Councillor).

The evidence presented during our research suggests the interplay of party politics can, and does, seriously damage the relationships between councillors and O&S chairs. Party politics can undermine the effectiveness of O&S as a vehicle for executive accountability. It is also the case that for many scrutiny councillors the work of O&S provides not just a vital access to influencing council activity, but also develops a collective purpose between a group of members outside of the executive. To summarise this situation an opposition O&S councillor (and O&S vice-chair) commented:

> *O&S gives councillors an opportunity to have some input to what the council does and there is a sort of scrutiny mentally and you can see it in scrutiny. We look at a wide range of issues – not just about the council – and we just get on with the job. Yes, there is the odd bit of party political knock-about, but it's limited. We do act like a team and when it works well it works really well. It works best when we look outside the council, that's when you see a real scrutiny team spirit* (affiliation unknown).

The chairs and vice-chairs of O&S have formed another distinct grouping among types of councillors but for the success of O&S generally they must see their prime relationship, not with the executive, but with the main body of councillors.

The majority group

Given that around 90% of all councillors in England are from one of the three main parties, it is not surprising the party group and party group colleagues provide the most important set of

relationships for the councillor (Karlsson, 2013). The majority group acts not only as an instrument for deciding party lines and disciplining the errant councillor, but also as a source of advice and support.

The majority group is a private deliberative and decision-making forum and as an entity, and through the meetings it holds, offers the majority group councillor a form of influence within the council and a direct link to the council leadership – collectively and individually. The majority group is a formalised informal part of the council's overall decision-making and policy development systems. The majority group is the place where majority councillors can explore long-term policy change, explore what may be unpopular options and conduct private debates.

A councillor summed up the privacy and confidentially of the group meeting in this way:

> *With the financial situation as it is we need to be able to consider all sorts of options and if we did that in public the press and protesters would have a field day – no sense in letting people think something is going to happen when all we are doing is thinking things through* (Conservative District Councillor).

Councillors' loyalty to the group is assured, not only through disciplinary mechanisms, but through shared political beliefs and objectives, the desire to ensure control of the council and the need to present a unified front in public. The worst excesses of party discipline can seriously damage open public debate and see councillors acting as delegates of their group rather than representatives of the wider public. A councillor who reflected independently on the party group of which he was a member commented:

> *The council [named party group] group-think prevents critical analysis of problems and their resolution; these barriers prevent councillors or officers achieving the best outcome for taxpayers and residents. The overall atmosphere that pervades the [named party group] ruling clique is deep paranoia, a siege mentality* (affiliation unknown).

Indeed, we experienced some councillors either refusing to provide evidence for our research or asking for assurances that we keep their evidence confidential, in case the '*Chief Whip didn't like it*'. The whipping system - if applied too vigorously can stifle debate and be imposed for the mere convenience of the ruling administration; the local government whip also lacks the sophistication of a parliamentary lined whipping system. One of our respondents summarised the situation by commenting:
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> *My take is that local government will be healthier if parties dominate less. Therefore, smaller parties ought to be encouraged as should independent candidates...The expectation for good, reasonable decision-making is that party loyalty – that is following a whip – can be one consideration for decision-making but cannot be the only*

consideration. This is current public law but in most situations, is untested (affiliation unknown).

The majority party group provides the councillor with a foundation for the work they conduct and offers a focal point for their political and policy objectives; membership of the majority group shapes the councillor's actions not only in council meetings but in all other relationships within the council. Membership of the majority group shapes the way councillors interact with each other, with other groups and with council officers. The following comments sum up the importance of the majority group to its members:

> *When I was first elected, the group was like a natural home; I was more comfortable there than in council. It gave me a sense of belonging, coherence and direction. I met party colleagues I had never met before and the group helped bring us together; gave us a common purpose and direction. Without it I would have floundered as a councillor* (Conservative District Councillor).

> *I can challenge and question the leader and portfolio holders, ask questions, put over my view. In fact, we have some real rows in group and occasionally it can get nasty. But, that's why we do it in private so we know where we are in council. You couldn't have those sorts of disagreements in public, it wouldn't be right. The leadership would hate it – when we challenge in group we can get somewhere – if we did it in public, we'd get nowhere, apart from kicked out [of the group]* (Labour Borough Councillor).

The party group is the councillor's natural habitat and is the mechanism through which control of the council is established and maintained. Majority group councillors see their legitimacy in running the council as stemming from membership of the ruling group, rather than the council itself. But the group system, the employment of a group whip, the secrecy of its deliberations and decision-making, and the expectations of loyalty – rule driven or culturally driven – place the group above the electorally legitimised council meeting.

There was no sign from majority group councillors that their loyalty to the group, the cohesion they demonstrate in public and the reduction of the space for free and open public debate caused by the group system, was in anyway seriously challenged – except on a few occasions.

The centrality of the group to the world of the councillor was summed up, thus:

> *I wouldn't be a councillor if it wasn't for the party and the group is the party on the council so I attend and abide by the decisions; it's the right thing to do and the group is the right place for discussion and decision* (Labour Borough Councillor).

When it came to council officers, majority group members that were not members of the executive expressed a desire for stronger relationships with officers at a strategic level and greater access and support from officers for policy and research. Majority members do not feel they have a privileged access to officers compared to minority groups. They do expect to have access to officers, almost on demand, and that access is not always forthcoming.

The difficulty in gaining access and support from senior officers for backbench members is clearly feeding a suspicion that officers are the dominant players within the council policy and decision-making processes. *'Officers run this council'* was an often-quoted comment from majority group members and served to increase the distance councillors can experience from the centre of power.

Operationally, majority group members express fewer complaints about access to officers – that is when they are seeking to solve casework issues or ward or divisional matters. If councillors approach officers lower down in the council structure, their experiences often, though not exclusively, become more positive than when operating at a more strategic level.

Minority(s) group(s) councillors

There is little difference in the way councillors outside the majority group relate to their own party groups, other than it not being a formal decision-making part of the council machinery. Councillors from minority groups express the same feelings of loyalty, cohesion and support in relation to their group and see it in much the same way as majority members. It is a place where politically like-minded councillors, of the same political party, share ideas, develop policy, decide party lines and plan how they will behave and what they will do in the formal settings of the council (Overview & Scrutiny to one side).

The group provides for the minority councillor a sense of strength not only against their majority opponents but also in relation to senior council officers. Indeed, one of the main roles of the group for opposition councillors is to enable them to speak with a single voice and to make demands for support and information from council officers. That role is exemplified in the following comments from two minority group councillors:

> *Officers don't like challenge (especially from minority groups) and the fallout this causes, plus local authorities pursuing the classic path of least resistance rather than adopting a proactive approach, means we have to act together or be ignored completely* (affiliation unknown).

> *The most frustrating part of my role is not being listened to by officers and being dismissed for being part of a minority political group, especially when my arguments are then put forward by someone else in the majority group* (affiliation unknown).

Minority groups express a similar level of frustration as majority group members about access to officers and the same strategic and operational distinctions in access to officers. The main distinction is minority group members often put the blame for lack of access to officers at the feet of the majority group and the council leadership who are often perceived as instructing officers not to cooperate with minority group councillors. There is a serious undermining of democracy and of the role of the councillor if access is deliberately obstructed to any councillor as a matter of political decision, which must be challenged and prevented.

On the other hand, many opposition councillors see officers as working far too cooperatively with the majority group and of sharing their political agenda to such an extent that access, at least to senior officers, by the minority group was restricted by officers themselves. When interactions do take place, they are often fruitless and frustrating for minority group councillors.

The minority party group meeting allows councillors to challenge what they receive from officers and act as a channel for complaints about officer interactions or lack of them. The minority party group allows minority councillors to question their own leadership, challenge its effectiveness and develop policy lines that the leadership will be required to pursue. But minority groups are not in a position to force changes and despite meeting as a group, the minority group of councillors is excluded from any effective input to council policy or decisions and even from an effective role in opposing or holding the administration to account, as summarised thus:

> *The majority party (Labour) has been in power since the amalgamation in the 1970's with only 10 opposition councillors, the majority independents. Sadly, we find that our input on the council stage is marginal. Even the local papers are Labour supporters* (Independent Borough Councillor).

> *It is frustrating being in a small opposition group with no opportunity to question executive members, without giving them prior notice* (Liberal Democrat Borough Councillor).

We found little difference in the activities, purpose, role and cohesion of minority groups when compared to their majority counterparts. Indeed, group loyalty and discipline are not tempered by being in control or opposition, but more by the needs of any one group's leadership and by political culture. Consequently, the positive and negative aspects of the group system set out above apply as much to all parties and groups on the council, whether in control or not.

It appears the primacy of the group system has been left largely unchanged and unchallenged by the Labour Government of Tony Blair's local government modernisation agenda. Given that over the last 17 years there has been a radical and evolutionary approach to how political decisions are made in local government and an emergence of a distinct set of speared roles for councillors. Despite the attention given to party politics in local government by official inquiries

and academic research (Copus, 2004), the issue remains to be sufficiently addressed. It is time that the way in which political party groups in local government conduct their activities is fundamentally altered.

We Want Information!

A constant theme of our research is the way councillors express a desire for more information than they currently receive from council officers and the council leadership. The demands for information echo the feelings of distance from decision-making experienced by many councillors and set out above. The demand however, is often unspecified as to what information and about what, how much, how it should be delivered or how it should be explained and used. Yet the demand for more information is made by both majority and minority group councillors and for the same reasons.

It is a worrying situation in local government that so many councillors provided evidence suggesting they have insufficient information from which to conduct their role as a decision-maker, scrutineer, or at least to challenge or make a reasoned judgment on the issues before them.

Various reasons are provided for this which often reflect those views expressed in the section above about access to officers: the majority group deliberately withhold or instruct officers to withhold information; officers are withholding or failing to provide adequate information to councillors so they are able to decide the direction of the council and shape policy formation; and, officers do not consider providing councillors with information at the centre of their activities.

We heard from a number of minority group councillors that obtaining adequate and helpful information was a particular problem. As one councillor commented:

> *It is far too difficult for backbenchers to get the information they need. We have to ask constantly for updates; nothing comes automatically unless it's a formal report* (Labour County Councillor).

Another councillor shared:

> *Information we get is inaccessible. As a backbencher, you have to act like a forensic scientist to understand…we don't have the power or information to follow up what is recommended* (Labour Borough Councillor).

The view is widespread among councillors that the information they receive whether for committee purposes, or for research or assisting them individually in making a judgement on matters before them, is either inadequate or provided in ways that are difficult to access. One of the ironies we uncovered is that the weight of information can be seen by some councillors as a deliberate tactic, by officers, to hide important issues in a voluminous report. The more information, the bigger the report, the more carefully it had to be read to find what is being hidden. Thus, it is not the amount of information that is the issue for councillors but the right information, provided in the right way and at the right time.

It must be noted that what is provided here are the views of many of our respondent councillors; we have not tested the veracity of these claims.

We heard some examples of where the frustration of being refused information, or provided with inadequate or unsuitable material, had led councillors to use Freedom of Information procedures to elicit information from the council of which they are a member. It is clearly unacceptable that councillors should have to have recourse to a procedure provided to the public to secure information or answers to questions.

As one opposition group leader shared:

> *Freedom of Information requests have been frequently used by opposition councillors here. The administration has no interest in providing the opposition with detailed, accurate information, and officers gain no benefit from enabling democratic scrutiny of their activities* (affiliation unknown).

If councillors do not have a greater ease of access to information held by the council, or other bodies, or do not have enforceable rights to information, or the power to receive any information they think necessary to enable them to do their job – which may be to expose some serious failure on the part of their council, its officers or its leadership - then their elected position becomes negated.

We did not test how widespread the practice of councillors using Freedom of Information legislation is but the practice was claimed to have been employed by both majority and minority councillors alike and often indicated a breakdown in relationships with officers.

At the end of each of our roundtable discussions with councillors, we finished with the question: if you could have one thing that would make your life and work as a councillor better, what would it be? In over half the roundtables the reply was: *information!* The rights of councillors to receive information which they feel is necessary to enable them to do their job needs to be

fundamentally strengthened. Access to information, in a form that is usable and understandable, should be a basic right resting with the office of councillor.

Training

Training is a regular feature of reports that explore the role of the councillor, and our evidence suggests the training provided to councillors still requires improvement. That improvement is needed in both the amount and the nature of the training provided for members and in a way that recognises large numbers of councillors are not full time and have to balance council demands with the demands of employment and family life.

The training members receive is often felt to be focused less on what members themselves feel they require and more on what officers need or want councillors to know or to be trained to handle. The training demands made by councillors providing evidence can be categorised as follows:

- policy processes and policy development
- officer and council structure
- legislative changes
- general personal development (broader education such as accredited degree programmes)
- general skills development
- IT skills and other technical aspects
- planning and planning policy changes

We found, therefore, some discontent with the nature and quality of the training provided which often fails to meet the specific demands of councillors. On the other hand, evidence was provided of councils that offer personal development programmes tailored to individual councillor's specific needs and with high quality provision being made.

The variation in training offered in terms of amount, quality and focus across the country, is stark. There are also national programmes available to councillors from a number of different providers. The difficult is question whether training for councillors should be voluntary or a compulsory element of their office and it is difficult to justify making training compulsory. Although we did however, come across a council whose members are not able to sit on the planning committee unless they have undergone sufficient training. Planning is, and remains, a unique case when it comes to councillor training.

As councillors are not employees of the council and as they may have full-time employment, making training in any area compulsory for councillors is fraught with difficulty. It is also unacceptable, in a democracy to insist on a level of training either before or after election as

making elected office dependent on a level of education and training would exclude some from seeking election.

Council Constitutions

There is a continuum of interest displayed among councillors in the development of the constitution and its usage, which ranges from full engagement to abdication. At the *'engagement'* end of the scale, councillors take full part in developing the constitution to fit their particular council circumstances and see the constitution as a useful tool in shaping the relationships they have with other councillors and officers, at least in formal settings. At the other end of the scale are those councillors who have *'abdicated'* from any genuine role in developing or framing the constitution and who do not see it as a document that assists them in their relationships within the council; rather it is often seen as a legally necessary document which offers them little in the day-to-day conduct of their roles.

The constitution of the council is more subject to criticism, from our respondents, than praise and especially by minority groups who experience the council constitution changing to suit the convenience of the ruling administration. It was often reported that the ruling council group had *'cavalier'* attitude towards the constitution – ignoring it when it suits and using it as a way of restricting what opposition groups can do in council. Such criticism comes from across the political spectrum. It is also apparent that council constitutions seem to be reviewed and changed almost at will.

Manipulation of the constitution was summarised thus by two forthright councillors:

> *I was a councillor in 2000 and we just nodded the constitution through. Some senior officers and the leader just gave us the document to agree and like sheep, we agreed it* (Conservative District Councillor).

> *The ruling group just changed the constitution to suit themselves and they do it whenever they want...the constitution should support our right to say what the ruling group doesn't want to hear* (Opposition Borough Councillor).

The evidence we received suggested constitutions, rather than empowering councillors, are often used to restrict their activities, or fail to fully support the duties, tasks, rights and powers of councillors within their councils. Resources for councillors or protection for minority groups are said to be missing or inadequate when it came to our evidence. There is clearly a need to fully understand how council constitutions are being developed, how they are being used, and whether they are documents which support or impede councillors in their activities.

Conclusion

Given the councillor's relationship with the council of which they are a member is a constant theme of investigations into the role of the councillor (HMSO, 1967; HMSO, 1977; HMSO, 1986; DCLG, 2007; DCLG 2008), we have selectively presented only evidence that either reinforces important aspects of the relationship the councillor has with the council – such as officer-member relationships, access to information or training; we have also presented evidence about the impact of party politics on local government which, while having been researched academically (Game and Leach,1996; Copus, 2001, 2004; Leach, 2006), has yet to be investigated as the sole focus of an official inquiry. Yet, it is clear from our evidence that party politics and the party group system remains as yet unmodernised. It continues as a shadow part of council decision-making with practices and procedures that have not changed with the more formal aspects of council decision-making, since the Local Government Act 2000.

The demand from councillors for information is an immediate and urgent one. Without sufficient access to information, or support in obtaining information, the councillor is constrained and prevented from being effective in securing public accountability of the executive and other bodies (see section five). There is a need here to strengthen the rights of councillors to demand and receive information.

The council constitution as part of the framework of local government has, by and large, failed to provide what a constitution should: a clear reference point for political responsibilities and duties; an accepted understanding of the roles, powers, responsibilities and duties of types of councillors; protection for councillors; and a document that cannot be changed at the whim of the ruling group.

It is clear that much of what is suggested in this section could be dealt with as part of each and every council constitution, but that would require a sense that the constitution of each council mattered; was a member-controlled document; suited the conditions of each council; and, was there to protect each councillor equally and not just the administration. Council constitutions could ameliorate much of the problems councillors have raised when speaking about the council but that would require a change in the legal and political status of council constitutions themselves.

A council constitution must be seen as more than a set of rules and conventions that lay down the powers and functions of council institutions and their relationship with each other, that can be ignored or changed at will. A cultural (as well as legal) change is required in local government to ensure a constitution speaks for the councillor and becomes a document which supports and protects all councillors when operating at 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 councilors 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.

5   Speaking beyond the Council

Introduction

One of the unique features of being a councillor is the proximity the office has to the communities served, represented and governed locally. Our evidence suggests strongly that, unlike other elected representatives – MPs and MEPs, for example - who spend most of their time away from their areas, councillors live, socialise, bring up their families, often work but certainly spend the majority of their time within the council area for which they are an elected representative.

Political proximity not only means councillors experience, on a day-to-day basis, the problems and issues faced by their communities, they also experience the consequences of the decisions they take. Moreover, as councillors are part of their local communities they also face the consequences of (as do those they represent) the decisions taken by a complex network of other public and semi-public administrative bodies (quangos) that make decisions, spend public money and develop public policy. Unlike councillors however, that network of policymakers has no democratic mandate or legitimacy granted to them by local voters. Also, engaging with the network of public decision makers are complementary networks of private and third sector bodies which also make decisions that affect the development and well-being of local communities, again, with no democratic mandate to do so.

Councillors, as the elected representatives of local communities, interact with other decision makers and are increasingly faced with the tasks of influencing and shaping decisions taken by others while also holding those non-elected decision-makers to account (Mangan, *et al,* 2016). The role of the councillor beyond the council of which they are a member is to take part in developing a shared vision for the community that other organisations will support or work alongside. In so doing councillors are able to use the moral leverage provided by their elected office to influence and negotiate with those bodies, but this use of leverage means councillors must govern but without the real power to do so.

Interaction with other decision-making bodies - many of whom will cover areas larger than some councils - be focused on single services and operate without a culture of accountability and democracy, is now a major aspect of the work councillors undertake. The external relationships councillors develop operate on two levels: the level of the electoral area (ward or division) and the strategic level.

Public Accountability

Councillors told us that an increasing aspect of their work is to question, challenge, criticise and seek information from organisations outside the council, but beyond the official and formal scrutiny procedures. What emerged from our evidence is that councillors, at all levels (leadership and backbench), are becoming the vehicle through which the other organisations are held publicly to account, as councillors attempt to obtain justifications – from public and private bodies – for the decisions they make and the policies they develop (Bovens, *et al*, 2014). Moreover, councillors receive varying levels of support – and in some cases no support – for this developing role.

Leading councillors operate at both a strategic and operational level when attempting to hold outside bodies to account – that is, their leadership role places them in a strategic relationship with other agencies and bodies, while their ward or divisional role places them in an operational relationship. Strategically, leading councillors seek justification and explanation of long-term policy and its implications that emanates from organisations beyond the council and how that policy fits with council policy and objectives; operationally, leading councillors interact with the same bodies to hold them to account for decisions they take that affect or could affect the ward or division they represent.

Backbench councillors have a dual focus to their attempts to hold to account other organisations. They too operate strategically when the decisions or policies of other organisations affect or could affect their wards or divisions and they seek justification and explanation for those policies. Backbench councillors also work at an operational level, where decisions of other bodies immediately affect their constituents such as a GP surgery closure or re-routing or cancellation of a bus service. The difference between leading and backbench councillors when it comes to interacting with other organisations to secure public accountability is that backbenchers are often working without the support of, or resources from, the council.

Councillors are fully aware of the limitations on the office they hold, particularly when it comes to their ability to hold other bodies beyond the council to any sort of effective account. Councillors are confronted, on a day-to-day basis, with the complex political, economic, technical and social environment within which local government operates and they stress the difficulties in developing interactions with a vast array of public and private bodies which make policy decisions, spend public money and affect the development and well-being of local communities (see, Sorensen and Torfing, 2009, De Groot, *et al*, 2010). A call was made by councillors for councils to be recognised as legitimate bodies for bringing together public and private agencies and to hold them to account. That view was summarised thus:

> *We need to integrate all public services under democratic accountability to councillors and give councillors information and power over CCGs, all health, the police and with*

the right information we can make accountability work. Most of these organisations couldn't run a council. We need to have power and accountability over these bodies (Conservative County Councillor).

Councillors are aware that they hold something, which the array of organisations which have power to shape what happens locally, lack: a democratic mandate from the public. There is considerable disagreement however, between those who presented evidence to the commission about the value of the public mandate they had be given by the electorate and the respect with which it was viewed by other agencies and bodies.

We received contradictory evidence from councillors about the way in which those they are attempting to hold to account (outside of formal scrutiny) respond to that process. It is clear from that evidence there is no settled acceptance that councillors have the right to seek explanation, justification and information from other public and private bodies (Sorensen, 2006). Indeed, we found evidence of the same regional or national organisation responding differently in different parts of the country and the National Health Service (NHS) was often held up by councillors as an example of this inconsistency in approach to being held to account. In other words, for some councillors the NHS (and its local manifestations) were prime examples of a willingness to respond and be held to account; and, in other parts of the country there was a marked reluctance to engage with councillors when they sought explanation and justification for decisions.

The reluctance of the NHS to be held to account was summed up by a councillor, thus:

The difficult organisations to deal with are the utility companies, particularly [named organisation], but the worst of all is the NHS – the NHS is completely unresponsive to comment and criticism (other than being defensive) and takes decisions without proper consultation (affiliation unknown).

Another councillor suggested in a similar vein, that:

The NHS is a law unto itself. No one will talk to councillors; they don't recognise us and seem to think we are just a nuisance. But, when they make decisions that can affect people's lives someone has to be able to challenge them and that challenge must be locally, where the decision hits home (Conservative District Councillor).

But we also received evidence that suggested the NHS are paragons of virtue when it comes to accountability. One councillor summed up the NHS, thus:

Ask and ye shall receive, seriously, I can ask the Trust and the hospital and they are very keen to explain what they have done and why. I don't always agree but at least I have an explanation I can take back to people or the council. Very positive response from them (Independent District Councillor).

We received evidence that suggested a similar scattered pattern exists across the country when it comes to bodies such as the Police, utility companies, the NHS, Local Enterprise Partnerships, transport bodies, major local employers and a range of quangos being held to account by councillors, strategically and operationally. Indeed, we also received evidence from councillors that they are being deliberately prevented by some bodies from any attempts at holding them to account.

It is quite clear that holding others to account is not universally accepted as a legitimate role of the councillor by those subject to councillors' accountability attentions (see, Bovens, *et al*, 2014). The evidence we received however, shows holding others to account is becoming a greater focus of the overall work of the councillor. Councillors conduct that role with no powers – other than those that rest with formal scrutiny. It is clear that on occasions councillors struggle with this new accountability role because of reluctance of others to recognise its legitimacy. As one councillor summarised:

Accountability only works if they want to be held to account, which is not when you want them to be held to account (Independent District Councillor).

The public accountability work of the councillor extends far beyond scrutiny as a formal process however, and it is a role which councillors are adopting because they recognise the gap in public accountability and because the office they hold gives them some leverage when it comes to eliciting responses for other organisations and challenging what they do.

The powers and rights of councillors to enforce accountability of others, outside the formal scrutiny process, need to be legally strengthened and we need to understand more about this emerging role of the councillor and how it is operating across local government. Councillors require a strengthened position to be able to secure the accountability of others and again this role must rest with councillors individually and not just collectively in scrutiny.

Shaping and Influencing Policy and Decisions of Other Bodies

There is a clear link between what councillors told us about their efforts to secure the public accountability of others and what councillors do to shape and influence the policy and decisions of other agencies and bodies. The process of councillors attempting to exert influence over outside bodies is a different one to the processes of holding the same organisation to account.

Councillors, when influencing, are acting prior to decisions and policy implementation by others and are seeking to shape what others finally decide. As with public accountability, our evidence suggests influencing the decisions and policies of other bodies is also fast becoming a central role for councillors of all types (Torfing, *et al*, 2009). We received considerable evidence which suggests there is a similar distinction between leading and backbench councillors when it comes to seeking influence as there is in holding other bodies to account and the two processes are closely related. Moreover, the same frustrations and limitations on the role and powers of the councillor are apparent when seeking influence as when seeking accountability. The importance of being able to influence other agencies was stressed by a councillor who commented:

> *We can and must be able to influence what others are doing in our cities. It takes time and a lot of work to bring people together but we can do it. One project took over 18 months of getting people together many times and yes, banging heads together. There's always resistance but you have to work to overcome it, otherwise people just go off and do their own thing and nothing is coordinated or linked* (Labour Borough Leader).

Leading and backbench councillors are engaged in trying to influence not only individual external decision-makers, but also in bringing together and trying to shape the actions of a complex network of organisations beyond the council, so they reflect some coherent whole. We see here the same strategic and operational distinction as we saw in the process of securing public accountability. What is different is councillors are not exploring a decision to find out why it was made; rather they are attempting to ensure others make a decision or agree a policy that reflects either the policy goals of the council, or has a positive effect on a council ward or division.

Our evidence also suggests work beyond the council is taking up an increasing amount of councillors' time as they engage with a myriad of organisations of varying shape, size, scope, purpose, powers and resources. That engagement takes them into arenas where they must negotiate, compromise, seek to broker deals and shape the preferences of those with whom they engage and do this by using their elected office as leverage to enter conversations in the first place.

Leading councillors will, more often, conduct such negotiation processes at a strategic level: that is, they are seeking to influence other significant players in the locality to make decisions and commit resources to projects the council wishes to see developed. Or, leading councillors will be engaged in brokering agreements between numerous players to bring together their often disparate and separate interests into some cohesive whole for the benefit of the locality (Berg and Rao, 2005). The external leadership role of the councillor is one that brings the focus of the council to bear on specific sets of problems the council lacks the resources or powers to deal with alone.

Again, we find councillors engaged in activity where they lack official or statutory power to enforce their views or to bring others to the negotiating table. It is the electoral mandate of the council and of the individual councillors that is used here as leverage to encourage others to participate. In addition, councils do have their own resources they can contribute to solving any problems and that also attracts others to engage with the council and councillors. A council leader summed this up by commenting thus:

> *The majority of my time is now spent talking to all sorts of organisations, companies, groups, any one that we can bring together for the benefit of the area. One day I'm talking to a major multinational company about employment, the next the health service about the Sustainability and Transformation Plan, the same day to a voluntary group or [named organisation], anyone and anything. I do have trouble sometimes with some organisations who don't want to talk – but that's normally when they have something to hide. You just have to keep pushing until they realise you're not going away. Most organisations want to talk to us, they come to us or readily accept an invitation to talk ... the best negotiations are when all partners are in the same room – we just thrash things out. I'm spending more and more time on this sort of work – but we [the council] can't do everything alone and every minute invested in negotiations can ultimately pay off for us. Sometimes I have to knock heads together and sometimes it would be really useful to say 'you will come to this meeting' or 'you will do x or y' but you keep going* (affiliation unknown).

The strategic influencing role of the leading councillor is replicated at an operational level by backbench councillors, who seek to draw together sufficient interest in problems within their wards or divisions and to encourage non-council bodies to invest time and resources in solving those problems. The same processes are undertaken at a ward or divisional level as those that take place on a council-wide or supra-council level. Councillors work to influence the decisions or activities of a range of disparate bodies and to encourage them to make decisions that fit the councillor's view of what is required locally. In addition, councillors will also attempt to bring to the negotiating table a range of bodies, not necessarily based within the ward or division, to broker agreement on developing the area or focusing resources on specific issues or problems.

Our evidence again showed councillors are spending more and more time seeking to influence others, broker local deals and interacting with numerous local bodies. It is the position councillors hold, as an elected representative, that enables them to operate as a coordinator of the activities, decisions and policies of others and to focus them within wards and divisions on specific problems.

We found that for councillors whether acting with a strategic or operational focus – council-wide, or ward based – attempting to influence and shape the decisions of others would be

untenable without holding a locally elected office. There is most certainly a moral and political leverage that goes with the office of councillor, but our evidence suggested councillors have different experiences of the value of the office they hold when seeking to influence others.

Many councillors who submitted evidence had found being a councillor makes very little, if any difference to gaining access to outside bodies, obtaining information from them or being able to engage in meaningful discourse. Some councillors report they have been side-lined, ignored or deliberately excluded by organisations such as the NHS, public utilities, transport bodies and private organisations. But as usual the pattern was scattered with outposts of the same organisations behaving differently to councillors in the same area – this is particularly the case with large, multi-faceted organisations such as the NHS.

We also heard evidence which suggests councillors are, by contrast, welcomed by other organisations, provided with information – albeit often filtered and limited – and able to engage with the senior executives of organisations that they approach. The lesson is that holding the office of councillor is no guarantee of access and ability to engage with various public and private bodies and holding the office of councillor does not mean the councillors will be automatically excluded either.

One councillor summed up his experience thus:

> *Being a councillor doesn't mean anything outside the council; I'm not sure it means much inside either. I get fobbed off on the phone, can't get access to some organisations and certainly it doesn't help to get information and when you say you're a councillor they think you're a lawyer or a psychiatrist. I'm spending more and more time trying to knock on the doors of various offices and getting those doors slammed in my face. If I could have one power it would be that we [councillors] had a legal right to information from any organisation we asked it from* (affiliation unknown).

Another of our councillors summed a more positive set of experiences, thus:

> *I work with a number of organisations outside of the council. Examples are the community association, volunteer and church organisations, the university and cathedral that are part of my division and various youth organisations. Also, I am a governor at the local secondary school. I probably spend at least as much time in meetings or contact with them as I do in council meetings, including preparation. In a lot of ways it is more satisfying than sitting in council meetings trying to persuade the ruling group of my point of view* (Conservative County Councillor).

Councillors are community leaders and they lead at a regional, sub-regional, council-wide and sub-council level, but that leadership role is not necessarily recognised or responded to by every

organisation (public or private) with which councillors are increasingly coming into contact. It is a frustration for councillors that, when attempting to influence, communicate with or gain information from other bodies, that the office they hold is no guarantee they will be entertained or listened to in those attempts. The office of councillor appears to offer no special privileges to the holder when it comes to engaging with others and that is a worrying feature of our local democracy.

Speaking with other councils

The evidence we received about councillors' interactions with other councils was confined to those two or three tier areas – county – district – parishes.

The overriding weight of evidence we received indicates being a councillor on a specific council is no guarantee, especially for those that were parish and town councillors only, that officers from other councils will respect and respond to a councillor from another council. That position is experienced by councillors both horizontally and vertically in that county and district councillors cannot guarantee being treated as 'councillors' by the council of which they were not a member and district councillors cannot expect to be treated as councillors when they attempt to interact with neighbouring district councils – at least not by officers. Similar issues also occur when county councillors attempt to speak to neighbouring county councils.

Election to a council is therefore bounded to the particular council but councillors understood this position, while at the same time using the membership of one council to try and secure information from, or influence over, another council on specific issues. As we have seen with other issues, there is no settled pattern of interaction for councillors with councils of which they are not a member and the interaction they have with other councils is often a product of the personal relationships they can develop with officers and members of other authorities. The need to develop good personal relationships with other councillors and officers on other councils was particularly stressed by parish councillors. That view was summarised thus:

> *I know people at both the county and the district. I have better relationships at the county because some of the people have been there longer and I've spent a lot of time nursing those relationships…It's worthwhile spending as much time as possible getting to know people. You can overcome any problems if you're working with people you trust. But, of course, when someone leaves you have to start all over again* (Parish Councillor).

While the situation may be expected – that officers from one council do not respond to councillors from other councils in the way they do to their own members – it is a cause of some frustration for councillors, generally. The situation creates tension among councillors – especially parish and town councillors (the relationships between parish and town councillors and district and county councils are explored in depth in section nine of this report) and undermines the office of councillor more generally. The problems generated when attempting to speak to other councils about policy, cross-border issues, shared service arrangements, or constituent's problems (for example education) often means such interaction is unproductive, frustrating and produces little positive results for councillors.

A district councillor summed this up in evidence thus:

> *If I try to contact the county it makes no difference to their officers that I'm a district councillor, it's hardly recognised on their radar. I'm a member of the public for their purposes and it's much the same talking to other district offices. I don't have to do that as much as contact the county, but it happens occasionally and again, I'm simply a member of the public phoning – being a councillor has no currency* (Liberal Democrat District Councillor).

Networks of councillors, operating across councils, do so in a much more informal fashion – often through their respective political parties but also across party lines. When meeting in this way however, councillors are not interacting with formal institutions although they may be conducting negotiations and debates that are later fed into and ratified by councils or other bodies. It is certainly the case that the informal interactions between councillors of different councils – vertically and horizontally – are more fruitful than interactions with council officers of other councils. It is also clear councillors experiencing problems talking to officers from other councils will use their political contacts on those councils to try and resolve the problems or to receive information.

The problems set out above do not appear to be widespread however, and that reflects the power of the informal councillor networks to resolve problems of access to other councils. Yet, the issue does serve to reinforce the points made in the previous two sections that councillors are not guaranteed access to, or information from, other organisations; nor are they guaranteed to be welcomed into discussions or negotiations with any outside organisations and may even find themselves deliberately excluded from direct involvement with bodies with which they wish to engage. It is not the tiered nature of local government structures in some parts of the country that generates the problems of access for councillors to other councils that has been identified. Rather, it is how the formal structures of local government sometimes fail to recognise councillors – from other councils – as authoritative politicians and do not always treat them as they would, for example, Members of Parliament.

The Community

The links councillors have with the communities they represent and govern operates on a number of levels:

- the ward or division
- geographical communities of place
- communities of interest
- communities of specific issues or problems
- the individual constituent

The roles councillors play in regard to each of these levels were clearly described and understood by our councillors who operated interchangeably as:

- community leaders and ambassadors
- support workers
- trouble-shooters
- brokers
- negotiators
- arbitrators
- spokespersons
- coordinators

Councillors play each of these roles in each of the levels of interaction they have with the community and the need to change roles and tasks adds a complexity to the work of the councillor (see, Heclo, 1969; Jones, 1973 and 1975).

Yet, councillors overwhelmingly stated the work they undertake with communities is one of the favoured aspects of their role and a part from which they gain considerable satisfaction, when solving individual casework issues and finding solutions to community problems or brokering deals for an increase in community based resources.

That community leadership/community representative role however, like so much of what councillors do, experiences different levels of support given to councillors from councils across the country. It is the support councillors receive, rather than the work itself, which generated criticism from our respondents. The following comments from councillors sum up the array of responses on the issue of support for community and case work:

Nothing, zilch, I'm on my own; the council provides us with equipment but there is no support in dealing with problems or in undertaking work with communities. I even have to pay to book rooms in the ward if I want to organise a meeting or piggyback on a meeting someone else has called and paid for somewhere to hold it (Labour District Councillor).

There's not much, really, I don't think the officers understand what it is to work with communities or what casework is really like – officers I approach about problems always try and help, but that's not the same. I need a secretariat; someone to chase things up, organise meetings, even keep a diary. We did use to have member support for that sort of thing, but most of it went a while ago because of the budget. The leader has support and the secretaries who work for him, certainly don't work for other members (Liberal Democrat County Councillor).

There is never enough support and what there is, you have to fight to get hold of; there is real pressure on us from the ward, all councillors experience that and it's as though it doesn't matter or doesn't it exist when it comes to what the council provide – I don't think the role of community leader is really understood (affiliation unknown).

These quotes summarise a bleak picture but must be balanced with more positive evidence we received which suggests in some councils, councillors are receiving sufficient support in acting and working with their communities. Indeed, a metropolitan borough councillor commented:

I'd rather do it myself, we have resources and an office with people to chase up issues etc, but if my constituents received an email from an officer after they'd spoken to me, it wouldn't look good. I can't send officers to community meetings instead of me going – it's hard work but it comes with the turf. There's a lot of this job [councillor] that you have to do yourself, especially if you want to get re-elected (Labour Borough Councillor).

It is clear support for the community work of the councillor is as important as support for the policy development work they undertake. When councillors speak about interactions with their communities – of whatever sort – they do so with pride and commitment, but also with a note that there is only so much they can do alone – especially if in full time work. It may be the time has passed where individual councils can alone decide what they will provide councillors by way of support in their various community roles and there needs to be a national framework put in place for support for councillors in these community roles.

There are a number of factors identified through out research which appear to cause such resource imbalance within different councils.. Firstly, a lack of culture within the Council of supporting elected members. Secondly, the style of leadership of the Council. Finally, councillors

themselves failing to make demands upon the Council of which they are a member to provide them with the support they need.

Proximity to the Public

The proximity to the public that is a unique feature of the office of councillor meant that councillors reported that the public, either within their wards or divisions, or across the council, recognised few boundaries between themselves and the councillor. Councillors, as public officials, find members of the public will approach them whenever and wherever required. One of our respondent councillors typified the evidence we received when she commented:

> *The impact on family life, the unusual working patterns and hours, the relentless casework, the damage to career prospects and having a virtually non-existent private life can take its toll and it does on many members, who just stand down when it all gets too much* (Liberal Democrat district councillor).

It was a consistent feature of our roundtable discussions with councillors and the written evidence we received that proximity to the public is something which provides councillors with intelligence about local issues, insights into local problems and views about council policy and networks of community organisations with which to work. Proximity to the public acts, in this case, as a resource for the councillor.

Conclusion

What is clear from our evidence is that while proximity to the public is a unique and special feature of the office of councillor, it is not without its cost to the holders of that office. It is an aspect of the office which is not fully understood or supported by councils themselves, at least in the experiences of many councillors.

While working with and representing communities, councillors face a complex set of demands which, although increased during times of austerity and financial restraint, are common features of their office, as our longer serving councillors attested. Councillors' work with communities often crosses the boundaries of what can reasonably be expected of politicians who must confront situations which previous experiences and training may not have prepared them to face.

It is very clear that an increasing aspect of the work of the councillor is in seeking to influence and shape the polices and decisions of other public, third sector and private organisations and to try to align their activities with the goals of the council. At the very least councillors will try to ensure that external agencies make decisions about resource allocation that meet local needs. Councillors are continually seeking to influence other bodies on a council-wide strategic level

and on a more functional basis at the level of the ward or division. In addition, councillors are also increasingly called upon to challenge other organisations and seek justification or explanation for their actions, inactions and polices. Councillors now are an important vehicle for ensuring the public accountability of those that spend public money, make public policy decisions and affect the public well-being but do so without any direct electoral mandate from the public. The electoral legitimacy held by councils and councillors means they are well placed to ensure the accountability of others beyond the council.

It is clear from our evidence councillors must respond to difficult, complex and personally draining circumstances. It is feasible that, with approximately 18,000 councillors across England, many find ways of avoiding or passing on some challenging work and some councillors admitted that some community work has just become too much for them to face, or the work involved in some case work too emotionally draining.

Such reactions are not a mark of failure; rather they are an indication of what our councillors face, some on a day-to-day basis and that their community work does not come within a convenient 9am to 5pm timescale. It is because councillors are so firmly rooted in their communities that they so intensely experience their community's successes and failures.

Our evidence highlights that effective support for councillors in their community work is required as standard for all councillors, otherwise we face a continued turnover in councillors, especially among the young and will face a recruitment crisis if councillors are unaware of the workload they may inherit and are not supported in dealing with community pressures.

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**

6   Speaking in response to central policy change

Introduction

The centralised governing system within which councillors operate means that they conduct their political activities with low levels of political and policymaking autonomy and constrained by frequent central government policy change. That centrally inspired change either directly affects local government and the role, tasks, functions and powers of councillors or imposes new requirements, regulations and duties on councils and councillors. With central government policy and legislative change across any policy field there can also be knock-on effects on what councillors can and cannot do or on the demands placed upon them as councillors. Thus, councillors inhabit a political office that is deliberately shaped, reshaped and reformulated to match any one central government's view of the role of the councillor and local government more generally; or it is reshaped by legislative and regulatory expectations.

The overall effect of central policy change is often to reduce the degree of autonomy councillors have in responding to local policy problems or the local manifestation of national policy problems. Moreover, central change can affect the ability of councillors to operate as politicians and to govern their areas based on local priorities and an electorally legitimised manifesto or set of policy promises (Gyford, *et al*, 1989). Our research found that even when government attempts to strengthen localism or to devolve powers from the centre, the role of the councillor is not always strengthened. Such a result occurs because centrally inspired change, even when orientated towards localism, is a top down process and often reflects a broad set of central policy objectives; or, central attempts at devolution and localism can be undermined by policy change aimed at other issues.

It is centrally generated instability in the roles, powers, functions and responsibilities of councillors and the instability central government can generate for councillors across a range of policy fields that constrains their ability to govern. It is in the regulations imposed on the activity of councillors and on local government as a whole that we see the low level of trust central government has for councillors and local government. Further, we see how a centralised state is intolerant of political difference and policy difference being adopted where local voters seek an alternative to the broad sweep of central government policy as it affects the localities.

If councillors are to govern their areas, then we need to listen to what they say about the impact of central policy control and change and the rest of the section relays those messages.

Central Regulation and Control

Expressed in all our roundtable discussions and in the written evidence we received were the frustrations councillors, on all types of councils, experienced from the array of regulation, oversight and control of local government exercised by central government. Similar frustrations were also expressed about controls not just over local government by the centre, but also over councillors themselves. Thus, there are two main components of central control which councillors experience and each is taken in turn.

Policy and legal control

It has been estimated that there are some 1,200 duties imposed on local government (HC Deb, 30 June 2011 cited in TSO, 2013a:8) and as a result councillors must operate in an increasingly narrow space where they have policy and decision-making discretion. What is stressed in our evidence is the centre can and does override the local knowledge councillors have about local policy problems and potential solutions and what they know of the needs of their areas. It does this to impose what are often referred to as '*one size fits all*' solutions to what may be national problems or issues, but which manifest themselves differently in different localities and as a consequence require separate solutions. Councillors, irrespective of their party and irrespective of the party in power, told us the imposition of central control undermines their ability to develop public services or take policy decisions that reflect both the views and the needs of their localities.

What is expressed is not mere political disagreement with the government of the day – we are not seeing a rerun of the battle of the mandates from the 1980s – but a frustration at the subservient constitutional position of local government that prevents the development of locally based solutions to local problems. There is a clear recognition of national government's right to govern nationally. What is often questioned by councillors is the depth of penetration of control by Westminster and Whitehall into local decision-making and the detail of that control. A councillor summed up the view of many of her colleagues when she commented about this situation:

> *There are so many restrictions on what we can do as councillors; the way our decisions are prescribed or moulded by the government is shocking. The public expect us to be able to do X or Y and it is impossible, almost, to explain that we do not have a free hand, even over the most simplest of matters. Take the issue of parking – people think we [the council] have a free-hand over parking enforcement but there are regulations, national policies all that sort of thing and even in parking we can't always respond to local needs. There was a report about parking by the government (sic) a while ago and everyone should read it to understand how things aren't controlled locally* (Labour Borough

Councillor) (TSO, 2013b) (The report referred to is a Transport Committee inquiry report).

Another example of central control raised by councillors as an example of central government's overly rigorous approach to policy control of local government is the council tax referendum requirements. As a councillor suggested, echoing many of the views we received:

Currently, with the reductions in funds from central government plus insistence that council tax goes up by no more than 1.9% without a local referendum, councillors are in a difficult position, in that there is a wide range of services that local people expect to receive, which it is arguable that there is now insufficient money to provide. We are elected and we have elections every year, the public get the chance to decide on what the council has been doing and by insisting on a referendum over council tax raises, that process is undermined. Now, if the council wished to call a referendum to test the views of local people that's one thing, but the government insists we do when we are dealing with centrally imposed budget reductions (affiliation unknown).

The questions raised by councillors are less about the legitimacy of central control and more about the need or desirability for Whitehall and Westminster to impinge so much on the policy discretion available to councillors. What is often made by councillors is a plea for a more obvious and clear separation of powers and responsibilities between central and local government and for a far lighter touch from government over the policy control of local government than is currently the case. As another councillor suggested:

The centre needs to trust us more, just let us get on with things, set the broad parameters of what needs to be done and the standards and just let us get on with it. There has to be choice though to reflect local political views otherwise there's no point in local elections. At the moment, we are constantly told [by officers] that we can't make certain decisions or do certain things because the law doesn't allow it or regulations say it has to be done this way. Have you seen some of the regulations we face, the detail is incredible (affiliation unknown).

There is a second plea made by our councillors: for consistency and a period of stability from government and for new governments to avoid the temptation to overturn what often appeared to be every facet of their predecessors' policies, as they affect local government.

Central Policy Change and Councillors

Councillors understand the need for a national legal and regulatory framework that surrounds the office of councillor and for those regulations to cover matters such as allowances and ethical standards and issues such as public attendance at meetings and access to information. Indeed,

there is widespread recognition, given there are some 18,000 councillors across England, that not all will be paragons of virtue and the wrongdoings of a few do reflect badly on the entire population of councillors. Yet, there is a very strong feeling of the centre displaying the same heavy hand with which it oversees policy decisions by local government. The view is widespread that government reacts to either problems or perceived problems of councillors' activity in an overly centralised fashion.

There are however, some contradictory messages in the evidence we received. One current of opinion is that central government is far too prescriptive when it comes to aspects of controlling councillor behaviour, with pleas made for more local oversight of how behaviour should be regulated and what restrictions should be placed on councillors. In other words, shifting away from central and national regulations. Summed up by a councillor thus:

> *Set a broad framework that you [government] expect councillors to abide by and let us work out the details of how and how it will operate* (Independent District Councillor).

The other identifiable current of opinion from our evidence was for more clarity from government regulations. Most often the demand for clarity was made by councillors in regard to new legislative demands which councillors felt had not been properly or fully explained or which were vague and requiring more detail to be understandable. That view was summed up by a councillor thus:

> *When the new ethical standards were introduced and the whole business was localised, we had no idea what was supposed to happen. We needed to see government regulations about how the system should work and it was very blasé about it: 'oh we've localised that, sort it out yourself'. Yeah, ok, but what if we got it wrong, they wouldn't be so blasé then, no there'd be trouble* (affiliation unknown).

Councillors often expressed these contradictory views: a desire for greater freedom from central control at the same time as demands for guidance and regulations about what the government expected and how any new initiatives should be introduced and operationalised. What such contradictions expose is an uncertainty among many councillors about the limits of their ability to act and about their role more generally. It also indicates a councillor population that experiences the uncertainty generated when the centre continues to shape and reshape what councillors can and cannot do and how they should undertake the changing roles for which they are responsible. (Barnett, 2011) There is however, a desire among councillors for certainty and consistency about their office and roles and for greater local shaping of their office to suit local circumstances, within a broadly set national framework.

Localism

Linked to discussions about central control and regulations are councillors view about localism and particularly central government's approaches towards, and definitions of, localism. Councillors are sceptical of any government's claims of pursuing a 'localist' policy and that scepticism was not confined to one party or aimed at one government. Councillors express the view that the target of localism has not been local government; rather, local government is often circumvented and localism aimed at communities (see, Lowndes and Pratchett, 2011). Empowering communities without empowering local government to be able to meet the demands that arise from communities is seen as an incomplete process and one which displayed the centre's distrust of local government. There is a disjuncture between localism aimed at communities and devolution aimed at local government (see the next section) which caused councillors considerable problems, as one councillor summed it up:

> *People already think we [councillors] have a magic wand to solve problems and many get really frustrated when we can't – they just think we can walk into the council offices and say 'do this' or do that'. The Act [Localism Act 2011] sort of made that worse as now people have this new set of rights which just ramps up demand. Localism doesn't seem to be about local government; it's more about taking power away from local government* (Labour Borough Councillor).

There is some scepticism about how localism should be used by communities and whether it would merely empower those sections of communities that are already active and engaged. Concerns are also expressed that claims to localism by government will increase demands and unreasonable expectations on councils and councillors that they lack the resources to be able to respond effectively (Jones and Stewart, 2012). It is also stressed by councillors that they are already working at full stretch in terms of engaging with communities, or as it was put by one district councillor: '*localism is what we do, every day*'. In other words, councillors are vital to successful localism, they are the ones who build the alliances within communities, or forge agreements and arbitrate local issues.

Our councillors described localism as a part of a political approach, about the way in which local politics was and should be conducted – for councillors, localism is about the culture of localities and the culture of an approach to local politics. What is also articulated by councillors is that culture and an approach to local politics can only take councillors so far. Without the powers and responsibilities to respond to localist pressures, councillors and communities will ultimately be frustrated. Councillors also understand that localism means doing things differently in different

places and therefore it means risking a postcode lottery – different quality and types of services and different responses to policy problems, operating across the country. The spirit of localism, for councillors, is the toleration of difference in policy and services across the country but few of our councillors believe government is ready for such diverse localism and that governments, of all colour, are far too concerned with a standard model and approach to services and standards across the country.

What is very clear from the evidence we received is that councillors distinguish between the party in government in Westminster and the permanent civil service in Whitehall. While governments may display more or less localist views, councillors recognise that the successful development and implementation of localist policies also rests on the civil service acting within a localist frame of mind. It is a widespread view that governments may appear to be committed to localism but unless that commitment is replicated within and across the civil service then localism as a concept will fail.

Finally, our research shows some confusion existing among councillors as to what government means when it uses the term localism and about how committed governments are to localism (see, Hildreth, 2011). There needs to be greater clarity and importantly consistency from both Westminster and Whitehall about localism and, for councillors, governments need to relinquish some control and oversight of local government. Without greater freedoms for councillors then it is unlikely the pool of potential candidates will increase, public interest and engagement with councils unlikely to be stimulated and less and less likelihood that local government will be meaningful to citizens and communities. A borough councillor summed up the evidence on localism thus: *we are all localists now, except no one seems to know what that means, how it will work or why and then it's just an expectation of being different.*

Councillors indicated that localism from successive governments has delivered little real change for local government or for councillors and the general lack of reference to the Localism Act or the general power of competence, by councillors, was striking. The discussion with councillors about localism, leads logically to a consideration of councillors' reflections on the current devolution agenda.

Devolution

As we conducted our research throughout the whole of 2016, devolution, devolution deals and combined authorities were fresh in the minds of all our councillors. What is salient is that not only is disagreement and/or conflict about the agenda and about devolution generally occurring between political parties, but that much of the conflict over devolution has been both intra- and inter-party. Councillors across the party spectrum express the same support for devolution, the same frustrations about the process and the same scepticism about the government's willingness to devolve powers to local government. There were no dissenting voices about the need to devolve powers in what one of our councillors summarised as *'one of the most centralised democracies'.*

There is a genuine and enthusiastic demand among councillors for greater devolution and for more powers and responsibilities to come to local government and a palpable frustration at the centre's unwillingness to relinquish control and to trust local government to do its job. There were only a small number of councillors concerned that current devolution policies could lead local government in different parts of the country to be responsible for different types of services and policy, or be configured in different ways through different combined authority deals. What was of greater concern was that there are no guarantees the areas of responsibility councillors see of greatest importance for devolution will indeed be devolved. Councillors are clearly concerned that while responsibilities best run locally are devolved from the centre, the resources and autonomy required to develop those responsibilities - to suit the needs of the localities - will not be forthcoming.

Councillors make very strong cases that major public services should be delivered, organised, overseen and run at the closest possible level to those receiving said services and at the same time locating public services in such a way would reinvigorate local government and democracy. As a councillor explained:

> *If too much is provided by government, what's the point of local government? It's not that we can't deliver; it's that we're not trusted or even wanted to deliver. If local people knew the council were responsible for the major public services then why wouldn't they vote in local elections? Devolution isn't just about making public services better; it's about saving local government* (Labour Borough Councillor).

The issue of central government trust is something councillors across the political spectrum reiterate and longer standing councillors who have served as councillors under governments of different parties are quick to admit that even their own party, when it is in power, does not appear to trust local government.

The current devolution agenda is criticised, by councillors, equally for being: a top-down process controlled by central government; centrally enforced devolution; lacking in capacity to negotiate effectively with collections of councils; lacking strategic vision or purpose; under-resourced; too heavily focused on structure; and, only having a growth focus rather than a commitment to genuine devolution. On the other hand, councillors also see the current devolution process as: allowing more services to be provided under more local control; bringing councils together and

providing a framework for joint-working; stimulating new thinking; and, challenging historical centralisation.

The Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) also expressed their concern about the marginalisation of councillors that could occur in the devolution process and pointed out:

> *We need to ensure our elected councillors are not set up to fail (in regard to seeking devolution deals). Councillors from all parties have expressed their concerns about the devolution process. They have a clear democratic mandate and should be listened to. We are not convinced this has happened to date regarding devolution* (ADSO written evidence).

The current devolution agenda to English local government far from matches the devolution of governing capacity to Scotland and Wales. Yet, councillors are hungry for greater responsibilities and powers because they see the first-hand value to local economies, community well-being and service improvement of decisions being taken closest to communities and citizens, even if that involves an exhaustive and exhausting process of negotiation with central government.

Devolution Deals

When councillors spoke about devolution they distinguished between devolution as a positive and favourable process that could improve both local public services and local democracy and 'devolution deals' as part of the current central approach to devolution. The deal-making process and the negotiations involved in the development of a combined authority are the focus of much criticism aimed both at government and the civil service. The top-down nature of the process is highlighted as something which indicates the government is not committed to devolution as a process, rather as a way of restructuring and configuring local government and for circumventing existing councils.

Councillors expressed the view that the negotiation process was insufficiently open or flexible to allow for the expression of differences between and within councils and that the process ignored existing local government structures, leading some to conclude devolution was for the benefit of the government rather than local government. The complexity of the process added to the feeling expressed by many councillors that there had been insufficient time to prepare deals locally. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority deal was consistently offered as an example of a group of authorities that, for many years, had been developing the links between councils and councillors and creating an infrastructure of cooperation that few if any other areas had in place. The original pressure from government to prepare and propose deals had to be conducted in a short space of time - 7 weeks - and although councillors recognise such a timescale may have been designed to deliberately speed up the process and focus the minds of

those in local government, there is a plea made for a more organic approach to devolution. As one councillor commented: *why all the rush all of a sudden?*

The idea of an organic growth of devolution deals and for a more open-ended process, with councils being able to propose deals at any point, is expressed by councillors as a more *'genuine'* approach to devolution. Councillors also criticise their own councils for not engaging with backbenchers (leading councillors were often criticised for failing to keep backbenchers informed of what was happening), insufficient public engagement and for an inadequate consideration of local priorities. It also appeared to some that the deal process was officer-led rather than member-led and was a process which had seen devolution proposals emerge across the country that looked remarkably similar to other proposals (see, Wall and Vilela Bessa, 2016).

Finally, the issue of elected mayors for combined authorities is not a popular requirement among councillors who fear a loss of power and influence to a mayor and that it is a centrally imposed over what was supposed to have been a process of devolution. That councillors are generally not supportive of elected mayors, is not new (Copus, 2006; Copus, *et al*, 2017). But the willingness among councillors to reject, or withdraw from, devolution deals that would involve control over public services which they had for a long time desired, if mayors were insisted upon by the government, indicated councillor hearts and minds are far from being won over to this form of governance. Indeed, it is a testament to the pragmatism and skill of those councillors who have brokered and agreed deals with mayors to accept a style of political leadership to which they object in order to secure the benefits of a devolution deal for their areas.

The lessons that can be learned here from councillors are that if devolution is to be a genuine process it cannot be led by government for government policy objectives or purposes; an open-ended offer of devolution, allowing councils time to build relationships and the infrastructure required, is preferable to artificial deadlines; devolution requires a focus that is generated locally rather than a national focus on economic growth; councillors and the public must be engaged in the process; and, if the government is to press ahead with elected mayors then the devolution deals that are brokered must be very attractive to the councils and councillors concerned. There are more general lessons in the last point that should be considered if a government intends to see elected mayors spread across traditional local government – devolution and new powers must come with all mayors not just those for combined authorities.

Double devolution

Devolution to parish and town councils from principal authorities is, for councillors, an issue that is not resultant on, or necessarily connected to, devolution from the government to combined authorities. Rather, double devolution is talked about as a necessary step in both two-tier and unitary areas, where parish and town councils exist. It is recognised by councillors on principal

authorities and parish and town councils that devolution from the centre to local government does add an impetus to the process of responsibilities flowing to the parish level.

Support for double devolution is not confined to parish and town councillors alone, but found favour with councillors on all tiers and types of councils. Double devolution to parish and town councils is seen as a logical continuation of devolution from the centre. As one borough councillor (not also a parish councillor) suggested: *there is really little point arguing that services should be delivered and decisions made as close to people as possible, if you don't then go on and include parish councils in that process who, by definition, are closer than any to communities*.

As with devolution from the centre, the processes are not always straightforward. Given the diverse nature of parish and town councils – population and geographical size or budgetary differences, for example – devolution from principal authorities could not be negotiated with all parish and towns at once, rather individual negotiations were required. A county councillor expressed it this way: *there are over 260 parish councils across the county and although we talk to the county association, when it comes to transferring things to parishes we have to talk to them to see what they can take on or want and it's different in different places.*

What we see with double devolution is that similar complexities exist for counties and districts devolving to parishes to those that can afflict devolution from the centre to principal authorities and that careful negotiations are required if devolution to the parish level is to be achieved. An understanding is required by counties and districts – especially by officers – of the nature of parish government and the variations in parish capacity. Parish and town councillors often felt such an understanding was lacking. Yet, councillors on all types of councils see that double devolution is necessary to avoid the overall devolution agenda simply resulting in centralisation at the level of the district and county hall. Moreover, clearly articulated benefits are expressed by councillors of devolving to the parish level: cost savings, public engagement, service flexibility and responsiveness to local demands and views are seen as stemming from devolving to the parish level.

Double devolution did not always find supporters among county and district councillors. Not only is there opposition expressed to further devolution to the parish level but also to the existence of parish and town councils at all. Arguments opposing the existence of parishes are often based on what are seen as additional costs in having a third tier of elected local government (contradicting our findings that councillors believed devolution to parishes could also save money), duplication of effort, opposition from parishes to principal authority policies or decisions and that co-option to parishes and uncontested seats undermined parishes as decision-making bodies. Such arguments are also levelled against the formation of new parish and town councils which again are not universally popular among district and county councillors (the parish response to these issues is explored fully in section nine).

The existence of some 90,000 parish and town councils across the country and their vast diversity makes double devolution a complex process and a process whose benefits are contested among some councillors. It is also sometimes the case that principal authority councillors and officers are not always fully aware of the capacity or potential of their parishes, or are resistant to further devolution. On the other hand, double devolution and support for parishes generally was certainly evidenced among principal authority councillors who often welcomed parishes as allies in community governance and improving local services.

The nature of the relationship between principal councils and parish and town councils remains to be fully explored and understood. There is considerable potential at parish level for a valuable contribution to devolution nationally as well as ensuring that double devolution results in enhanced public engagement with local government, democracy and politics and improved public services, which again, remains to be fully explored.

Local Government Reorganisation

During the research for this report the Chairman of the Local Government Association (LGA), Lord Gary Porter, at an LGA event posed the question: *how did we get from the promise of devolution to reorganisation?* The research we have conducted among councillors provides some answers to that question. The evidence we received indicated that in two-tier areas reorganisation is a background theme music that often sets the tone for relationships between county and district but, as would be expected in local government, the relationships between counties and districts vary across the country and within counties themselves. That relationship partly stimulates a favourable or unfavourable attitude among councillors towards reorganisation whereas for some councillors reorganisation is a long-term objective that has been in existence, certainly since the Banham Commission (1993-1994) if not for a longer period.

Councillors, both county and district, spoke openly about the existence of, or their knowledge of, local long-term and long-existing objectives for reorganisation, which sought the creation of unitary councils – either county-wide or sub-county unitaries created by district mergers and county abolition. It was not merely poor relationships between county and district councils that stimulated such plans. There was a firm belief, expressed by councillors, that the 1972 Local Government Act and subsequent 1974 reorganisation, the Banham Commission and the 2007-2009 reorganisation were somehow unfinished business and that a trajectory for the creation of

larger unitary councils across England was an unstoppable direction of travel (see, Richards, 1975; Wood, 1976; Chisholm, 2000; Chisholm and Leach, 2008).

We heard from district councillors in particular of their belief that the county council, within which their district was located, had long held a view that the abolition of the districts and the creation of a county-based unitary would form the best system of local government. District councillors generally disagreed with this argument stressing that a county-wide system would be remote from communities within the county. We did however, hear from district councillors who were happy to pursue a two or three sub-county council unitary reorganisation within their areas. A district councillor summed up the view thus:

> *The county council has long wanted to be a unitary council and to get rid of the districts – they think they are superior to us and that we are a bit of a nuisance and make things awkward for them. They are not superior; we [county councils and district councils] have different roles to play, different functions and focuses and districts can be just as strategic as counties* (affiliation unknown).

Given the existence of a set of long-term objectives for reorganisation existing in some county areas, it is hardly surprising that discussions around devolution and the brokering of devolution deals have resulted in the re-opening of the reorganisation debate. Councillors explained to us that devolution negotiations require, among other things, exploration of the relationships between councils, the development of new structures in the guise of combined authorities, an examination of new service responsibilities and functions, and the balance between strategic and community thinking.

If a devolution deal cannot be brokered locally, or find acceptance with the government, then what can emerge is a return to the debate about the reorganisation of local government within a county and this is particularly easy to resort to if there is a pre-existing objective for some form of county restructuring. Indeed, some councillors expressed the view that devolution had been used as a cover for sparking a local reorganisation rather than any genuine attempt by some of the partners in the negotiations to secure a devolution deal. A district councillor commented: *I don't think the county were ever really interested in devolution – they just want to be a unitary and that was obvious very quickly.*

As well as long-term objectives for unitary based reorganisation being given a spur by devolution negotiations and more often by difficulties in those negations or the failure of them, other reasons such as austerity, financial constraints and arguments about efficiency, effectiveness and cost reduction, were often put forward by county councillors as a reason for reorganisation of local government on a county unitary basis. A county councillor summed this view up, thus:

We [the county council] commissioned a consultant's report and that proved categorically that we would save millions every year and would provide improved services more efficiently than currently exists in our two-tier structure. We need reorganisation before devolution (Conservative County Councillor).

Another county councillor commented:

We need to have a council that can meet the demands of reducing funds and resources at a time when we are seeing increased demand for services and that simplifies local government; I think a unitary system does that (UKIP County Councillor).

Needless to say such arguments were countered by district councillors who pointed to county councils that were facing financial difficulties and stressed the need for local government to operate at a level closest to communities. Further, district councillors challenged potential savings that had been identified by consultant's reviews as being: *'unachievable', 'fanciful', 'inaccurate'* and *'the expected outcome of a paid for report'*.

Councillors from two-tier areas expressed a much-divided opinion about the merits or otherwise of another round of local government reorganisation. Opinion was not reflective of a simple county-district basis on the issue as some of our county councillors were not in favour of reorganisation on a unitary county basis and some of our district councillors favoured sub-county district mergers. What we did find however, was a greater feeling among district than county councillors that mergers should not be forced and unitary councils should only be formed with the support of the councils concerned – there were also a few suggestions that the issue could best be settled through a local referendum.

We did find county councillors favouring forced unitarisation – that is the final decision on any proposals should be made by the secretary of state – irrespective of disagreement by any or all of the councils affected. Support among county councillors for a non-consensual approach to reorganisation reflected greater confidence among county councillors that the county council of which they were a member would be selected as the single-tier council for their area.

Interestingly the comments we received about reorganisation from councillors were focused on the needs of specific areas and were not followed by a call for a general reorganisation of the whole of local government. It is also clear reorganisation debates remain the source of considerable bitterness between district and county councils while they are being considered and can sour the working relationships for many years to come. It was also clear that party political control of county and districts was not a major factor in reorganisation debates – councils did not try to extinguish party political opposition through reorganisation (abolishing councils controlled by other parties) and some councillors claimed relationships between

districts and counties could be hindered by being controlled by the same party. It was put this way by one councillor:

> *It is because the county is controlled by us [Conservative] as well as the districts that put an additional strain on relationships – there are all the internal party tensions, personality clashes, policy differences to contend with too. Because one knows others well on the county it doesn't mean that relationships will go well – far from it* (Conservative District Councillor).

Not all relationships between counties and districts are poor as that is far from the case, but in the discussions about devolution and reorganisation (particularly the latter), tensions between the two tiers did display themselves very starkly. Devolution resulted in a re-emergence of old reorganisation tensions that had lain dormant between councillors and financial constraints and austerity have given a spur to further proposals and arguments for unitary reorganisation.

One of the more positive themes of the reorganisation debate among councillors was the request for a period of certainty and stability in the current system; many of our councillors voiced concern over the upheaval of reorganisation at a time when local government could least afford to be distracted. In addition, councillors stressed that where reorganisation might re-emerge for serious consideration, it has a destabilising effect on relationships between councils and on the quality of local government generally. As the following comments we received indicate:

> *Reorganisation is a distraction and what we really need is to know that the structure will be left as it is so we can get on with delivering for local people* (Labour District Councillor).

> *Although the county group's position is to support a unitary county I don't think it is necessary and it will cause too much resentment – we should make the system we have work instead of harping on about reorganisation* (Conservative County Councillor).

> *I remain firmly unconvinced it [reorganisation] would make any difference or that we would see the cost savings predicted – local government doesn't work like that, it's not a private company, economies of scale don't always happen. The system really isn't broken, it's just that some are not committed to making it work in the way it was meant to* (Liberal Democrat District Councillor).

> *It drives me mad, the county and districts constantly at war on the issue [reorganisation] which explains why we can't get anything done around here. Oh, they [county and districts] will make all sorts of promises about how good a unitary or two-tier will be for*

parishes and they promised the earth a few years ago – what happened? Nothing! Forget reorganisation and get on with the day job (Parish Councillor).

All this [local government system] changed over the years from the 1960s to today's position where local councils are lost (Parish Councillor).

A number of things about the reorganisation debate are certain; the outcomes of reorganisation are unpredictable, the benefits claimed for it are not consistently supported by research, the negative effects on local democracy are often down-played or ignored and that questions about size or unitary status are the wrong questions to ask about local government (Chisholm, 2000; Dollery *et al.,* 2007; Baldersheim and Rose, 2010; Andrews and Boyne 2012; Denters, *et al*, 2014).

Conclusion

Councillors experience considerable frustration at the amount of central government interference in their day-to-day activities and in their ability to shape policy and financial decisions to meet local needs. The frustration councillors experience cuts across the political spectrum and arises from the actions of central government generally in controlling local government. Councillors do not challenge the centre's right to govern nationally and there is no resurgence of the centre-local conflict of the 1980s developing. There is however, a clear and consistent demand from councillors for greater local autonomy and discretion and for government to set broad frameworks within which local government could then operate, without the need for detailed regulation and control.

Councillors interpret intrusive government regulation and control as indicating a lack of trust in them and a lack of trust in local government more generally. Councillors stressed that, the lack of trust was indicative of a culture of centralism that exists in Westminster and Whitehall, which will continue to exist despite current central policies towards local government. Alongside the call for a culture change at the centre in regard to local government, there is also a growing demand among councillors for a period of stability and for the flow of regulation, control and change to ease. The continual change and upheaval in central policy either towards local government, or over the policy areas for which local government is responsible, provides an uncertain territory in which councillors are expected to navigate while waiting for the next change to arrive. There is a call from councillors for a clearer division of labour between central and local government and for greater local self-determination as a result of that clearer division of labour.

Councillors expressed some doubt over both the localism and the devolution agenda as representing a clear policy path towards greater local government freedom and autonomy. The interpretation of localism held by councillors and government differs in some respects; for councillors localism is about the toleration of policy differences across the country and the ability of councils to be able to respond to local needs and priorities; for the government localism appears to be a means of diluting the power of local government and of bypassing councils to

give powers directly to communities. It is not that passing powers down to communities is something councillors generally oppose, far from it, but that localism should be left to local government to develop as a strategy for community engagement.

Councillors expressed considerable support for devolution from the centre and for having the ability to be able to negotiate with government about the content of a devolution deal and associated budgets, to suit the needs of specific areas. Some scepticism is expressed by councillors that the process of devolution is top-down and something which is being done to local government; rather than a process which signalled a fundamental change in attitudes by centre about the role and purpose of local government. There was a call made by councillors for an organic growth of devolution deals and for a more open-ended process, to replace the current centrally-driven approach.

Councillors want to spend sufficient time developing devolution proposals, engaging with the community over those proposals and securing the right territorial configuration and then be able to make an approach to government at any point, rather than be constrained by a centrally set timetable. There is also some scepticism about the permanency of the policy and of devolution itself and that some future government may simply start to re-centralise if it did not see the benefits to its own position from devolution.

Double devolution – devolution to parish and town councils – as part of the overall process of devolution found supporters and opponents among all councillors, including parish and town councillors, and across the political spectrum. Enthusiasm for double devolution is seen by councillors as a way of ensuring services and decision-making responsibility are located as close as possible to the citizens and communities involved. Councillors supporting double devolution recognise that resources are required to make the process a success and sufficient time is required for negotiations to take place between principal councils and their parish and town colleagues. Those expressing a more sceptical view of double devolution do so either because they are principle authority councillors who do not welcome parish councils as part of the local governing system; or, are parish and town councillors who feel the principle councils with which they deal have used devolution locally as a cost cutting devise and as a way of shifting costs onto the parish or town council.

What emerged very quickly in the discussions about devolution was, for councillors concerned, how rapidly the enthusiasm for discussing devolution from the centre had deteriorated into a debate about the possibility of a round of local government reorganisation. Councillors are certainly divided over the issue of the necessity or desirability of reorganisation. Although the type of council of which a councillor is a member is a good indicator of their position on reorganisation in terms of favouring county based unitaries (county councillors), the continuation of the two-tier system (district councillors), or the creation of sub-county unitaries (supported among our respondents by both county and district councillors), it is not a consistent

predictor of position. Neither is party affiliation. Support and opposition existing among councillors regarding the reorganisation of local government results from a complex array of factors: political values; relationships between councillors and councils in any given area; ideas about the role, purpose and value of local government; and, responses to government policy change.

It is clear from our respondent councillors that reorganisation is one of the most contentious and divisive issues in two-tier areas but it is an issue that does not seem to go away for councillors; rather lies dormant until opportunities and circumstances arise for it to re-emerge. Moreover, reorganisation is an issue which often rests on a long-held folklore-like belief that bigger local government is better – a belief not supported by the results of long-term research (Nielsen, 1981; Vince, 1997; Oliver, 2000; Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011; Rysavy and Bernard, 2013).

In talking to us about reorganisation, councillors have shown the politics of the localities is as big a contributor to the debate as more technocratic arguments about costs, efficiency and effectiveness. It is also clear councillors and local government generally would benefit from an end to the constant re-awakening of the debate but that end should not come from a national reorganisation, rather from the centre relinquishing control over local government structure (see, TSO, 2013a) and for veto power over reorganisation to rest with a single pre-existing council or a local referendum. Without an end to the debate in this fashion – which avoid making English local government, already the largest in Europe, significantly larger – reorganisation will always have the power to derail important policy initiatives such as devolution of more power, responsibilities and budgets, to local government.

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.**

7   Speaking about perceptions

Introduction

Councillors expressed to us the uncertainty of the changing environment within which they operate and how that changing environment has shaped the way their office and activities have come to be seen and interpreted by others. It is clear the office of councillor and the holders of that office no longer have the political and social status that was once the case and even younger and newer members are concerned about the perceptions of them and their office that exist (Lee, 1963; Jackson, 1965; Hennock, 1973). The way in which specific groups view, perceive and understand (or misunderstand) councillors has an effect on what they are able to achieve, particularly when operating outside the council. In particular, the perceptions and opinions held by the public, the media, the external bodies with which councillors interact and the perceptions that Westminster and Whitehall have about councillors, their work and motivations and their value to the governance of the country, shape the environment within which councillors operate and influence their effectiveness.

While the status of councillors has no doubt declined over the decades, that decline is aided by any misconceptions about councillors held by the public, the media, external bodies and Westminster and Whitehall. Indeed, a vicious and self-fulfilling circle is created from misconceptions about, and poor perceptions of councillors which further undermine the status of those we elect to serve and govern us locally. There are some 18,000 councillors across England and therefore we can expect from that group to see a reflection of the range of human and personal strengths and weaknesses that can be found anywhere. What councillors are concerned about is that a negative perception and inaccurate understanding of the councillor population can create a broad image of the councillor which then tempts government and other organisations to further undermine the office.

Councillors' concerns about the perceptions held of them by public, the media, external bodies and Westminster and Whitehall are not merely vanity or a misplaced sense of importance. Rather, those concerns are based on an understanding by councillors of the importance of how they are perceived by others because of the effect that has on what they can achieve locally (Klok and Denters, 2013). There is a fear of what central action may be prompted from misconceptions about councillors held at other levels of government. We now report what councillors have told us about the way they are perceived by others.

Public Perceptions

What is a clear and constant source of concern for councillors is their firmly held view of the low level of public understanding of their role and what it is they can achieve. In addition, councillors identified what they perceived to be their own low standing in the eyes of the public, partly formed by unrealistic expectations of what councillors can achieve and partly by a view, which was widely expressed by councillors, that politics and politicians were held in low regard by the public.

It is not a superiority complex, or a case of over-blown self-importance that leads councillors to reflect on and disparage negative public opinion of them and their office; rather, it is a sense that a lack of public understanding and appreciation of the roles councillors undertake serves to further undermine the office, the office-holder, local democracy and councillor's personal effectiveness in office, as these comments illuminate:

> *I feel I'm a councillor under false pretences as the residents expect me to be able to do more that I have the power to do. We do not have a magic wand: I can't tell officers to sort out so and so's problems, even though so and so thinks I can; I can't tell officers, 'get that fly-tipped rubbish in the alley removed now' - I can report it and keep reporting it, but when people tell me about it they expect it gone the same day or at least the next day* (Labour District Councillor).

> *I have no idea where people get some of the expectations about councillors from, but they are unrealistic, simple as that* (Independent District Councillor).

There is a consistent call from councillors for greater public awareness and interest in not only what they are doing but also in local government more generally; indeed, for councillors the two are intertwined (Barron, *et al*, 1991). What councillors can achieve for their constituents – both in problem solving and policymaking – can be reflected in broader public attitudes towards local government; as one councillor put it: *If I fail, the council fails*. At least that is in the mind of the particular member of the public.

In the reflections and evidence we received there is considerable frustration among councillors about public perceptions which are focused around three main issues of what councillors can achieve:

- for individual constituents
- in solving broader local problems or issues
- through input to council policy

Councillors also recognise the blurring of the edges between what they can achieve in solving constituent's personal problems and resolving local issues and their input to, or responsibility for, policy, especially where some constituents' problems might be caused by policy decisions of the council (parking was an often-used example of the latter). A London borough councillor condensed councillors' views about these dimensions of public perception, thus:

> *There continues to prevail an opinion, especially amongst the older generation - and my borough has the highest elderly population of any London Borough - that the council possesses far more direct powers over things like private landlords and planning legislation, while being completely unaware that the council is responsible for providing elderly care provision for those unable to support themselves in care any longer* (affiliation unknown).

Linked to the assessment that the public have too high expectations of what councillors can achieve, is the expression of concern by councillors that the public also have little or no idea of the day-to-day experiences of the councillor and the workload with which they have to contend. As a district councillor commented:

> *The public don't realise and appreciate how stressful being a local authority member is, especially if you have a demanding ward or hold any position of responsibility* (affiliation unknown).

That comment found an echo from many councillors who stressed the view that there is little public awareness or understanding of the weight and complexity of the work they have to undertake:

> *It isn't just the odd council meeting, its reading paper work before hand and working out exactly what's going on; it's attending meetings with tenants' associations, residents' associations, community groups, governing bodies, action groups; it's meetings with council officers, the police, the CCG; it's trying to resolve people's problems; it's being stopped in the street and asked to explain why the council has done this or that; it's meeting with minsters; it's party meetings; it's a lot of meetings to be honest. But as long as I can get something done then it's worth it. The public don't see all of this, I'm not sure what they see, but it's not what we do* (Conservative County Councillor).

> *I was once accused of 'living off the rates', not that we have had rates for some time. I hadn't managed to get the council to repair a streetlight in sufficient time for someone and that's what I got: 'too busy living off the rates to bother'* (Labour Borough Councillor).

I'd been a councillor for about 3 weeks when I was told 'we never see you now you've been elected'. I wasn't expecting the weight of work myself so I don't know why the public would know what councillors do – but they should, they really should know; it would help people understand what local government is about and that would be a good thing (Liberal Democrat District Councillor).

Councillors do not demand public adoration for what they do and readily admitted they stand for the council as a personal choice and decision; but their views stressed the damage an inaccurate public perception of their role can do to local government and politics and government more widely. These comments from two councillors summarise widely held views among their fellow councillors:

One frustration about being a councillor is the lack of public understanding of our role and the amount of work involved, but the main frustration is the lack of government understanding of local government and the highly damaging cuts that have been made to our financial support, making our role even more difficult (affiliation unknown).

Some of the outcomes achieved for residents as a local councillor will never be known, or seen, or understood by the public, but they are there (affiliation unknown).

There is equal disquiet among councillors about the public perception of the remuneration regime for councillors and widespread public misunderstanding is seen as particularly damaging. What is clear from the evidence councillors presented is wherever councillors are located and whatever the local remuneration scheme and level of allowances, the public perception is of councillors as a group of full-time, salaried politicians receiving an income from council work that placed them in the higher pay brackets.

Councillors told us that estimates by the public of what councillors are '*paid*' ranged from: £65,000 a year, through to £87,000 a year with the largest estimate from a member of the public of councillors pay being £120,000 per year. Or, as one councillor reported being told by a member of the public: *I bet the sky's the limit for you lot, because you vote your own salary don't you*. Parish and town councillors in particular find the lack of public awareness of remuneration damaging to their office as many parish and town councillors told us they did not claim expenses.

Councillors struggle with the public attitude that it is income alone that motivates them to become councillors and to stay in office. Thus, councillors represent, govern and work on behalf of citizens and communities that hold them, often, in low regard; have scant understanding of the role, responsibilities, workloads, functions and powers of councillors; have little knowledge of the remuneration scheme to which councillors are subject; and, care little about the pressures to which they are exposed.

There is an alternative view however, and some councillors had fond stories to tell of thank you cards, or letters they have received from grateful constituents for solving their personal problems or resolving some local issue or conflict. Indeed, for many councillors, some slight public recognition for what they do is a badly needed pick-me-up.

Media Perceptions

The concern among councillors is the media – nationally and locally – suffer from the same low-level of understanding of the role of the councillor as the public and that there is also some misunderstanding about local government itself. Media coverage of councillor activities is seen, by councillors, as falling into three categories:

- Personal
- Political
- Policy

It is when reporting on councillors' personal lives that the media is felt to be the most intrusive and potentially the most damaging to councillors. The stories of councillors' personal activities are either positive or negative; with negative stories focusing on moral or legal wrongdoings by councillors; positive stories focused on issue such as: examination success, honours and awards received, recovery from illness, marriage and the arrival of new children. The view from councillors is that because they hold an elective office their personal lives are public property and so too are the lives of family and friends; and the media reports on those lives in a way they would not about those not holding elected office.

Councillors recounted to us examples where the local media, in particular, had branded them as (individually, not collectively): liars, dishonest, corrupt, '*love rats'* and cheats. We also heard of successful cases taken to the Press Complaints Commission by councillors.

Councillors however, see such personal intrusion as part of the *'turf'*. Indeed, while councillors also respect the press for uncovering wrongful behaviour, the main concern is that such media reporting creates an image of councillors as a group that feed into and is fed by the low-levels of public esteem in which councillors feel they are often held. As one councillor summarised it:

> *If the press were to be believed, we are all corrupt, two-faced, liars, only interested in lining our own pockets so we could pay to keep our lovers in the lap-of-luxury* (Labour Borough Councillor).

But there was also a balanced view expressed by one councillor who commented:

*Both positive and occasionally negative press coverage are part of holding elected office (*Labour County Councillor*).*

It is not the reporting itself that is the problem for councillors, who accept it is right for wrongdoing to be exposed. Rather, it is the cumulative damage such reporting does to the public reputations of hardworking and honest councillors, that is of concern.

When it comes to local politics, one of the unique features of the media – written and electronic - is the ability to make most councillors feel any media outlet is allied with their political opponents – whatever the affiliation of the councillor. We were variously told the local press: 'were all Tories', 'nothing but left-wing propagandists' and 'hated independents'. Similar views were expressed by councillors about the national press. The electronic media however, are seen by councillors to be less biased because it is a forum within which, whatever questions may be levelled, councillors are able to articulate their views.

Although party political criticisms made by the media – or criticism of a particular party's policies - is seen as an expected part of the councillors' experiences and interactions, many councillors expressed the feeling that the local media oppose them politically and in particular oppose the party in control of the council. Similar issues were raised by councillors in regard to council policy and although the line between political party and council policy can blur in the media – councillors distinguished between media opposition to individual policy decisions and a more fundamental opposition to the party in control of the council. That view was exemplified by two councillors who commented:

The local paper is simply against everything we do. The journalists seek to undermine us wherever possible. It's all political and they are all Labour party members (Conservative District Councillor).

The editor (of the local newspaper) is an old Tory. They've always been opposed to what we want to do and try and block us at every turn. I don't mind criticism, but this is out and out politics (Labour Borough Councillor).

Again, party and policy criticism is accepted as a legitimate role of the media but it is often the nature and the tone of such criticism that drew complaints from councillors, across the political spectrum. A link is drawn, at least by councillors, between the policy and party criticism they experience through the media with the more personally orientated reporting which serves to create an inaccurate image of the councillor.

The theme of an inaccurate media image of the councillor is also evident in discussions with councillors when they reflect on the way councillors are portrayed on television and on the radio. Examples were given from long-running soap operas where characters had decided to stand for the council. It is in these portrayals that councillors see the weak grasp of local politics held and therefore displayed by the media about councillors and the people that become councillors. Examples were given of soap opera characters being elected as councillors and immediately becoming the mayor or taking on some leading role – without serving a political apprenticeship; or, of characters being elected as *'independents'* in fictional areas that would be a party–fiefdom.

More troubling for our real councillors was the fictional portrayal of the type of character that becomes a soap opera councillor, who, in the words of one of our real councillors: *was always mendacious, tricky, pompous, bumbling, shady, self-important and somehow not up to the job.* While again for councillors this media portrayal came with the job, the worry was the image was seen as the reality by the wider public. The link between media image and public perceptions of the councillor were sharply drawn by those we spoke to about the issue.

All the more troubling for our councillors was the media and public image created was an image of councillors that was accepted and reflected by Westminster and Whitehall, and it is to that aspect we now turn.

Westminster and Whitehall Perceptions

The view we received from councillors was consistent in the conclusion that central government – MPs, ministers and civil servants – reflect a similar set of misunderstandings of councillors, their roles and what they can achieve to that existing among the public and media. That set of misunderstandings is more troublesome for councillors because they are held by those who take decisions about and develop policy that affects councillors and local government as a whole.

The view was often expressed that Westminster and Whitehall hold councillors in disdain, doubt their ability and competence and as one councillor forcefully summed it up: *civil servants and ministers seem to think we are thick, not up to the job, a nuisance and incapable and don't bother to disguise that feeling because we haven't all got a PPE from Oxford* (the councillor making that comment disclosed that they held a doctorate in politics).

This councillors' views were reinforced by a councillor who commented:

> *My main frustration is the lack of understanding by central government of the role I have as a county councillor and the financial responsibilities I have. It should be*

compulsory for a prospective MP to have served time in local government – many have no experience of what a county council does or the role it has (affiliation unknown).

Examples were given by our councillors of disparaging remarks made by ministers or former ministers about the quality or calibre of councillors and about the nature of the roles they undertake. It was put to us that, as well as a culture of disdain, there seemed to be a deliberate attempt to mock or belittle councillors. The view was expressed that, where the public hear national politicians expressing less than complimentary views about councillors and local government, it further undermines local politics and so reinforces a set of inaccurate negative views which serve to undermine still further councillors and local government. A borough councillor summed the situation up for her colleagues when she commented:

It is almost as though there is an unspoken campaign to undermine and belittle councillors, which is a very unhelpful thing. But, worse than being unhelpful, it makes it more difficult for us to do our jobs and is very de-motivating (Conservative Borough Councillor).

Again, the views we received from councillors were not that they are seeking high-level public recognition and praise for their work. Rather, they expect to be treated as equals and as serious politicians engaged in the governance of the localities and contributing to the governance of the country.

So, councillors feel as though Westminster and Whitehall neither understands, nor care for the role they have as local politicians, have little regard for their abilities and have a low level of understanding of the current pressures councillors are facing. Parish and town councillors were particularly scathing about what was termed the *'cavalier'* attitude and poor understanding of senior politicians and civil servants about the role, activities and purpose of parish and town councils (see section nine). It is generally felt among all types of councillors who spoke to us and submitted evidence, that their office is much maligned and woefully misunderstood by other levels of government.

Conclusion

Councillors spoke about three important sets of perceptions – those held by the public, the media, and Westminster and Whitehall – and how those perceptions can damage the standing and status of councillors and local government and hinder them in their work. It is also clear to councillors that the three groups with whom they interact collectively reinforce a set of inaccurate views about the work of the councillor and about local government generally. Councillors are not craving praise or even recognition for what they do, rather they expect their office, its roles, functions, powers, responsibilities and, importantly, its limitations to be recognised and accounted for by those with whom they interact.

There is a case to be made of a steady and malignant undermining of the status and responsibilities of councillors as elected politicians – which probably reflects a similar decline in the status of all elected officials. But it is a decline which, for councillors, has been accelerated by others and by the perceptions held of them, particularly at higher levels of government. With a councillor population of some 18,000 across England we will see the full range of human ability and failings, but those failings, such as they are, must be placed into the context of an environment, publicly and politically, which magnifies inadequacies and generalises from them across the whole of local government. Moreover, the limitations on councillors in terms of powers and responsibilities far from provide them with a *'magic wand'* with which to dispel local problems and perceptions.

What councillors did not demand, when talking about the perceptions others have of them and their office was a false status and reverence simply because they were elected. What they require is for others to understand what they do and, particularly when talking about Westminster and Whitehall – for an understanding of the effects of the decisions taken by central government on councillors and what they can achieve. What councillors called for was greater public, media and government understanding and awareness, and despite giving praise to the Local Government Association efforts with campaigns such as #ourday, that much broader public education about local government was required coupled with an end to the culture of disdain that permeates from central government.

Councillors expressed concern about how they were perceived by the public, the media, Westminster and Whitehall and how inaccurate views of 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.**

8   Speaking about the job

Introduction

It is in speaking about the multifaceted nature of their job as councillors and the pains, pleasures, frustrations, motivations, challenges and improvements they would like to see to the office they hold, that councillors have been the most revealing. It is the day-to-day experiences that councillors have relayed to us and the lessons they have learned from those experiences, that shone a light on how the office, powers, roles and functions could be reformed and strengthened to allow councillors to govern their areas more effectively. It is in governing their areas that councillors should be empowered and supported by their council but there is clearly a vast array of approaches existing across local government in supporting all councillors in what they do – not just leading members.

Councillors were equally as revealing about why they stand for council, what keeps them standing, what makes some of their number stand down and the frustrations they experience as a councillor. It is clear that for the councillor there are few strict boundaries between the personal and the political and that the facets of their life – council, personal, social, family, employment – blur at the edges. Indeed, for some the pressure of council duties and responsibilities and the way it impinges on other aspects of their life and the time it demands, becomes too much. Yet, for other councillors the challenges and frustrations of being a councillor and what they can achieve for communities, individual citizens and their own values and beliefs, means they simply come back for more at each election.

The financial costs of supporting councillors in their work – not just allowances – will always raise controversy but a choice exists: continue to experience local democracy on the cheap and to under-resource and fail to provide adequate support to councillors in what they do, with the deleterious consequences that would have on the effectiveness of councillors; or, accept the service councillors provide to the council and their communities is a service – albeit a political one – like any other service for which the council is responsible and resource it as such. Councillors themselves do not speak with one voice on this issue.

What is set out below, when councillors speak about their role, provides a valuable insight into how to improve the way in which councillors are able to serve, represent and govern their communities more effectively and how local government more generally can be strengthened as a governing institution.

Motivations for Standing for the Council

It is hardly surprising, when around 90 per cent of all councillors in England are members from either the Conservative and Labour Parties or the Liberal Democrats, that party affiliation and the desire to promote and implement the polices of a political party loom large in the reason why people become councillors. Membership of a political party provides a ready stimulus to stand for council and even the most reluctant of potential candidates can often succumb to pressure and encouragement to stand for election. It was also clear from what councillors told us that there are also in political parties, those members who require little or no encouragement to stand for election and will seek to be selected by their parties for any seat across the council area.

Thus, political parties provide a pool of both reluctant and enthusiastic candidates for council whose eventual arrival on the council is stimulated by the desire to pursue a set of party political objectives. We also found councillors wanted to engage with the *'enemy'*, that is to experience the cut and thrust of an election and of interacting with councillors from other parties with whom they disagree and doing so in the council chamber. Engaging in party political conflict is a clear motivation for many as these comments illuminate:

The council had been run by the Labour Party forever and I wanted to get involved, to argue with them, to show what they were doing and to provide a Conservative alternative. It's politics, it's about confronting those you disagree with and trying to stop them, or if that's not possible which it's not here, then having a good go at them (Conservative Borough Councillor).

I'm Labour through and through, always have been, and being a councillor means I can fight for Labour values, oppose the Tories and do that locally but also as a councillor I can oppose them nationally too, from the council – practically and by arguing against them. I want the Labour Party to win at any and all levels (Labour District Councillor).

We [Liberal Democrats] have a community-based philosophy about giving power to people and communities, we campaign actively in communities when you never see Labour or the Tories; we do it all year round. I stood for election because I believe in devolving power and that's what we offer, decentralisation and citizen control and you will only get that through the Liberal Democrats (Liberal Democrat District Councillor).

An equally motivating factor for some, though by no means all, was the desire to pursue a political career – either to seek election to parliament or the European Parliament, or more often expressed, a desire to secure higher office on the council – a cabinet or leader position. Those councillors that sought to develop their political career were very open about that ambition and other councillors were equally open about ambition among their council colleagues to develop a political career, within or beyond the council.

To some the council is a stepping stone to other offices, or provides a forum within which the desire to stand for other offices develops; for other councillors, the council itself is a satisfactory forum within which they can develop a political career. A question remains: why is it some councillors' political ambitions cannot be satisfied at the level of the council and what changes are needed in local government that might provide such satisfaction?

While there is a clear party political motivation for councillors to stand, and continue to stand for the council, what was surprising was that councillors offered, in addition to their political motivation, a wide range of reasons for standing and remaining a councillor, which were not related to party political activity. What was also surprising was that in our roundtable discussions these alternative motivations were often spoken about with more enthusiasm and intensity than party political motivations. While that assessment is a subjective one based on observations of our roundtables, it was certainly a consistent impression: political party membership is an important motivator but councillors were either reluctant, or did not feel it necessary to press the point. Rather, we found councillors presenting a series of motivations for standing and remaining councillor that were less about party and more about community.

A regular theme that arose from our evidence was the desire among councillors to *'give something back'* to the communities and localities within which they lived. Moreover, there was a consistent desire to improve, develop and strengthen their areas from a ward or divisional perspective, or from a council-wide perspective, or indeed from both perspectives. It was that notion of giving something back or contributing to the area that was particularly strong from all of our councillors and a vital motivating spark for them to seek election and then to seek re-election to the council. The position is illuminated by one of our councillors who commented:

> *I stood as I thought I had something to offer in terms of representing local people's views, helping people access services and also advocating for the right kind of services to be provided locally* (Independent District Councillor).

Another of our councillors summed up much of the evidence we received, thus: *When I first stood for election it was because I did not think the needs of my local community were being recognised* (affiliation unknown). It was that assessment that somehow there was something lacking in the way in which community needs were being recognised and responded to that resulted in individuals deciding the council was the right place to try and rectify that situation.

A Conservative councillor (sitting on a Conservative district council) told us she: *just didn't feel as though things were right and that change was needed and lots of people in my area knew I was a member of the Conservative Party and said I should have a go [at standing for the council].*

That comment illuminates the constant message we heard about reasons for standing for the council and was replicated among Labour, Liberal Democrat, Independent, Green and UKIP councillors we heard from; that encouragement from outside of the party, from friends, colleagues and contacts in the community, often helped make the decision to stand.

It was also clear becoming a councillor offered the potential of using a political office to stimulate change and improvement in a community and this should be of no surprise as our councillors had sought to change their areas for the better. As summarised by a councillor at one of our roundtables, thus: *it's because I want change and many people who are councillors are hardworking and really do their best and give things a good go* (affiliation unknown). But the simple motivation of wanting to make change is not sufficient as it must be possible for councillors to achieve change and development, and to feel they are doing so once they are elected. As a long-standing councillor commented: *to be able to both recruit and then to retain good councillors we need to make them feel that their views are important and that they can make a real difference to their council* (affiliation unknown).

Although the harsh experience and frustrations of being a councillor may wear down that notion of the ability to improve, it never disappears from councillors' frame of reference. As one councillor summarised it when speaking about the potential to contribute to the community: *In my view, there is no limit to what can be achieved as a councillor* (Conservative District Councillor). In addition, being a councillor is a way of articulating the views, opinions and values that emanate from communities and provide councillors with the opportunity to speak both to the council and community. A councillor summed this up, thus: *I'm not just a little voice in a big council but a big voice in a little community* (affiliation unknown).

In written evidence and our roundtable sessions it became clear that councillors are motivated by a number of factors to stand for election and to continue to seek re-election to office. There is likely to be however, one overriding or overarching reason for seeking election or re-election that stands out from the others and for councillors in England that reason is the political party of which they are a member. At least that is the case for our successful councillors, for as we know, a wider range of candidates presents themselves at local election time than are elected, candidates from smaller national parties, independents, single issue groups, resident's associations and community activists. Yet, our electoral system excludes those from council membership so we did not hear of their motivations, although a reasonable assumption is they share many of the same motivations as successful candidates.

Political parties then are an important stimulus to councillors in initially seeking office and then continuing to stand for election, but it is also clear that our councillor population is politically less than fully representative of the wide spread of party political views that exist across the country. What councillors had to say about broader interpretations of representativeness is the subject of the next subsection.

Councillors and Representativeness

Traditional representative democracy – and local democracy – is based on the election of individuals whose views are reflective of the political opinions of the voters and who then act as representatives within the framework of those views (Pitkin, 1972; Manin, 1997). Today however, representative democracy has come to be interpreted more and more as meaning the body of elected officials should look like or *'resemble'* the communities that elected them. The issue was explored in *'Councillors on the Frontline'* (TSO, 2012) and in other reports (DCLG 2007 and 2008) but councillors were themselves concerned to stress the latter interpretation and to call for a greater diversity among their numbers.

There is a desire among councillors for larger numbers of younger people to stand for council – although at what age a candidate counts as a *'younger person'* was not specified. In making such a call however, some of the barriers that prevented councillors as a body looking more like the communities they represented and again attracting younger people were identified.

It is the clash between being in full-time employment and the demands of council work that are identified, strongly, as barriers to younger people becoming councillors. More specifically, it is how the meeting culture and how the structure and processes of council meetings operate that is particularly identified as problematic for younger councillors – or indeed any councillor in full-time employment.

Councillors recounted the difficulties incurred in attempting to convince younger people they should stand for council while at the same time being honest about the level of work they are likely to find themselves confronting. One of the first questions asked by many potential young councillors, when others are seeking to interest them in election, is: '*how much work is involved and how many meetings will I have to attend?'* At this point the need to be honest with potential councillor recruits often loses the day. Indeed, many councillors recalled when being first elected that they were unprepared for the weight of work they were expected to undertake.

Part of the initial councillor work-overload seems to come from what many of our councillors describe as *'initial enthusiasm and over-dedication'* and the tendency, as a new councillor, to feel obliged to read fully everything that comes from the council to the *'last punctuation mark'*.

It can often take newly elected councillors a while to develop strategies of selective reading, or to focus on aspects of council work they find most interesting or important.

Despite councillors own strategies of dealing with the workload, the competition between employment and council work is seen as particularly troublesome for younger councillors who may be starting careers or have demanding jobs with little discretion about the hours they have to attend in the workplace. Councillors we spoke to are very aware of the differences that could occur between manual and office based employment although the latter, in the experiences of councillors, did not automatically make attending daytime or early evening meetings easier as the nature of much full-time employment demands the presence of the employee at the workplace.

It is also recognised that meeting attendance, as well as the other demands of council work, is more difficult for younger councillors seeking to establish their careers, than for those whose careers are already established, or for those who are coming towards the end of their working life. A councillor described the problem thus:

> *You have to make a choice – council or career – if you choose career you either don't stand for council or you can't participate fully; you become one of those councillors everyone moans about: never attends meetings, doesn't do anything, never seen, etc.. If you choose the council you might still be able to be in full time employment, but you're not going far in it; and if you really choose the council, well I've seen some give up work to be full-time councillors and that's fine, but then you don't become leader, or lose the leadership, or don't get reselected or lose an election – then where are you?* (Labour Borough Councillor).

That comment neatly encapsulates the dilemma faced by potential younger candidates and the decisions with which they may be faced at some point – become an absentee councillor, or forego advancement in job or career.

Councillors are well aware of that dilemma as the following comments indicate:

> *The younger members who also work find it difficult to attend meetings during the day due to the uncomfortable nature of working around office hours* (affiliation unknown).

> *Most people don't enter local politics for the pay, but younger councillors more than others need the income to offset reduction in hours at work etc* (affiliation unknown).

> *Standing for the council was suggested to me at a time when I was feeling stale about my main day job and looking for a new challenge* (Labour District Councillor).

The latter comment illuminates the point made to us that some councillors decided to stand for council because their current employment was dull, unfulfilling and *'stale'* and such councillors are more inclined to place council work above the demands of their employment.

Councillors are clear: it is both the weight of work and the structure of council meetings that are problematic in attracting younger people to become councillors and to continue in office and both these barriers require radical solutions if the age profile of the councillor population is to develop.

The question of gender and ethnicity was also mentioned by our respondents as issues which needed addressing but the barriers are seen as more complex than attracting more young councillors. The issue of the gender and ethnic representation among councillor population was also explored in 'Councillors on the Frontline' (TSO, 2012) and has been the subject of other reports (DCLG, 2007 and 2008) but councillors are still acutely aware gender and ethic representation does not adequately reflect the makeup of the overall population. We heard from councillors, especially those in the urban, more ethnically diverse areas, that political parties have actively sought to select council candidates from a diverse ethnic background and taken particular care to develop the ethnic (and gender) balance of the council. In some cases candidates themselves had taken the initiative without prompting. As one councillor simply commented:

> *I didn't think there were enough Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) councillors, so I stood so the BAME voice could be heard* (Parish Councillor).

We did not keep records of the ethnic or gender representation of those submitting written evidence or attending our roundtable discussions, but women were well represented at our roundtables and particularly so at parish and town council roundtables. As with young people and ethnic minority councillors, the councillors to whom we spoke recognised a need for more women to be as elected councillors and for more of a focus to be placed on recruiting women councillors by political parties or for women to be encouraged to stand as independents. A female Independent councillor commented:

> *I'm always encouraging women to stand as Independents; you don't have to worry about upsetting people in a political party or do what you're told by a party you can just stand. It's easier at parish level, I've found, to get women to stand. To be honest I don't know why more women don't just put themselves up as independents; then again, I don't know why more people generally don't put themselves up as independents either. I think it's the work of campaigning, I have to do most of it myself, not all, but most and that's hard for anyone; it's easier in by-elections, other independents can all chip in* (Independent County Councillor).

What is clear from what councillors are saying is there is a recognition that the current composition of the councillor population – while changing over time (see, NFER, 2007, 2009; Evans and Aston, 2011; Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014) – is still not sufficiently reflective of the composition of the overall population. There was a degree of fatalism expressed on the issue and a hope that during successive elections an organic change would develop. A rallying call was made by a county councillor who said: *I just want more people to stand; it is becoming more and more difficult to find people willing to commit the time and take on the job – we need more candidates whoever they are* (affiliation unknown).

One issue of particular note was a clear distinction that emerged between councillors about why the current composition of councils might need to develop and it comes back to different interpretations of the word 'representation'.

On the one hand, some councillors perceive that only people from those groups currently seen to be under-represented can legitimately speak for, and on behalf of, those groups – what we see here is an interpretation of representation that is much closer to injecting identity politics into local representative democracy.

On the other hand, some of our councillors saw the need to increase the diversity of the councillor population, not because only individuals from such groups can legitimately speak for those groups, but because the articulation of different voices, opinions and experiences are valuable when fed into local government policy development and decision-making. In addition, there is the need for all groups to be seen to be engaged in local politics to create an affinity between the represented and representatives.

Developing new interpretations of 'representation' is however, a highly political and politicised process and not all of the councillors we heard from accept that such reinterpretations are valuable or required. The matter for some stands on representation being a process of reflecting a set of political views and opinions in an elected chamber and through policy development. Increasing the presence of groups identified as under-represented could lead to a dangerous sectarianism and divisiveness and as one councillor described it:

> *We don't want to keep setting people and communities against each other. There is enough bitterness and conflict in politics as it is, if we have councillors thinking they are only there to represent one part of the community and not everyone, that will only get worse and it shows what a broken society we have become* (Labour District Councillor).

Thus, while there is a general consensus, among councillors that the councillor population does not currently reflect, at least in some areas, the composition of the local population (in some areas however, it does and more research is needed on this issue), there are divergent views about the merits of that disjuncture and particularly over how it should be rectified.

While councillors do recognise that specific barriers exist to women, ethnic minority and young candidates emerging, there is also wide agreement that the general workload and the time commitment involved in being a councillor acts as a general barrier to the recruitment of candidates from across local communities. It is to the workload and time commitment required by councillors that we now turn.

Councillors: Workload and Remuneration

Councillors rejected the idea that the term 'volunteer' provided an accurate depiction of the nature of the work that they faced. Councillors did not decry volunteers in any way; on the contrary, councillors praised the work of the voluntary sector within their localities and some had found their way to elected office through voluntary work within their communities, with standing for the council as a logical extension of that work. Much like great swathes of the voluntary sector itself, the work and office of the councillor had become more and more professionalised, skilled, demanding and regularised. The popular characterisation of the term *'volunteer'* often masks the commitment, responsibilities, dedication and professionalism of the individuals that undertake a particular set of roles and tasks and the term can be used particularly to undermine claims for effective and appropriate remuneration for councillors.

Councillors reported that they have experienced a steady increase in their workload and in the demands made upon them by council meetings, constituency work (case work and community leadership and engagement) and interactions with outside bodies. Longer-standing councillors are particularly clear that over two or three terms of office they have seen the demands made upon them and the time committed to council work, increase. As we saw in section five, working with a range of outside bodies is becoming more and more a prominent part of the time demands and workload of the councillor. That work extends far beyond being a council representative on an outside body in a formal council sense, to a much more complex set of interactions where councillors seek to influence, or hold to account, other public and private agencies. As one councillor commented:

> *The serving on outside bodies means that I am working every day of the week, weekends too and of course there are evening meetings to attend – Parish Council meetings, outside bodies where I represent the County Council and two health trusts of which I am a member. I believe that there must be a recognition of the type of work, the volume of work and the level of responsibility there is here* (County Councillor - political affiliation unknown).

The comment above echoed many of those we received from councillors who also mentioned that the work they undertake cannot be confined to office hours, but time has to be found, in whatever way possible, to deal with an ever expanding set of demands and workload. Studies have shown a steady increase in the number of hours councillors are required to dedicate to their work (Robinson, 1977; Maud, 1967; Widdicombe 1986; Young and Davies, 1990; Bloch and John, 1991; Young and Rao, 1994; NFER, 2006, 2008 and 2010).

What we also know is the differing methodologies employed in the studies of the time councillors commit to council duties, do not always capture the complexity of the workload and can underestimate the hours committed. In addition, the differing demands on different types of councillors (leadership, chairs, backbenchers) and the demands of different types of councils and different geographies and the socio-demographic makeup of particular areas, make generalisations about councillor workload and time commitment problematic. But, as a district councillor in her first term of office commented:

> *I realised very quickly that I had underestimated the time I'd need to give [to council work]. I knew councillors before being elected, of course, and I knew they worked hard, but it's not until I was elected and started with meetings and paperwork and case work, that I started to get an idea of how much was involved. It really is a lot of work that we expect people to do while they have* work *and families. I still couldn't really explain it fully to anyone who was interested in standing* (affiliation unknown).

What is needed to enable sensible policymaking around local government and the office of councillor is a clearer understanding of the workload that councillors experience and the time demands made on them by ever-expansive council work. As yet, we do not have that understanding, other than a knowledge that the workload is increasing and will continue to do so.

Alongside the discussions about increasing workload and time demands that councillors explored with us is the ever-vexing question of the system of councillor remuneration. Remuneration is an issue over which our councillors expressed disagreement. We heard two main currents of opinion about remuneration: one which recognises that to encourage more people to stand for election and to ensure the complexity and demands of council work are properly acknowledged, councillors require a robust remuneration system; and, another set of opinions which displays a form of self-denying ordinance that found payment for political work – certainly as a councillor – is to be avoided, or at least kept to a minimum to ensure councillors are not paid for the privilege of being a councillor. Such a view has gained some purchase among councillors due to austerity and the need to reduce expenditure on public services.

We heard a particularly energetic defence of a system of remuneration that recognises the professionalisation of the role of the councillor, which summed up the views of many:

Councillors are overseeing multi-million pound budgets; we are balancing complex financial pressures; we are making decisions that will affect our areas for decades to come; I saw somewhere that local government has 132 different responsibilities (or something like that) – how many private companies have that range of products or interests? We have to work with leaders of industry and public bodies on salaries of two or three hundred thousand pounds and we are on peanuts and they know it; we work with officers paid much more than councillors and they know it – the way we are paid, just doesn't reflect the reality of what we do (Conservative County Councillor).

On the other hand, there is a strong current of opinion opposed to increases in allowances or a radical change in the system of remuneration. A view is clearly held by some councillors that remuneration should be kept to a level that does not recognise being a councillor as an occupation or profession. The argument is both financial – recognising austerity – and ideological – a straightforward belief that public service as a councillor should not provide an alternative occupation to full-time work. That view was summed up by one councillor, thus:

Please resist the temptation to propose increases in Councillors' pay and allowances as this will add to the risk that councillors become political professionals. Councillors' remuneration should not be a living wage. If Councillors are to be part of the towns or districts they represent, if they are to understand the lives of their electors, and even mix with them at work, far better that they should work in the same places as them and experience the real world of employment (Conservative Borough Councillor).

The two sets of competing views expressed to us are difficult to reconcile, but the question of what is the most suitable form of councillor remuneration has troubled previous inquiries and reports as the nature of council work has changed over time (for example, Onslow 1929; Wheatley, 1969; Maud 1967; Robinson, 1977; Widdicombe, 1986; TSO, 2012). The debate still rages as the workload of councillors and the time demands made upon them increase. A thorough investigation is required into the nature of the remuneration system that is appropriate for the demands made on councillors, for the increasing workloads they face and for the professionalisation of the role that is taking place.

What happens next? Is there life beyond the Council?

As well as speaking about the practicalities of office, councillors provided us with lessons through what we were told about the reasons councillors do not seek re-election or, indeed, stand down through their term of office. The conversations we had with councillors identified

two broad categories of *political* and *personal* reasons why their colleagues had failed to seek re-election, or had stood down mid-term:

Figure 2. Factors leading to the decision to resign or to not to seek re-election

Personal	Political

• Weight of council work
• Time demands
• Unrealistic expectations or inability to meet expectations of being a councillor
• Lack of, or inadequate support for being a councillor, from:
    o The council
    o Employers
    o Family
• Harassment by constituents or media
• Job or career demands conflicting with council duties
• Change in family or life circumstances
• Health problems
• Moved from the council area
• A range of private personal reasons
	• Internal party democracy – or lack of it
	• Party discipline
	• Disagreement with the party group or the local political party on local or national issues
	• Disagreement with the national political party on national issues
	• Poor personal relationships with party colleagues
	• Failure to secure political promotion within the council
	• Frustration at the council having too little power
	• Frustrations that councillors had too little power
	• Poor relationships with officers

Councillors told us that many of their colleagues had left the council because of the strains of the *council-life* balance and particularly the lack of council infrastructural support in dealing with those strains. Some of the *personal* factors may be irreconcilable with council work – such as debilitating ill-health, for example, but others, such as weight of council work and time demands, can be eased if councillors receive appropriate and adequate support in their roles. The issue was illuminated by a councillor who commented:

> *The label of councillor doesn't mean anything, which means I have to work really hard to get anything done. It's the weight of work and the constant frustrations that are the problem…I don't see how anybody can be expected to take on this workload and work at the same time* (Liberal Democrat District Councillor).

Leaving the council because of *political* reasons may be somewhat more difficult to address, but it was clear for councillors, that some of their colleagues had left the council because of the workings of political parties. Political parties as disciplined organisations may create working conditions that do not suit the abilities or style of some of their councillors. Frustrations at the lack of power held by councils and by councillors were also identified as reasons for some councillors to leave the council. Linked to such frustrations was the increasing

amount of time councillors are spending interacting with public and private agencies over whom they have little or no power, but with whom they must share decision-making space.

It is likely, given more research, that a wider range of reasons will be uncovered as to why councillors decide not to stand again, or resign mid-term. Such research will also be able to uncover if there are separate and distinct reasons that make different types of councillors resign or fail to seek re-election and what reasons are distinct to gender, age, ethnicity and disability, and what reasons are common to all councillors.

Our discussions here with councillors have left a major question to be addressed: why do councillors fail to stand again or, worse, resign mid-term and what, if anything, can be done about it?

Finally, councillors also raised the prospect of how to replace the loss of experience and organisational knowledge when councillors resign, stand down, or are indeed defeated at the polls. While the latter is part and parcel of a democratic system, some councillors recognise the loss of some of their colleagues – for whatever reason – reduces the capacity of the council and meant those replacing them have to relearn what was already known.

A few, not many, mentioned the old Aldermanic system as a way of retaining such capacity. There is however, a need for greater understanding of what happens to former councillors and if there is a way in which their knowledge, experience and expertise can still be put to good use for the council of which they are no longer a member.

Conclusion

Councillors are very clear when speaking about the office they hold that they are passionate, enthusiastic and dedicated, and they see it as a way of improving the quality of life of their communities collectively and citizens individually. There was also a clear sense of pride emanating from many of our councillors about being a councillor and about what can be achieved in the office. They are motivated to seek office largely by party political reasons and by local issues and by a determination to contribute to the betterment of their areas.

There is a recognition and concern that the councillor population is not a microcosm or sociological reflection of the wider community and the councillors we spoke to are particularly concerned at encouraging younger people to stand for office and to stay as councillors.

There are a number of frustrations identified as not only preventing younger people from standing as, and staying, councillors, but which also exasperate most councillors: the time demands made upon them, the weight and complexity of the work with which they are faced, dealing with constituent casework (although an often-cited source of considerable satisfaction

when successfully resolved) and the question of councillor remuneration. In addition, councillors are also often frustrated by the lack of real power attached to their offices which is given as a reason why some councillors fail to seek re-election.

There are several structural deficiencies in their office of councillor which need to be resolved and the question remains whether resolving those issues should be left to individual councils or whether a national framework needs to be put in place. While national frameworks may sound more like a centralist than a localist approach, we do accept a broadly national framework for councillor remuneration, which councils can then operate within. That remuneration framework needs a radical overhaul, but we also need to consider a framework for the support that should be offered to all councillors, by their councils.

While what has been reported in each of the sections so far has drawn on the conversations and evidence we received from all types of councillors, including parish and town councillors, it emerged throughout the commission's research that there are specific issues that are particularly appropriate to the experiences that parish councillors have in their office. To ensure the voice of the parish councillor is not drowned out by councillors on other councils and the distinctive aspects of the role and work of the parish councillor are heard, section nine of this report, sets out the 'the voice of the parish councillor'.

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.**

9   Speaking as a parish or town councillor

Introduction

It was never our intention in conducting our research or in reporting our findings to separate out parish and town councils and their councillors. The voice of parish and town councillors - where that voice coincides with the voice of principal authority councillors – is heard throughout each of the sections above. Indeed, what is striking is how similar what parish and town councillors have told us through the research, is to what we have heard from councillors on principal councils.

Yet, it is also clear from the research that there are distinct and discrete experiences shared by parish and town councillors only and there are aspects of the role of the councillor and how it operates that also attach only to parish and town councillors. At least that is how parish and town councillors have explained it.

The existences of twin and in some cases triple hatters – where a councillor sits on a principal authority (or two principal authorities) and a parish and town council – makes distinguishing the voice of the parish and town councillor somewhat more difficult. So too does the existence of party politics on parish and town councils as the voice of the party councillor operating at any level is likely to echo that of the voice of party councillors at other levels of local government.

There is also the question of the size (and budget size) of parish and town councils which adds a dimension to understanding the voice of the parish and town councillor that resonates in different ways on different sized councils.

With over 9,000 parish and town councils across England and with approximately 80,000 councillors serving on those bodies which operate as the first level of local government, it is vital we hear and listen to the voice of those that serve as councillors at this level. Without an understanding of the specific experiences of parish and town councillors and without understanding what distinguishes them from other councillors (and where their work is the same), we are left with only a partial view of how local democracy operates and what is needed to support councillors in continually strengthening local government. Moreover, with so many parish and town councils and with such a diversity of size, budget, functions and services

existing among parish and town councils, we need also to understand the impact of that diversity on the world of parish and town councillors and the work they undertake.

The section is set out under a series of headings that were used as titles for each of the preceding sections so that the voice of the parish and town councillor can be heard on the same issues alongside the voices of councillors on other councils. In the rest of the section the term 'parish council' or 'parish councillor' is used to avoid repeating the term 'Parish and Town' unless drawing a distinction between the two.

Speaking about the Council

Parish and town councils are often referred to as the 'third tier' of local government, but councillors spoke about their council very much as the 'first tier' of local government. Parish and town councils are the tier of local government closest to communities of place and which reflect that place in their boundaries. Indeed, the evidence we received stressed the close connection and links parish and town councils have with a specific and identifiable geographical community. It was very apparent from parish councillors that local pride, identity, community and a sense of shared place and shared history of that place, is particularly important in their work.

The idea of parishes being the closest level of local government to communities was not however, romanticised by councillors as one summed up, thus:

> *The parish council may have become a bit of a cosy club, not much information was given out, it was assumed that anyone who needed to know anything would pick it up via the pub, school or church or by some kind of general osmosis* (Parish Councillor).

With that note of caution in mind, parish councillors still spoke about a unique closeness between themselves as a group on any one council and between themselves and the staff of the council, which in some cases may only be the parish clerk, who may even be part-time. Even in those larger parishes where there may be a number of staff, the closeness between them and councillors was remarked on as a unique feature of parish government. The evidence we received from parish councillors spoke about four sets of relationships that are central to the effective operation of the parish council: between parish councillors; between councillors and the parish chair (or mayor in town councils); between councillors and the clerk (and other staff); and, between the chair or mayor and the clerk.

i.   *Parish councillors*: The evidence we received suggests that on many parish councils there is a much closer sense of cohesion, collegiate working and partnership than that which might be found among the elected members of principal councils. We heard from parish councillors about the strong culture of cooperation that exists among them as a group and a shared desire to work as a team for the betterment of the area. While there is always room for disagreement on decisions that must be made, policy development or any issues before the council, we heard much that described how consensus or some form of agreement is brokered between parish councillors.

On the other hand, it is very clear some parish councils are heavily politicised, and also party politicised, with party councillors and political party control of parishes. In such parishes, the interplay of party politics is much like that of any principal council and we heard evidence of parish party group meetings and whipped votes taking place. In addition, it is also clear that personality clashes and differences of opinion could generate a problematic political culture, again in much the same way as for principal councils. The relationships between councillors as a group, on any parish, can generate a collaborative and cooperative style of political decision-making and interaction but such close working is not an automatic outcome of interactions.

ii.   *Councillors and the parish chair*: the approach and style of the chair (or mayor) of the parish and the relationships he or she has with the other parish councillors is a vital ingredient to securing the cooperative and collegiate working arrangements that so many parish councillors stressed operated on their parish council. It is very much the style and approach of the chair that sets the tone for the relationships he or she has with other councillors and as would be expected, it is this leading parish councillor that acts as a bridge between councillors and the parish clerk. Parishes, as with principal councils are prone to distance and division developing between the chair and other members and the relationship is one which chairs have to work to maintain. We heard evidence that in parishes with a high level of party political engagement, or with party political control, of councillors who did not share the political allegiance of the chair feeling excluded from parish activities.

iii.   *Councillors and the clerk*: the importance of the relationship between parish councillors and the clerk was summed up for all by a councillor who commented: *A key factor in the effective running of any parish council is the quality of the clerk*; in a similar vein, another councillor commented: *the skill and training of the clerk is absolutely crucial to what we do and our relationship with the clerk is crucial in the clerk being able to get on with what has to be done.* It is evident that councillors rely on the clerk not just for the legal and financial probity of the council, but as a point of contact, information and advice for councillors in what they do. It is also stressed in the evidence that the clerk could wield considerable influence and power over the council and within

the parish generally and we heard similar issues raised about *'officer control'* as we did from councillors on principal councils. The relationship between a parish clerk and councillors, though pivotal to the success of the parish, is not automatically positive and, like all relationships, requires work and commitment. We did hear of cases where the relationship between clerk and councillors was dysfunctional and had affected the smooth running of the council.

iv.   *Chair or mayor and the clerk*: Parish councillors described to us an exact parallel relationship here to that which existed between a council leader and chief executive or at least members of the senior management team on a principal authority. The relationship between the parish chair and clerk was expected to be cooperative, close and collegiate. It is a fundamental relationship, in the view of parish councillors, to enable the smooth running and effective working of the parish council. To such an extent that for many councillors, when selecting a parish chair, the relationship candidates had with the clerk, or the relationship they would likely forge given their own personalities, is seen as important to supporting the election of a chair or mayor. Indeed, many councillors admit to using their views on the quality of the clerk, whether he or she needs firm management or a free hand, as a criterion in voting for a parish chair. In party political councils that criterion was less of a feature when it came to electing the chair or mayor. On whatever basis councillors decided on who to support for chair or mayor, the relationship between the incumbent and the clerk could either provide stability, cohesion and direction to the council; or, if poor, could disturb the council's ability to conduct its work.

When parish councillors spoke more generally about the council of which they were a member, two distinct sets of views were expressed. The first is of the value and contribution that parish government, and being a parish councillor, could make to the quality of life of local communities and to giving communities a say over the way their areas developed and in dealing with the problems it may face. Parish councillors spoke with intensity and pride about being the 'voice' of their communities and about the parish speaking for, and on behalf of, those communities. The parish council provides a location for localism – that is, as members of a recognised and authoritative body parish councils hold a legitimate position within their communities and one from which a series of public services can be delivered. A parish councillor summed up the view thus:

The parish is just that, the parish. It's a council that is so close to people, close to the place, and as councillors we understand what the area wants. People talk to us as a council, they tell us what's needed or what the problems are and because we are a council – not a residents' association or something like that – we can do something about those problems. The parish office is here, not miles away; the clerk is always there; councillors are around and about and in and out of the office all day. We are an

institution and an important one – we are elected, just like the district and county. We matter to people's lives and we can get things done (Parish Councillor).

On the other hand, parish councillors were also acutely aware of some of the restrictions on their council as was summed up thus:

The frustration is the limitations of what the council can legally do. For example we are not a planning body…the district council has executive power over planning. Also highways matters are covered at county level when it would be better handled locally (Parish Councillor).

Or as another councillor added:

I enjoy being a parish councillor and have no intention of standing for the district, but it can be very frustrating. We are consulted, but not always listened to. We have a small range of real functions and powers, a small precept – and that was a deliberate choice but it limits us – few real ways of making things happen. It's all about getting on to others. The strength of parish councils is that we are councils and not so much what we can actually do ourselves (Parish Councillor).

The practical limitations on some parish councils were also neatly summed up in this comment:

We have considered undertaking a Neighbourhood Plan but have decided against it. It is a lengthy process requiring a lot of time and commitment which could then be over turned at the end in a referendum. We have asked the village for volunteers to help but few were forthcoming (Parish Councillor).

The frustration here was thst the lack of capacity among both the parish council and local community had frustrated what could be a vital process of a community planning for its own future.

In a similar vein the following comment echoed the capacity frustration:

A parish council does not have much power or influence compared, say, to a comparable organisation in France. The very limited influence we have can be frustrating and may well put some people off getting involved (Parish Councillor).

The views expressed here are from smaller councils and we did not find any town councillors expressing the view that they had too few powers or functions or too small a budget. Indeed, there was a distinction made between smaller and larger councils in the evidence we received as was summed up in the two following comments from parish councillors:

I don't know what some of these smaller councils do or why, some only have 300 or 400 hundred people; I don't know why they just don't merge with other parishes (Parish Councillor).

Contrast that view to:

Some of the bigger town councils are too arrogant; they think having a lot of money makes them better [than smaller parishes]. They think they're a district council. You can't get to know or care about 20 or 30 thousand people; whereas I could introduce you to everyone in my parish (Parish Councillor).

The merits or otherwise of smaller and larger parishes and town councils are neatly condensed in those two contrasting viewpoints – which reflect similar arguments about smaller and larger principal councils.

When it comes to parish capacity and the ability to act, parish councillors are acutely aware of the limitations on their ability to act that can arise from uncontested elections or from the co-option of members onto the parish council. Comparisons were drawn with the pre-1972 Local Government Act where uncontested principal authority seats were far more of a regular event than today and the existence of Alderman, as co-opted councillors, was also commonplace.

While recognising co-option could damage legitimacy, and with the vast majority of parish councillors that we spoke to expressing a preference for fully elected parishes without the need to co-opt, co-option did have some supporters.

The support for co-option was firstly linked to the recognition that at the parish level, not all those interested in becoming councillors are of the same type of person who is ready to contest an election to a principal council. In other words, the image of an 'election' as an intense, party political and personal contest deters many from standing. Thus, co-option provides an alternative route on to the council for those lacking the confidence for confronting an election process and that this route may also provide an alternative for enhancing minority representation on parish councils and increasing the diversity of the parish councillor population.

Second, co-option solved a capacity problem for parish councils when faced with insufficient members to conduct or share out the business of the council.

Parish councillors are aware co-option could be seen to damage legitimacy, but it was stressed to us, particularly at roundtable discussions, that parishes are rarely criticised by citizens and communities for a lack of legitimacy because of co-option. As one councillor commented: *if*

anyone says that we shouln't be doing what we're doing because we have co-opted members, I just say: stand at the next election then. That normally does the trick.

Where parish councillors feel most vulnerable over the issue of co-option is in their relationships with other councils and councillors. Where parish councils are undermined by a district or country - mainly because they are opposing some decision or policy of the other council, or because councillors on other councils simply oppose the existence of parish councils – principal councils and councillors will, if possible, use co-option as a way of de-legitimising what parishes do.

There were loud and clearly articulated views expressed from all parish councillors – whatever the size of the parish – that parishes should have; greater capacity to act in ways they feel best meet the needs of their areas; enhanced responsibilities and functions should they demand them; and, a more equal relationship with the principal authorities in the area. We now turn, therefore, to what parish councillors told us about the relationships they have with other councils and other public and private agencies.

Speaking beyond the Council

Parish councillors are engaged with organisations beyond the council of which they are a member in the same way as councillors on principal councils. Indeed, the evidence we received suggested parish councillors have a greater need to engage with bodies outside the council, when compared to principal councillors. Parish councillors indicated that rather than engagement with external bodies being mainly driven by leading parish councillors, all faced the need to engage on both a strategic and functional level with other organisations. There was far less of a strategic and functional division between leading and other parish councillors when it came to engagement with other agencies – compared to that which we found existed for leading and other councillors on principal councils. As one parish councillor put it:

> *Dealing with others is what we do. Parish councillors spend more time working outside the council than in it: the police, the doctor's surgery, the CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group), the bus company, the public utilities, the airport and, of course, the county and district council* (Parish Councillor).

The evidence we received from parish councillors indicated that the contact they have with other bodies falls into four categories:

- Other parish councils
- District, county or unitary councils
- Public organisations (including charities and voluntary groups)
- Private concerns

Working with other parish councils, particularly with the county area or within the framework of the local 'County Association of Local Councils' (CALC), is a distinct focus of parish councillors' activity. Much depends however, on the size of the parish concerned and although the larger town councils are active in CALCs, it seems they spend less time working with other parishes and parish councillors in a direct sense, than the smaller parishes. It is also clear networks of parishes exist and councillors collaborate at the parish level, with councillors on other parishes, to enhance the capacity they have for problem solving and for approaching other bodies. As it was put by a parish councillor in one roundtable:

> *I find talking to people like the public utilities or the Police and even the unitary council, that if we speak as a group of councillors from more than one council, it helps to get a hearing. So, I'll often arrange meetings for myself and councillors from neighbouring parishes, with whoever it is I want to speak to; my colleagues on other councils will get in touch if they are organising things and want our input or help* (Parish Councillor).

> *I can drive through four other parishes in about 40 minutes. Now we are nice and small, compact areas and we want our own council, but if we go mob-handed, so to speak, it saves whoever we're talking with going to 4 meetings about the same thing and we can also speak about our individual matters, too. They get the idea there is a bigger issue at stake too. Sometimes I find some can be a bit dismissive of parish councillors – especially if it's some big organisation, like the bus company. So, we [parish councillors] gang up on them, I suppose* (Parish Councillor).

Thus, for parish councillors, working closely with colleagues on other parishes enables them to pool resources to develop capacity, while also maintaining the discrete local identity of their own communities and being able express its own particular take on any problem.

Working with other councils forms a core part of the activities of parish councillors and as would be expected, is a vital role for the chairs and mayors of parish and town councils. Forging a cooperative and strong working relationship with other councils is stressed as a vital task and one which requires the investment of time and energy by parish councillors and particularly those in two-tier areas. In such areas the relationship could vary between the district and county councils and a good relationship with one did not, for parish councillors, guarantee a good relationship with the other.

A parish councillor neatly summarised the feeling of her colleagues when she commented:

> *It really is down to individuals; you have to make contact with the right people at the county and district, both the right councillors and certainly the right officers. You can have a good working relationship with some and not others. I'm not sure council officers*

understand parish councils, or at least the very senior ones don't. Even if you have a good relationship with someone, invariably they will leave and get another job and then you have to start all over again. There's no saying that the next relationship will be as good as the last one and nowadays I'm finding that when an officer leaves, they're not replaced (Parish Councillor).

A constant theme of the evidence we received from parish councillors is the need to work at ensuring good relationships with councillors and officers from principal authorities. This aspect of their role is time consuming, often with no guarantee of a positive outcome and prone to personnel changes. Another parish councillor echoed the comment above in a similar vein:

Another area of interaction on a regular basis is of course our Unitary Authority. This can be quite frustrating as we are only a small parish. We have many queries on planning and on highways as well as the drainage... Planning has been notorious for not having enough staff to respond and for a high turnover of staff (Parish Councillor).

Relationships between parish councillors and planning authorities provided a rich stream of evidence to suggest that parish councillors often feel ignored or undermined in planning issues, with the following a typical comment made in regard to planning issues:

I have not been on the Council for very long but one of the repeated problems we have is that the planning department do not listen to local views on planning applications (Parish Councillor).

As would be expected with the existence of so many parish councils and councillors there is a vast range of experiences, positive and negative, when it comes to relationships with principal authority councillors and officers. A successful tactic employed by parish councillors is to develop a strong working relationship with the district or county councillors who also cover the area of the parish. That relationship went beyond simply ensuring principal authority councillors have a regular invite to formal parish meetings. Rather, parish councillors invest time in developing personal working relationships with principal authority councillors and in involving them, as far as possible, in issues that affect the parish, particularly around planning and development matters.

There is a distinct message from parish councillors that came across in the evidence we received and was particularly articulated in the roundtable discussions: unless parish councillors work at creating solid relationships with principal authorities, they will be overlooked, ignored or marginalised. As a parish councillor summarised:

We work with the district and county council. Deal with them daily. But it's not always effective at getting things done via these bodies….it is important we deal with them but

they do not always treat us fairly or equally, especially as we are unpaid Councillors who devote many hours each week (Parish Councillor).

The issue here is one of regularising the relationship between parish and principal councils and establishing the relationship as one of a statutory partnership between governing bodies, with separate geographical remits – much like the relationship between counties and districts. Without some formalisation of relationships between parishes and principal authorities, parish councillors will have to continue to invest considerable time and resources into developing a set of relationships that should be standard operational procedures across local government.

Placing more of the relationship between principal and parish councils on a statutory footing was evident in calls made by parish councillors for an extension of the duty to consult on planning matters to a much wider range of principal authority decision and policymaking.

Shifting what is an arbitrary relationship between parishes and principal councils to more of a statutory footing – across a wider number of policy domains – was a call made that reflected the experience of parish councillors who did not have friends at principal council level. The strain in relationships between parish and principal councils is nowhere more clear than in the process of governance reviews and particularly around the formation of new parish councils.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 made principal authorities responsible for community governance reviews and decisions about the outcomes of those reviews. Our discussions with parish councillors revealed considerable disquiet that the existence of parish councils – and specifically the abolition of existing councils and the creation of new ones – rests in the hands of another elected authority that may have an ambivalent view about parish councils or, at worst, a hostile view which leads principal authorities to oppose the creation of new parish councils.

As one parish council campaigner told us:

We had a lot of support from the community for a new parish, a lot of people were really interested. We'd put out a survey, collected the responses and it was obvious people wanted a parish council. We asked for a local referendum, but the district wouldn't call one. Then the district did its own consultation and said there wasn't enough support and it went to a vote at the council and was lost. We knew the council leader and our local councillor didn't want a parish and they stopped it (Parish Campaigner).

It was made clear by parish councillors that even with evidence of support from the local community for the creation of a new parish council, principal authorities had overridden or ignored that support to prevent the formation of a parish council. That the formation of new parishes is in the hands of a principal authority means different interpretations of levels of

support for a new parish made by local communities and by the principal authority can be used as a reason to reject a new parish. The problem becomes all the more acute when a principal authority may be politically disposed towards preventing the formation of new parish councils.

It is very clear from our evidence that parish councillors invest considerable time and effort into working with public organisations and private concerns within and around the parish area. The nature of that interaction for parish councillors is shaped by the needs of the specific parish and by the actions of others that affect the parish. Public utilities, private companies, transport bodies, charities and bodies such as the police and the health service all loom large in the activities of parish councillors. Indeed, we found little difference between the interactions of parish councillors and principal authority councillors, when it comes to the nature of the involvement with which such bodies.

Parish councillors operate on both a strategic and functional level with a wide range of public and private bodies as a way of shaping what those bodies do, the decisions they make, the policies they develop and the services they provide. Parish councillors attempted to influence the long-term policy and investment of other organisations and to ensure the day-to-day quality of services provided by others also meet the needs of their parish areas. The strategies employed by parish councillors to engage with others, to hold them to account and to seek to gain influence over such bodies do not differ greatly from those developed and employed by principal authority councillors.

Our evidence suggested the time given by parish councillors to interaction with other bodies is increasing and external activity is becoming more important and of a greater focus for parish councillors. Holding external bodies to account through questioning, criticising, seeking explanation and justification for decisions and actions, is a way in which parish councillors are also able to increase the capacity available to them to take action themselves and to generate improvement in their parish areas.

Engagement is not always positive for parish councillors and is not always automatic, as one parish councillor summarised:

> *You have to work very hard to get accepted by some organisations and some are better than others – good with the GP surgery, not so good with the CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group); that's pretty much the pattern. Some accept you, others don't; some don't really understand parish councils, or more likely don't want to, we are another group they have to talk to and some just shut the door* (Parish Councillor).

As another parish councillor, from the other end of the country commented:

> *It [building relationships with outside bodies] takes a lot of effort and isn't always successful but when it works, it works well and we can see benefits to local people. We are elected and we represent communities and that can get you access, other times it doesn't and it's no different to anyone trying to get a meeting with a large organisation. I think because I'm a parish councillor and a bit of a big mouth, I just keep going and its tenacity rather than being a parish councillor that helps – but being a parish councillor helps with being tenacious* (Parish Councillor).

It is clear that parish councillors recognise the value of interactions with other agencies and bodies and that such interactions are part of developing capacity for community improvement. As with principal authority councillors, negotiation, interaction and influence with others are not an automatic result of being an elected official, but one that requires the investment of time and effort. It is also an activity which requires support for parish councillors so as to be able to have an effective input to decisions made by others that impact on local communities.

Speaking in response to central policy change

When parish councillors spoke to us about changing central government policy, regulations, detailed oversight and the reduction in local discretion, they spoke in a very similar fashion and exhibited a similar frustration to their principal authority colleagues. The feeling that central policy change prevents parish councillors from acting, or providing barriers to their work, was very simply summed up by a newly elected parish councillor who commented:

> *At first I didn't know what to expect. Now I find it very hard with all the rules and regulations which Government keeps sending down* (Parish Councillor).

That view found an echo across parish councillors and the theme of centralisation was expressed by a parish councillor when she commented that the issue for her and her colleagues was a:

> *...frustration with the directives from Whitehall - as there is with the directives being sent down from Brussels* (Parish Councillor).

The experience of a limited and diminishing pool of powers and responsibilities resting with parish councils and parish councillors is a constant theme of the evidence we received. The immediacy of parish councillors to their communities and the expectations the public had of parish councillors' ability to solve local problems, increased the sense of frustration at

government limitations and at the way policy change can affect what parish councillors are able to achieve. One parish councillor stated that:

> *I keep on trying to do my best for the parish and community, but keeping on top of how what the government does affects what I and the parish council can do, is exhausting. We rely on the clerk and if the clerk has to say: 'you can't do that because of paragraph one, subsection 12, para small 6 of the blah blah Act of 1853', then we sort of take it out on her, but it's not her fault; she's doing her job. I just wish the government would let us do our job and stop passing laws that make things harder* (Parish Councillor).

We received a lot of general evidence and suggestions from parish councils that draw a picture of an environment where there are many legal, regulatory and policy restrictions on what parish councillors and parish councils are able to do and how they are able to do it. The area of policy change which raised the most specific issues, because it was immediate at the time of our research, is the government's policy of devolution and in particular the development of double devolution to parish councils.

Parish councillors expressed support for the idea of devolution and for a less centralised approach to government across the country and for the idea of double devolution, the passing down of powers, functions and responsibilities, to parish and town councils. As with principal authorities, alongside support for greater devolution there is also clear scepticism about how devolution would work and whether or not resources would be available to ensure devolution from the centre fulfilled its potential.

There is another dimension for parish councillors to the devolution agenda and that is the linked idea of *'double devolution'* - the passing down of powers and functions from principal authorities to parish and town councils.

Two currents of opinion over the issue of double devolution exist amongst parish and town councillors. The first was supportive of double devolution and parish and town councillors often gave specific examples of further responsibilities they'd like to receive for their councils. The argument was very much that devolution should not stop at the level of the principal authority but that as far as feasible and possible parishes should see their responsibilities increase. The arguments we heard from parish councillors also reflected on devolution as a result of Brexit, as one councillor summarised nicely:

I hear a lot about powers coming from the EU not stopping in Whitehall and Westminster but coming down to local government. I don't hear anything about it not stopping with counties and districts and coming to parishes. We shouldn't replicate centralism in local government after Brexit (Parish Councillor).

There is a strong appetite among parish councillors for double devolution but what is expressed alongside that support is the need for principal authorities to:

- recognise that double devolution should match the requirements, capacity and resources of parish councils
- accept that different services and responsibilities can be offered differently in different parts of a principal authority area. That is some responsibilities will rest with some, but not all parish councils, within the same principal authority area and that a principal authority must accept such diversity of approach
- devolution should not be imposed on parishes by principal councils especially as a cost cutting exercise
- double devolution requires negotiation between principal councils and parish councils on an individual basis

The second current of opinion is one of scepticism among parish councillors about double devolution and that scepticism reflected similar scepticism expressed by some principal authority councillors about the entire devolution agenda. That scepticism was about the intention of and resources that would support double devolution as was illuminated by a parish councillor thus:

The devolution agenda seems to want to push more and more functions down on to parish councillors but with no additional funding (Parish Councillor).

That view was supported generally as elaborated by another parish councillor thus:

A recent growth of reduction in grants and funds will become very problematic for parishes. Also, the increase in the transfer of assets from councils to parishes is causing problems as resources aren't coming with it (Parish Councillor).

The most damning of comments about double devotion came from a parish councillor who commented:

The county came to us and said, take these services on, or they will stop. Simple as that; no commitment to devolution just saying to us, if you want these things, you pay. That's not devolution, that's blackmail and it's not because the county has had a conversion to

the virtues of parish councils; it's because it's run out of money and can't do things itself anymore (Parish Councillor).

The evidence from parish councillors that we received leaves no doubt about the considerable support that exists for devolution to local government generally and for double devolution to parish and town councils specifically. Certain conditions have to be met for parish councillors to accept double devolution is a genuine process and not an expediency for the principal authorities concerned. Double devolution has to be a negotiated process, built on a genuine partnership between parishes and principal councils, reflective of the capacity and requirements of the parishes concerned and set within a context of a diverse set of outcomes across any principal authority area.

Central policy change generally can be as restrictive and debilitating for parish councillors as it can for their principal authority councillor colleagues. The fear of breaching the law, even if inadvertently, can destabilise parish councillors and act as a brake on innovation and change stimulated by parish councillors. The message was clear: central government must not only trust local government more and ease the regulatory burden; it must understand and trust parishes more. In addition, the messages from parish councillors was that not only should central government trust more and regulate less, so too must principal councils when it came to their interactions with parish councillors.

Speaking about perceptions

As with the rest of local government parish councillors felt, strongly, that they suffered from an image problem which was neatly summed up by one parish councillor who commented:

> *The Vicar of Dibley did us no favours at all – great programme, yes– but now people think we sit round a table all night saying 'no, no, no, yes' [a reference to a catch phrase of one of the television programme's main character] or that we are just bumbling chancers with little clue about what we are doing* (Parish Councillor).

Parish councillors explained to us experiences of two very distinct sets of perceptions from the public they serve and the media that reports on their activities.

The first, illuminated by the comment above, is the Vicar of Dibley syndrome: that is the media in particular, but also some of the public with which parish councillors interact, perceive parish councillors in a negative and ineffectual light. The public and media were seen to perceive parish councillors as well-meaning but without the skills or powers required to deal with local issues or problems; or with too little power and responsibility to make a difference to the governance of the area. Or, a far worse and more extreme view as being: duplicitous, unrepresentative and operating as a closed local clique. It must be stressed here these are the

views of how parish councillors felt they were often perceived in the media and among sections of the public, not how those two groups do perceive parish councillors.

The second set of public and media perceptions expressed by parish councillors about them and their activities was much more positive, to the extent parish councillors often felt the public believed they had a *'magic wand'* (an oft used expression). That is the public exaggerated parish councillors' abilities and powers to solve local problems, make the district or county council do something or stop doing something, or to solve the problems being experienced by an individual. Parish councillors found these more positive perceptions as equally unrealistic as the Vicar of Dibley syndrome.

It is clear the media do recognise the importance of parish councils and there were many examples given to us of the local press attending parish council meetings and reporting on the proceedings and outcomes of those events. Local journalist attendance at parish meetings was almost guaranteed when the parish was considering and responding to contentious local planning applications or being consulted on planning policy. But examples were also given of regular journalist attendance at a parish meetings as a matter of course, or if the parish was considering policy decisions by other bodies such as NHS organisations. A parish councillor described things, thus:

> *We are treated with respect by the press on big issues; journalists will attend parish meetings, or phone up for reactions to district and county decisions, or to ask about my view on the A&E service or cuts to the post office: serious stuff. Then the next minute we're all a cross between David Horton and Jim Trott [two characters from the Vicar of Dibley television programme]* (Parish Councillor).

As with other tiers of local government there are, in the eyes of parish councillors, conflicting sets of public and media perceptions about their role that do not capture the reality of their experiences as parish councillors. Those inaccurate views – whether positive or negative – hinder parish councillors in the work they undertake, whether to belittle their actions or to over-inflate what they are able to achieve for their areas, thus inevitably disappointing some of their constituents.

Although working with external organisations takes time and effort to develop a set of effective relationships, parish councillors did not feel belittled by external bodies. Indeed, we were given examples where major local employers regularly and without request, consulted with parish councillors on major investment decisions. Indeed, parish councillors are able to influence and shape some decisions and policies of others and as a result, are able to accrue capacity and resources for their parish areas.

My parish negotiated with [named local employer] for millions of pounds of investment over the years. They come to us, listen, respond and the parish benefits. They treat us as the voice of the area. I couldn't wish for better relationships and it's what being a parish councillor is about (Parish Councillor).

Parish councillors stressed the work they undertook not only contributed to the well-being of their communities within their parishes, but also to the betterment of the wider area. Parish councillors' capacity to act to alter perceptions of the public and media, where that was felt necessary, was seen to be the responsibility of parish councillors themselves. As a councillor summarised:

It's not good enough to just work hard for the area; we have to let people know what we are doing. If they just came to parish council meetings they'd only see a fraction of what we do and not a particularly good fraction, either. We have to work to set the record straight – some help from the district, county, government and press wouldn't go amiss, though (Parish Councillor).

The perceptions of parish councillors, held by some, can be reshaped by parish councillors themselves, but in listening to parish councillors we found echoes in what we had been told by principal authority councillors. The views of the public and media matter to what councillors can achieve and how they conduct their work. Moreover, those perceptions matter when it comes to calls for greater powers, responsibilities and freedoms, because negative or overblown views, held by the public and the media, will influence the thinking of those responsible for enhancing the position and responsibilities of parish councillors. Given the diversity in the nature of parish and town councils, ensuring an accurate view and understanding of what parish councillors and councils can achieve is vital to the continued success of parish level government.

Speaking about the job

The way parish councillors speak about their role and the work they do is noticeable in the passion, enthusiasm and excitement with which they describe their work, their commitment to it and what they hope to be able to achieve for their parishes and towns. They also recognise their role makes committing sufficient time to parish business a necessity if the work required is to be undertaken effectively. The smaller the parish area, the more likely it is parish councillors will be recognised locally and the more likely it is they will be approached about parish work, the work of other organisations or individual problems. A parish councillor summarised the job, thus:

Whenever I'm out and about in the parish, I'm always stopped by someone to talk about something. It's no good me saying: that's nothing to do with the parish council. Even if

the issue isn't to do with the parish council, that's not what people want to hear. I mean, it's good really that people approach me, or any parish councillor when we're out and about. I listen, take notes and do what I can – always get back to people. Often, I don't have to go back specifically to someone, as I'll see them when I'm walking around anyway (Parish Councillor).

The time commitment is also recognised as demanding on parish and town councillors and as something that is not fully recognised. Indeed, long-standing parish councillors expressed the view that the time demands had increased over the years. It is also stressed that while parish councillors volunteered to stand or to be co-opted, many react against the idea they are volunteers, which was nicely encapsulated by a councillor who commented:

I put myself forward, yes, but that's as far as volunteering goes. The time demands are considerable; there's a lot of statutory work that needs doing, paper work to go through. I can't just do it when I feel like it, none of us can. I made a commitment and the work has to be done (Parish Councillor).

That view was supported by another parish councillor when she commented:

It was quite difficult to commit a lot of time to the role when I was working full time. However, now that I'm retired it's easier (Parish Councillor).

The view expressed here reflects the difficulties principal authority councillors experience in balancing council duties with other facets of their working, family and social lives. The added dimension to the lot of the parish councillor is the closeness of parish authorities to their communities, but that closeness is also seen as a virtue by parish councillors. Indeed, being the closest point of contact for local communities, into the world of local government is something that parish councillors prize and something which separates them from district and county councillors.

The parish councillors who provided evidence to us were certainly motivated by a desire to contribute to their local communities and to improve the quality of life of their areas, as summed up in the following comment we received:

I felt that I could assist the community to progress much needed projects. I expected to get things done quickly but I have found great patience is necessary. I want to help improve village facilities and infrastructure (Parish Councillor).

A similar view, which sums up much of what we heard, was made by another parish councillor:

Being a parish councillor is an excellent way of helping people and bringing about improvements to the area: looking at what people need, being in a position to draw on local knowledge and to help solve local problems. It's about caring for your community but also being prepared to act too; I can't complain about things if I'm not prepared to act and I am so that's why I stood and why I think parishes are really valuable. We need more people to get involved (Parish Councillor).

When it comes to the issue of encouraging greater involvement in parish work, parish councillors are also very vocal about specific issues related to the work they do and no more so than the role of twin or triple-hatters - those parish councillors who are also either district or county councillors, or who were at the same time parish, district and county councillors. The opinions we received about the merits or otherwise of twin and triple-hatters vary among parish councillors.

First, there are those parish councillors who see a value in a district or county councillor sitting also as a parish councillor, but much depends on whether that councillor is a member of the ruling group or opposition group on the other council of which they are an elected member. Having a county or district councillor to provide direct access to officers and other members could ease the access of parish councillors to those councils and ensure that contact is made with relevant officers and members for specific aspects of business. In addition, twin or triple-hatters could ensure a speedy and relevant flow of information to parish councillors and parish councils and provide early warnings of issues being considered at the district or county about which the parish should be aware or to which it should have an input.

Second, is a contrasting view that is very much opposed to parish councillors also being district and/or county councillors and which sees members of principal councils who are also parish councillors as having a potential conflict of interest. Here the idea is that such councillors are often less of a friend to the parish council and more a voice for the district or county than to the parish council itself and use the parish to promote, protect and defend the polices and decisions of the district or county of which they are a member.

One comment from a parish councillor summed up this view, thus:

She only ever comes to the parish to stand up for the district; the district can do no wrong. I wouldn't mind but there is a proper job of work to do as a parish councillor and it's not just defending the district (Parish Councillor).

It was also felt such members did not necessarily and automatically support the parish view to their other councils; rather, such members could often undermine parish policy and decisions. The view was also expressed that some councillors *'hoarded'* council seats and, as a consequence, there were fewer elected offices to go around.

There is certainly no settled will among parish councillors about the merits, or otherwise, of twin and triple-hatters, but it is an issue that was a major theme in the evidence we received from parish councillors.

One area of local involvement where parish councillors are very concerned to see changes is in encouraging a greater range of people to stand for parish council election. Parish councillors are again enthusiastic about the need to encourage more people to become parish councillors and do so for a number of reasons:

- to reflect the differing makeup of local communities – much like the concerns with a sociological interpretation of representation that was discussed in section eight in regard to principal authority councillors
- ensure the greatest possible pool of talent available to parish councils
- increase parish council problem-solving capacity
- ensure the widest possible range of views are heard about the needs and development of the area

Reflecting on the image of parish councillors, many express the view that there is a need to ensure a greater number of younger people, in particular, become parish councillors, as was summed up thus:

We must not have the levels of government closest to the people run by old men and women - their decisions affect everyone, and everyone should have a role in that government!... There is no reason at all why young people should not become great parish councillors (Parish Councillor).

The issue of voice for the whole community is recognised and parish councillors attested to actively going out to seek candidates for parish councils from among younger people, women and ethnic minorities. Indeed, it is also here the idea of co-option finds some defenders. Co-option means those not ready, for whatever reason, to face the potential rough and tumble of an election, are able to take on an authoritative representative office.

The experience of being a parish councillor, by co-option, it is hoped, encouraged such councillors to then stand for election. We heard evidence from parish councillors that they had only stood for election because they had initially been co-opted. It was suggested co-option aids the route to the council for under-represented groups.

Thus, on the issue of representativeness parish councillors are exercised by similar concerns to many serving as principal authority councillors; for parish councillors there is an added pressure of being seen to fill seats by election – despite the positive aspects of co-option that

were voiced. Parish councillors we spoke with are enthusiastic and heartfelt about their role as parish councillor, its potential for enhancing community well-being and for engaging communities in local self-government.

They are equally committed to encouraging more people from their parish and towns to stand for election and experience the job for themselves. Indeed, one of the aspects parish councillors are most encouraging of, is extending parish government into urban areas. Despite taking evidence from parish councillors cross the country, it was striking how many had heard of the new urban parish council in Queens Park, London and used that as a way of expressing that parish government was about providing all recognisable communities with opportunities to govern themselves and to develop capacity to enhance community identity, cohesion and well-being.

It is not just representativeness of sections of the community that exercises parish councillors, but also that the opportunities parish councils provide for local self-government and engagement in elected local politics should also encompass all types of areas of the country.

Conclusion

Parish and town councillors experience similar pressures and tensions in their roles and in the work they undertake to that of their counterparts on principal authorities. While the scale of operation may vary, not only with principal authorities, but also across the diverse range of parish and town councils, being a parish councillor brings with it a set of pressures, demands and tensions that exist for all councillors.

It is wholly wrong to see parish councillors as somehow a lesser form of councillor to their counterparts on other levels of government and therefore it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that parish councillors require the same support mechanisms, training, research and administrative infrastructure as principal authority councillors. Parishes will lack the ability however, to provide anything like that which principal councils can offer to their councillors. Thus, for parish councillors, the issue becomes one of pooling resources and developing capacity through working with others. The lesson must be learnt that no levels of local government can rest alone for its effectiveness on the personal sacrifices that its elected members are willing to make.

The parish councillors that submitted evidence to us are enthusiastic about their role, the responsibilities they have and passionate about promoting, protecting and developing their areas and the communities within them. They are also exceptionally realistic about what they can achieve and the work that is required of parish councillors if they are to contribute to the decisions and polices of other organisations, not least of which are the principal authorities

within which the parish or town is located. There is also a clear view that parish government should be extended to other parts of the country.

While the evidence submitted to us from parish councils provides some clear messages about the roles and work of parish councillors, given the large number of parish councils across the country and the diverse nature of parish government, we have only but scratched the surface of understanding the contribution to good governance made by parish-level government.

There is a need for more research into what is needed to support parish councillors in their work and to assist in developing their capacity to govern; in 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; and, what can be done to encourage more people to stand for election to parish level government. Moreover, there is a need to further explore the relationships between parish government and principal authorities and to strengthen the factors that ensure the best possible working relationships between the first tier of local government and its principal authority partners.

We heard specific messages from parish and town councillors which indicate 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 the 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.**

10   Conclusions

The Commission's investigation started with a straightforward objective of listening to and reporting what councillors wanted the public, policymakers and the media to know about their office and what they could, and could not, achieve as a councillor. We also wanted to identify the changes necessary that would make the experience of being a councillor a more effective and powerful one. We are very grateful as a commission to councillors across England for the time, energy, enthusiasm and commitment they gave to support our research. The commission took the novel approach of not setting out a series of specific questions which we wanted to address and understand. Rather, we set out to listen to what councillors wanted to say in order to understand how their experiences and the issues they tackle can be used to develop and strengthen their office and local democracy and government.

It became clear very quickly that when councillors spoke to us they reflected on a series of common themes and experiences which were shared irrespective of council type, membership of a leadership group or backbench status, political affiliation, or the urban or rural nature of their locality. Indeed, parish and town councillors shared and reflected on many similar experiences to their principal authority counterparts. It was these common experiences we sought to hear and understand and yet, it is also the case that there are, of course, distinctions between the experiences and work of councillors that reflect differences in each of those factors above. What came over most clearly was the complexity of the work of the councillor, the intricate networks within which they must operate and the often unrealistic expectations from the public, the media, officers and the government, about what can be achieved as a councillor.

In listening to councillors, they spoke about a specific series of settings in which they operated or about specific activities that they undertook and these can be categorised as speaking about:

- The council of which they are a member
- The complex series of interactions they have with organisations beyond the council of which they are a member
- How central government policy change and interference shapes, or hinders, what they are able to achieve
- How the public, media and government perceptions of councillors influence their activities and set the context within which they can operate
- The intricacies of the range of functions roles, tasks and activities, that come with the job of being a councillor

It is within these dimensions of councillor activity and responsibility that we see the expectations and pressures faced by councillors and the limitations on their role, powers, resources and freedoms. Those limitations do not stem from councillors themselves; rather they are a product of the political and structural environment within which they operate.

The Council

When councillors spoke to us about the council of which they were a member, we saw very clearly the distinction between the experiences of leading and backbench members (or scrutiny chairs) and members of the majority and minority groups. The closeness that leading members have to senior officers, while understandable, does set them apart from the rest of the council membership. Yet, leading members are aware of that distance and either respond to it by developing a collaborative collective culture; or ignore it and carry on in full recognition of the distance between them and other members by pursuing an individualised leadership approach. It is in the distinction between the leading member and other councillors that the imbalance in resources available to support the work of the councillors, within the council, is also evident, with leading members receiving the most support for their work.

It is also clear majority group members are able to access more support resources than minority group members, but much of that results from the confidence of being a member of the majority group and a greater familiarity with the points of influence and power within the council. Yet, these structural imbalances in power and resources can be solved through cultural, structural and procedural change in local government without changing the reality of the different political roles and responsibilities with councillors of different types.

The call we heard from all councillors about what would improve how they are able to operate within their councils is, loud and clear: 'we want information'. That message comes from across the political spectrum and across types of councillors and their different roles. The lack of information and the lack of information provided in the right format and at the right time, is a major frustration for councillors – some of whom even told us that they had used Freedom of Information requests to secure a response to their demands for information from their own councils. Information, research support, training and development and a council organisational structure of the council that recognises and supports the work of the councillor, is a requirement across local government.

Our research among councillors uncovered a general message that council constitutions were far from fit for purpose when it comes to defending councillors, of all types, and in ensuring that they have the resources, support and rights within the council to be able to conduct their various tasks. Indeed, there is disturbing evidence to suggest that constitutions can be manipulated by ruling groups to undermine opposition and minimise opportunities for accountability. Constitutions, it was put to us, are often designed for the convenience of the

ruling administration. We do not know how widespread such practices are, but it is clear that council constitutions do not always facilitate and support the work of the councillor. A major review is required of whether or not council constitutions are fit for purpose.

Beyond the Council

Councillors explained to us an increasing amount of their work is now drawing them outside of the council and into a series of complex and interconnecting networks of public, private and third sector organisations. It is in those interactions that councillors operate within two dimensions: strategic (council-wide and beyond the borders of the council) and ward-based (functional and often service based). It was also made clear that both leading and backbench councillors operate within those two dimensions. Interactions with external agencies and organisations see leading councillors working to shape and influence the decisions, policies and actions of those organisations. Leading members operate in close contact with senior executives and board members of a range of organisations in an attempt to bring them into alignment with the council's objectives or vision for the development and well-being of the area.

Other councillors, outside of leadership positions, especially when acting in scrutiny, but also when acting as a lone councillor, are also now spending considerable time and energy interacting with external agencies to achieve similar outcomes to leading members. Councillors are not excluded from attempting to influence what public, private and third sector organisations do at a strategic level – they do however, experience a similar resource imbalance to when they are operating within the council when compared to the support leading members receive when also interacting with external bodies. All councillors operate on a ward/divisional basis to influence the functional delivery of services from a range of bodies and to influence the decisions that are taken by others that result in improvements to the well-being of communities within their electoral areas. Councillors are not freed from looking after the *'patch'* simply because they are leading members.

Councillors were loud and clear in the message they sent that their role is becoming more and more about securing the public accountability of organisations beyond the council. That is, they are questioning, challenging, critiquing, seeking justification and explanations from, and holding up to public gaze a myriad of public, third sector and private organisations. Many of these organisations operate on a sub-regional, regional or national basis, maybe single service focused, have considerable resources available to them and have little or no regard for, or recognition of, the role of the councillor. Yet, it is councillors and the council which has something that these external bodies lack: a democratic mandate and direct line of electoral accountability to the public.

We heard that leading and other councillors are not automatically guaranteed a receptive and welcome hearing from the bodies with which they seek to engage, at any level. Indeed, a scattered pattern of engagement between councillors and external agencies exists across the country. In some areas councillors, of all types, have been able to forge strong, cooperative and positive relationships with the police, the NHS, or local offices of government departments. In other areas of the country, councillors find engaging with the same bodies to be fraught with difficulty and have found external agencies reluctant or unwilling to cooperate with them.

As with the council of which councillors are a member, councillors also want information, data and a responsive and collaborative attitude from the host of organisations with which they are increasingly called upon to interact with. We heard that for some councillors the title 'councillor' can open doors to external agency interaction; but we also heard for some the use of the word 'councillor' was meaningless and carried no weight with those they were attempting to engage in a discussion. It would not be too farfetched a conclusion to make that for some agencies and bodies, the office of the councillor means very little.. It is the case that our councillors have to invest time, energy, resources and a dogged determination when it comes to engaging with some external bodies.

The Centre

Councillors expressed a view that Westminster and Whitehall often interact with them with a barely concealed contempt for councillors and a poverty of democratic respect for local government. Again, the conclusion is not too farfetched as it stems from councillors' general experiences of the way central government approaches local government and their understanding of what it is councillors do and how they are able to undertake their roles and functions. There is intense frustration among councillors about the level of interference from central government in their day-to-day activities and in the low levels of discretion and autonomy councillors have over the policies and decisions of their councils. There is a very loud and clear call from councillors for a reduction in central oversight and interference, which councillors believe will only come from the centre trusting them and local government far more than is currently the case.

Not surprisingly councillors support localism and devolution, in principle. But, there is considerable scepticism about the genuine nature of central government's localism and devolution policies. The scepticism is not aimed at a particular government, but is based on assessment, by councillors, that the 'centre', 'Westminster (whichever party was in power) and Whitehall', have interpretations of the two terms, which still rest on the centre maintaining control: localism and devolution is something the centre does to local government and councillors, not with them. Moreover, the fear councillors expressed about the lack of central trust is seen to be justified when the centre's interpretation of localism is something which

often *'leapfrogs'* elected local government and devolves powers to communities and neighbourhoods. Alternatively, councillors articulate localism as being about the culture of their localities and the culture of an approach to local politics but that can only take councillors so far; without the powers and responsibilities needed to respond to pressures and issues emerging locally, councillors and their communities will ultimately be frustrated.

We heard a genuine support among many councillors for greater devolution and for more powers and responsibilities to come to local government and for the centre to relinquish control of services and decision-making. Councillors were enthused by the idea that devolution could result in different agreements existing across the country, as that meant the centre had to respond to the different policy priorities of the localities. Yet, councillors are clearly concerned that while responsibilities are devolved from the centre, the resources and freedoms necessary for them to be able to shape the end results of devolution would not be fully delivered. Similarly to their views about localism, councillors expressed the view that devolution was something being done to local government, rather than reflecting a fundamental change in the relationship between local government and the centre.

Among the councillors we spoke to, there are two schools of thought about the concept of *'double devolution'* – devolution to parish and town councillors. First, there are those principal authority councillors who voice the opinion that devolution from the centre cannot and must not result in localised centralisation with everything resting at the town or county hall. In other words, local subsidiarity should occur and ensure that what could be devolved to towns and parishes should be devolved. The second current of opinion expressed by some principal authority councillors is less favourable towards double devolution because it reflects an unfavourable view about the necessity of having town and parish councils at all. Parish and town councillors we spoke to are, as might be expected, overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the prospect of the right services and responsibilities for their areas being devolved to them so long as they reflect the reality of parish and town resources. Parish councillors echo the idea that double devolution is an antidote to the possibility of localised centralisation.

There was considerable disappointment among some of the councillors we spoke to, that the debate about devolution has, in county areas, degenerated into a re-emergence of a debate about the possibility of local government reorganisation. On the other hand, there is support among some, mainly but not exclusively county councillors, that reorganisation would lead to unitary local government – although considerable disagreement exists about which council or councils should become the new unitary.

Perceptions

We heard a great deal from councillors about the way in which they are viewed and the way their work is understood, or misunderstood, by three important audiences: the public, the

media and the government. Councillors are understandably anxious about how misconceptions about them, their work and their office, held by either of those three groups, could damage the standing and status of councillors and local government and could undermine what they are attempting to achieve for their localities. It is clear to councillors there has been a steady and malignant undermining of the status and responsibilities of councillors over the years and a vicious cycle has occurred with the misconceptions of the public, media and government operating to reinforce a set of negative perceptions about councillors.

The public either perceive councillors as having a *'magic wand'* to solve their problems (and express frustration and disappointment when councillors are unable to immediately solve the issues they wish resolved); or the public feel councillors are excessively paid, ineffective and distant. Many of the frustrations about councillors that they passed on to us by councillors, arose from an inflated idea of the powers and responsibilities that councillors hold as elected local politicians.

The media were seen by councillors to be frequently focusing on the negative aspects of their job and as such, creating a widely held, but inaccurate view, by reporting on their political, personal and policy-related activities from a negative perspective. In spite of this, councillors still recognised that they are public property and media attention comes with the turf.

Equally of concern to councillors is the attitude of central government to them, their office and local government generally. Councillors do not feel they are anywhere near seen as equals in the overall governance of their localities, let alone the country, when it comes to interaction with Westminster and Whitehall. Councillors identify a feeling of being treated with disdain by the centre and where such disdain is expressed it simply serves to underpin the negative public and media perceptions of councillors, their ability and what they do.

Councillors called for greater awareness and understanding of what they do among these three main audiences and that is not a call that need be made in vain but is something that those within and beyond local government can take on as a policy priority. The image held of councillors is also something which enhanced training and development can help to alter.

Being a Councillor

The message we received from councillors about the office they hold, was that they are passionate, enthusiastic and dedicated to their duties and have a clear focus on improving the quality of life of their communities collectively and of citizens individually. Councillors also express a pride in the office they hold and what given the right circumstances, powers and responsibilities they could achieve for their areas though that office.

We heard from councillors about the near impossibility of compartmentalising their lives into council, social, employment and other facets and about how council work could, and very often does, spill over into all their activities beyond the council. It is the experience of the all pervasiveness of council work that is reported by councillors as a major barrier in attempting to encourage a more diverse councillor population and in encouraging younger people in particular to stand for election. Councillors recognised that 'representation' and 'representativeness' are interpreted more and more in a sociological or microcosmic sense; that is, representation means an elected chamber 'looking like' or resembling the local community. There is a clear tension here with more traditional interpretations of 'representation' focused on the 'representing' of political views and opinions in a representative chamber.

When speaking about encouraging greater participation in standing for council, the ever-vexed question of remuneration was raised. There are a wide range of views about the issue, with a preference for full-time salaried councillors at the one end of the spectrum and councillors as unpaid public servants at the other. For every voice that called for an increase in councillor remuneration, there was a voice opposed. The issue however, requires radical action not just to enhance the roles, responsibilities and powers of councillors, but also to encourage a wider group of people to seek election as a councillor. Moreover, the conclusion drawn from listening to councillors is that estimates of the hours councillors contribute to council duties often woefully underestimates the realities of the work and time commitment given to that work by councillors.

Parish and Town Councillors

In hearing from parish and town councillors, it is very clear that they experience most of the same pressures and tensions experienced by their colleagues on principal authorities, but their councils are much more likely to lack the resources to provide them with support required to deal with those tensions. Indeed, parish and town councillors require the same support mechanisms, training, research and administrative infrastructure as principal authority councillors. It is only the scale on which those pressures exist that varies from the experiences of principal councillors and the proximity of many parish and town councillors to their communities magnifies the tensions and expectations they face. It also means parish and town councillors are approached about a range of issues which are outside of the responsibility of their parish or town and which rest with one or either - or both - of the principal authorities.

There is considerable appetite among parish and town councillors for double devolution and for receiving functions and responsibilities from district and county councils. It must however, be down to parish and town councillors to decide which functions and responsibilities should be the subject of local double devolution as it is the parish and town councillors who know the issues, resources, priorities and needs of their local communities, and how they are placed to

deal with what might be devolved to them. While there should be no localised centralisation, there can also be no enforced devolution for the convenience of the district and county.

Parish and town councillors are noticeable in the passion, commitment and excitement they express about their role and about the parish and towns of which they are a member, and about the communities within those parishes and towns. It was at the roundtables with parish and town councillors that such excitement was noticeable and at which the passion for local community governance was heard the loudest.

The diversity in size, population and resources of parish and town councils, which operate as the first level of local government, means it is essential to dispense with the *'Vicar of Dibley'* image that many councillors believe belittles and undermines what they attempt to do within their localities and with a range of external agencies. Parish and town councillors are experiencing the need to deal with the outside world and to influence and shape its behaviour and hold other agencies to account in just the same way as their principal authority counterparts. As a consequence of the development of the external role of the parish and town councillor the resources and support available must match this new and growing demand.

Two issues exercise parish and town councillors considerably: the first is the issue of those elected members of the parish or town who also sit on one or both principal authorities within which the parish or town is located. These twin or triple-hatters are either seen as a bonus to the parish or town council and as a ready means of access to district and to county council decision-making and to the officers of those councils. On the other hand, twin or triple-hatters are seen as almost an 'agent' of the other councils, who merely sit on parish or town councils to keep an eye on them or to prevent or dilute criticism of the district or county council. Thus, opinion varied about the benefits or otherwise of a parish or town councillor being elected to other councils and in this case a localised solution, left to parish and town councils, might seem appropriate.

The second issue of some concern to parish and town councils is the formation of new local councils. As would be expected, parish and town councillors want to see an extension to the coverage of parish and town councils across the country. The issue of contention is the process of governance reviews and the ability of the principal authority to control the destiny of parish and town councils and the formation of new parish and town councils. It was made clear that in some areas the principal authority is in principle, opposed to the formation of parish and town councils, or obstructive to their formation. It is illogical to have the future of a locally elected body in the hands of other locally elected bodies rather than in the hands of local communities themselves.

One thing is abundantly clear from the messages received from parish and town councillors and that is the contribution they make to public service delivery, local democracy and community well-being is a vital part of the overall governance of the country. If double

devolution is to be successful, the parish level of government must be strengthened and empowered.

Hearing the Voice of the Councillor

The office of councillor, and the people that hold that office, make a unique and powerful contribution to the governance of not only their localities, but also to the governance of the country as a whole. The commitment, dedication, work and loyalty of councillors to their councils and communities is often overlooked, misunderstood or ignored by many. Without that work and contribution, our democracy would be far less rich, vibrant and healthy.

The experiences, knowledge, expertise and practical understanding of what is needed to improve the health and effectiveness of local government and democracy rests with councillors. In listening to the councillors that spoke to us the messages they sent must be heard and acted upon by government. Councillors are a professionalised body of politicians – that is, they take a professional, informed, educated and sophisticated view of the needs of their councils, the communities within them and of their wards and divisions. Moreover, councillors are dealing with complex political, social and economic decisions and overseeing and controlling the activities and finances of a diverse service providing entity, while at the same time operating close to communities and citizens within their own patches.

Councillors understand what changes are required to enable them to be more effective in the long-term government of their areas. They know what is needed so they can indeed govern locally and ensure the future development of their localities and enhance their economic, social, environmental, community and political well-being of those areas that they represent. Councillors have told us they need to be liberated and empowered to be able to govern locally and if devolution is to achieve anything of lasting worth, it must be a fundamental change in the nature of the relationship between central and local government. The report of the commission's inquiry is called 'The Voice of the Councillor' because what we were told by councillors needs to form the basis of a set of fundamental reforms to the office of councillor and the recommendations that follow reflect what we were told. We are left with one question: will government listen?

Recommendations

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 councilors 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.

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Appendix 1: List of roundtables (2015 – 2016)

1	21st November 2015	LGA Young Councillors Event
2	18th December 2015	Launch roundtable at De Montfort University
3	13th February 2016	#NotWestminster 2016
4	2nd March 2016	Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
5	16th March 2016	East Midlands Councils
6	4th April 2016	Leeds City Council
7	5th April 2016	Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council
8	10th May 2016	Association of Democratic Service Officers; Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
9	11th May 2016	Staffordshire County Council
10	13th May 2016	West Suffolk Councils
11	26th May 2016	London Borough of Sutton Council
12	7th June 2016	Shawbury Parish Council
13	15th June 2016	Test Valley Borough Council
14	20th June	South East Employers
15	30th June 2016	Wakefield Council
16	5th July 2016	Leicester City Council
17, 18	7th July 2016 *(two sessions)*	Hampshire Association of Local Councils
19	8th July 2016	Sussex Association of Local Councils
20	27th July 2016	Essex Association of Local Councils
21	12th August 2016	Kent Association of Local Councils
22	30th August 2016	Luton Borough Council
23	12th September 2016	London Member Development Network
24	22nd September 2016	Torbay Council
25	4th October 2016	Cumbria Association of Local Councils
26	27th October 2016	East Riding and North Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils
27	16th November 2016	Northumberland Association of Local Councils
28	19th November 2016	LGA Young Councillors Event
29	24th November 2016	Association of Democratic Service Officers Conference 2016
30	16th December 2016	Broughton and Milton Keynes Parish Council
31	1st December 2016	Centre for Public Scrutiny Conference 2016

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