



A councillor's workbook on community leadership



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Introduction

This workbook has been designed as a distance learning aid for local councillors. It is intended to provide councillors with insight and assistance with the key skills which will help you to be most effective in your role. Some of the content may be of most use to more newly elected councillors, but nonetheless if you have been a councillor for some time, the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that make for an effective ward councillor and community leader. It may even challenge you to reconsider how you have approached aspects of the role to date.

Those councillors who are new to local government will recognise that there are many aspects to being an effective ward or division councillor. The workbook will help you to get up to speed on the main areas that require focus and attention. In effect, it should provide you with some pointers on how to develop a style and approach that you are comfortable with, and that enables you to be most effective in your day to day duties.

The workbook can be used as a standalone learning aid or alongside other material you may cover such as e learning modules or sessions within your own council. It is recognised that each individual must decide how best to use and develop their influencing skills, based on individual preference and confidence. As such, the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach in influencing other people – how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent. In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a

number of features designed to help you think about the ward councillor role. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate guidance, research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are ‘pen pictures’ of approaches used by councils elsewhere.



Hints and tips – a selection of good practices that you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information that may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches.

A list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the Appendix to the workbook.

This workbook may usefully be read alongside a complementary workbook on neighbourhood and community engagement. The two subjects are linked in terms of their subject matter and can also be found as the topic of a Local Government Association (LGA) councillor e-learning module.

The e-learning modules can be accessed at <https://lms.learningnexus.co.uk/LGA/>

The context

What do we mean when we talk about community leadership and the roles and responsibilities of councillors? Many different people and many varied services contribute to the welfare of local communities. But councillors are uniquely placed to develop strategies, shape thinking and take an active lead locally because they alone have been democratically elected to represent the interests of the people and the council. This gives them a legitimacy and a mandate no other local body or individual has, apart of course, from MPs.



Guidance

“Some people think that being a Councillor is about being important in the Town Hall – wrong! The political work is important but the most important role for a Councillor is mixing and fixing in the communities you represent. That is where you can really make a difference. By being the ‘Cabinet Member’ for your ward and showing real community leadership.”

Cllr Richard Kemp, Liverpool City Council



Guidance

“Good councillors make sure voters feel involved, creating a buzz of new ideas.

Not much happens that they don't know about.”

Polly Toynbee, 'The Guardian'

Community leadership in a changing environment

As a result of government legislation designed to move decision making closer to the local communities which councillors are elected to represent, the whole landscape of community leadership and engagement with local neighbourhoods is changing. For a wide range of issues there is compelling evidence that bringing decision making closer to the people affected leads to better outcomes and saves the taxpayer money. As such, there has been significant drive in recent years to devolve decision making powers away from Westminster and put power in the hands of local communities. Government legislation and guidelines have required and encouraged councils to work in closer partnership with other bodies – such as the police and health authorities – and to empower councillors to take a higher profile as advocates and leaders in their wards.

The idea is to give individual councillors greater influence over the services and facilities available in their wards – and the freedom to prioritise provision according to local needs – so long as they are not acting in conflict with the council's overall interests.

Decentralisation and localism is an extension of this – giving greater control to local communities and transforming the relationship between central government, local government, communities and individuals. The democratically accountable role of the councillor is uniquely placed to understand the needs of the community and to take a joined up approach to meeting them.

The Localism Act 2011

The Localism Act¹ was introduced in November 2011. Its aim was to better enable local councils, communities and individuals to act on local priorities by giving them greater powers. The Act covers a wide range of issues relating to local public services, with a particular focus on the general power of competence, community rights², neighbourhood planning and housing.

The key measures of the Act are grouped under four main headings:

- new freedoms and flexibilities for local government
- new rights and powers for communities and individuals
- reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective
- reform to ensure decisions about housing are taken locally.

Since the introduction of the 2011 Act, local government has been at the heart of making it happen – transferring powers, asset, resources and decision making down to grass roots communities. This has a direct effect on your role as a community leader. How you lead as well as who you lead, will directly impact on your effectiveness as a politician and to the contribution you make to your local area, its residents the organisations and businesses within it.

1 The Department of Communities and Local Government published 'A plain English guide to the Localism Act: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5959/1896534.pdf

2 mycommunity.org.uk - a one-stop hub and network for communities to help them get inspired, it offers resources, stories and the opportunity for individuals to find community rights activity in their area

The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016³ has also resulted in a major change to how councillors engage with one another across council boundaries. The Act has provided the legal framework for the implementation of devolution deals with combined authorities and other areas. Devolution deals are agreements between central and local government, granting councils new flexibilities and freedoms when making decisions for their local area. Devolution, therefore, provides the opportunity to ensure that decisions are taken as close to residents as possible. Many local authorities are also looking to take this one step further through ‘double’ or onward devolution – passing down control of services to town and parish councils, as well as community groups.



Case study Cornwall Council's work on devolving to local communities.

For more information:

www.cornwall.gov.uk/community-and-living/communities-and-devolution/devolution

Against this backdrop of increased localisation, there are compelling reasons why councillors need to look at their community leadership role so as to better at engage with their communities:

- There is a primary responsibility to consult and involve all the stakeholders in their community – localism and devolution is about giving more say and power to local communities.
- Good leadership can help to improve the reputation of councillors and build trust among residents – in an era of tight fiscal constraint and public service reform, councils, and those elected to serve them need to do all they can to demonstrate that they are delivering value for money by keeping their residents well informed.
- To enable capacity building so that communities are empowered to solve their own problems without the need for costly statutory sector provision or intervention. This is not just about the need to save money – although that is undoubtedly a driving force – but is about the need to recognise that society is changing with a more connected population demanding greater participation in shaping the lives of their own communities.

Ward councillors, as democratically-elected leaders representing their communities, have a unique role to play leading strong, connected communities – what we sometimes refer to as ‘neighbourhood and community engagement’. The LGA workbook of this title provides more information on this topic.



Challenges The future of local leadership

“...leaders must engage communities in a dialogue about the extent of state support available, and about the roles of, and the relationships between, state, individual and community. This dialogue needs to be open, honest and realistic [and] be at the heart of a new way of working where local authorities work together with communities to pursue collective aims”.⁴

Councillor Claire Kober

Leader of London Borough of Haringey

³ The LGA have produced a guide to the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act:

www.local.gov.uk/get-inon-the-act

The LGA's DevoNext Hub is dedicated entirely to devolution news and resources:

www.local.gov.uk/devolution

⁴ Extract from ‘How does direct democracy change leader's roles as local activists?’ The Next Question, NLGN, August 2011,

www.nlgn.org.uk



Guidance

Strong community leadership is fundamental to being a good local councillor. It's about being approachable to residents, making them feel involved in decision making and standing up for their interests.

It also means acting as a broker between different groups of residents or partners, as well as communicating the strategic goals of the Council in a local context. This can be challenging, but councillors are uniquely placed to fill that role, owing to the democratic mandate we've been given.

Cllr Sarah Russell

Derby



Guidance

The LGA in action

The LGA has developed a 'community action' web resource. This provides information and case studies about how councils can involve communities in the design and delivery of services.

The LGA works to support councils to better engage their communities in the design and delivery of services – something we call community action.

As the sector undertakes a fundamental rethink of how public services are delivered in light of this and ongoing financial challenges, it is right that we consider the role of local people in designing, commissioning (or decommissioning) and delivering those services.

There are a number of successful examples of local authorities enabling and empowering their communities. The community action web resource contain information based on conversations with councils across the country, illustrating where community action is happening, as well as guiding principles, tools and resources for other areas looking to work in this way.

www.local.gov.uk/community-action

Understanding neighbourhoods and communities

In the context of this workbook, the terms 'neighbourhood' and 'community' are used in a broad sense to mean one or more of the following:

- general or specific geographical areas that are defined as workplaces or categorised by their residential nature, eg an area with a defined population size, a single housing estate, a block of streets within a ward area
- groups of people defined by the areas they live or work in, eg ward constituents or the 'community' of individual towns and villages
- groups of people defined by something other than their residential or workplace environments, ie communities defined on the grounds of race, colour, age, class, faith, disability or sexuality.

Every neighbourhood or community is made up of different individuals and groups, whose particular views, interests and ambitions may often be at odds and may not always be reconcilable. This is not a reason for ignoring the importance of neighbourhood and community engagement, but is the very real challenge which you will face in getting people more actively involved in the issues which affect them.

Ward members are in the front line of neighbourhood and community engagement. As a community leader, you are best placed to understand the particular challenges faced by your constituents. By working with a wide range of individuals and organisations in the area, you can help them to decide how best to respond. It is only at a local level that problems such as access to social housing, crime, deprivation and anti-social behaviour can be understood and addressed. Few other community leaders have the mandate to coordinate different interests, reconcile diverse views and encourage open debate and dialogue in the way that you can.

What is community leadership?

It said the role of the community advocate includes:

- speaking up for, and on behalf of, individuals and groups
- encouraging residents to engage and participate
- participating in plan making and planning decisions
- communicating residents' concerns to the council and to other providers such as the police. But in this role councillors must not, it said, 'lose sight of the strategic context for the council area as a whole'.

It said the role of the community leader includes:

- stimulating local organisations and individuals to take up opportunities to express their views
- representing local level concerns and perspectives
- maintaining a link between the users and the providers of services
- encouraging the community to organise for themselves
- working with other community leaders in the voluntary, community and business sectors
- offering vision and direction to local groups, and building support for that vision
- brokering agreements between different interests and partners
- contributing as an effective partner in neighbourhood arrangements, including those that deliver delegated functions.

Community leadership can be defined as:

- helping communities to identify and deal with problems in the most effective way
- bringing in help from officers and partners
- acting as the voice for the community to the council, partners and others
- communicating the work of the council and partners to the community
- leading the community and others in developing a vision for the area and the steps to achieve it.



Activity 1

- (a) What does community leadership mean to you?
- (b) What does community leadership mean to your council?
- (c) To what extent have you already developed your role as a community leader for your ward?
- (d) Have you identified local problems or ambitions and discussed possible solutions with other local groups and organisations?
- (e) What personal obstacles are there to you becoming a leader in your community?
- (f) What external obstacles are there?



Case study

“For me, being a good community leader is about being a part of my community, listening to their needs and acting to deliver outcomes, usually working with other partners such as the police, other local authorities and the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector is becoming increasingly essential to the delivery of services as central government funds to local authorities decreases. Campaigning is something I enjoy enormously therefore I am always involved in projects that look to make a difference to our community, for example, as Mayor of Amersham, my community fundraising group raised £120,000 to install an outdoor gym, Street Snooker, table tennis, cricket, football, basketball and handball courts to celebrate the London 2012 Games and to promote health and fitness to the whole community that was accessible to all, DDA compliant, free and fun! At a national level, I campaigned for the 12A cinema classification, which has benefitted most families in the UK. Being a community leader is incredibly satisfying and I absolutely love what I do. I have been elected since 1999 and a community volunteer and campaigner since 1995. Try it! The more you do, the more you want to do. It is the most satisfying role I have ever had.”

Cllr Mrs Mimi Harker OBE
Chiltern District Council

The meaning of leadership

Leadership in this context does not mean taking centre stage – it is about creating the right environment for others to act. It is less directing and controlling, more stimulating, enabling and empowering. County and district councillors need to explore their respective roles – while at the same time acknowledging the important role of parish and town councils and councillors.

The growth in the number of organisations and agencies active at a local level and the localism agenda has made the task of community leadership more complex, and at the same time more important. Councillors have to demonstrate their ability to fulfil that leadership role whilst also convincing their local partners that there is something in it for them

Community leadership concerns more than the services and functions delivered by the council. The focus of community leadership has to be the whole range of public services delivered locally together with the contribution and impact of the private, voluntary and community sectors. It is not just about the council's vision for the locality, it has to be framed around a shared vision – and one backed up by a shared commitment to delivering. The task of taking the difficult decisions – on for example issues where consensus cannot be reached – lies with councillors and cannot be easily ducked. This responsibility goes to the heart of your community leadership role.



Guidance A three thousand year old philosophy

Go to the people; live among them; love them; start from where they are; work with them; build on what they have.

But of the best leaders, when the task is accomplished, the work is completed,

The people all remark: "We have done it ourselves".

Lao Tzu,
'Tao Te Ching' (Chapter 17)



Hints and tips Do's and Dont's

Do

- Find out what groups and organisations are active in your ward – some, like the police, will be obvious, others less so.
- Find out what concerns and ambitions they have and look for common ground and possible areas of disagreement.
- Develop a shared vision for the ward that is achievable and not in conflict with council policy.
- Develop a plan that will guide you and your partners in making the vision a reality.
- Tell fellow councillors and residents about what you are doing.
- Encourage and enable others to take the lead on matters close to their hearts.
- Remember that as an elected councillor you have democratic integrity and a responsibility to represent everyone in your ward – not just those who voted for you.
- Understand that some partner organisations will not have the freedom and flexibility you possess.
- Involve council officers when necessary and appropriate.
- Celebrate success and share your experience with others facing similar challenges.

Do not

- Try to do everything yourself – your role is to conduit between the various local groups and organisations and between them and the council.
- Attend every meeting and event held in your ward – it is not necessary and you will quickly become exhausted.
- Try to solve every problem that comes your way – other people and organisations

may have more resources and expertise than you have.

- Forget the needs and opinions of individuals.
- Become associated with pressure groups unless you feel that their agendas are compatible with your role as a councillor.
- Hoard information – sharing knowledge about local matters will lead to better working relationships and better outcomes.
- Expect to agree with everyone or for them to agree with you – some negotiations will be tough and challenging.
- Complain – get things done instead.

Leadership characteristics

The LGA suggests there are at least eight characteristics of effective community leaders.

1. Listening to and involving local communities – councillors cannot call themselves leaders if they are not in touch with the communities they purport to represent. They need to be in touch with all parts of their community such as parishes and neighbourhoods, and communities of interest, such as young people and minority ethnic communities.
2. Building vision and direction - local communities face a complex and diverse set of problems and challenges. They want to know that all the relevant organisations in their area – public, private and voluntary – are working together in a common direction. Councillors have to work with the whole gamut of local organisations and interests, in shaping a long-term vision for the areas they serve. No single person acting alone can respond effectively to the needs of localities. Effective community leadership involves securing the commitment of partners to delivering a shared vision for their area as well as helping to shape it.
3. Working effectively in partnerships - no single person, acting alone can respond effectively to the needs of localities. Effective community leadership involves securing the commitment of partners to delivering a shared vision for their area as well as helping to shape.
4. Making things happen – community leadership involves more than having a sense of direction. It is also about making things happen on the ground – delivering outcomes for local people. Vision, direction and effective partnership are only of any use if they deliver actual change on the ground.
5. Standing up for communities – local people want to know that the people they elected to represent them are doing just that. This ‘advocacy’ role can involve speaking out for local people on major issues that impact on the community – such as hospital or factory closures – and acting on behalf of specific groups of individuals.
6. Empowering local communities – community leadership is not about the councillor taking power for him/herself. It is more about creating the environment in which other leadership roles can develop, and fostering the development of active citizenship. Councillors have both to lead and stand back at the same time, investing in the growth and development of communities so that they are able to govern themselves.
7. Accountability to communities – community leadership involves being accountable to local people – through the ballot box and through the development of active on-going relationships with people such as by listening to and being accountable to local communities through citizens’ juries, people’s panels and area forums.
8. Using community resources effectively – communities, councils and partners have a wide range of resources they can bring to the table. Community leadership is about ensuring these resources are used effectively to meet local priorities. Community leadership is also about delivering the best outcomes for local people and actively seeking new ways to promote the wellbeing of their area.



Hints and tips Seven behaviours to realise good community leadership

1. **Good communications** – shift from communication to conversations through adaptable style, facilitation and feedback
2. **Openness** – transparency, approachable and open minded
3. **Empathetic** – listening and hearing, being receptive and responsive
4. **Negotiating** – ‘holding the space’ conflict resolution, reconciliation, mediation
5. **Motivating** – encouraging, stimulating confidence
6. **Managing expectations** – set realistic expectations and meet them
7. **Sharing** – learning to let go, work with different working agencies and organisations



Guidance

It is the responsibility of councillors and community leaders to listen to and act on people’s views and concerns. While keeping expectations realistic, leaders must be willing to take account of, and fight for their residents.”

Claire Wright Devon CC



Activity 2

(a) What do you believe are your top three leadership behaviours?

(b) How have you recently demonstrated those behaviours? Have you personally led members of your community in resolving a particular issue, challenge or opportunity?

(c) What area represents your greatest opportunity for growth and development?

How might you improve in this area?

(d) How would you rate your council’s performance at a ward level?

– excellent – good – acceptable – poor – non-existent?

(e) Who are the other key community leaders in your ward?

(f) How do/might you use your leadership behaviours to further develop the leadership skills of others?

Why does it matter

Research consistently show that communities that are engaged – that is, where different groups, organisations and individuals from the public, private and voluntary sectors communicate with each other and contribute to the wellbeing of their community – tend to have happier, healthier people and lower levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.

At the same time, there is concern about the decline in voting in local elections, more people living on their own, threats to community cohesion and an increasingly detached attitude towards their local area and what is going on there.

Councillors have an important role to play here because they are the interface between citizens and the council and they have the power to demonstrate directly what they have achieved for the people they represent. Through surgeries, casework, the media, local events, social and voluntary groups, newsletters, blogs and so on, they can effect change and communicate their achievements to local people.

In politics it is often easy to look for the big gesture, the big plan, the big policy statement. But real tangible achievement at ward level need not be like that. Time after time, research and case studies show that little things mean a lot when it comes to improving things for local people.



Guidance

“For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalised reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants’ sense of self, developing the ‘I’ into the ‘we’.”

Professor Robert Putnam, Harvard.

Working in partnership

Community leadership is about councils, both councillors and officers, enabling local communities to determine their own future. It is not traditional, top-down leadership, but involves councillors and officers using all the tools at their disposal to engage communities in making their own difference. It promotes a partnership of shared commitment to promote a shared vision for the locality.

Councillors need to have:

- the ability to build effective partnerships with other local organisations and communities
- a commitment to community engagement and empowerment
- the ability to respond effectively to local priorities
- a sound understanding of local governance arrangements
- an understanding of the local community and the groups and organisations within it
- access to key people in other agencies within that community
- access to officers and key people within local authority.

The landscape of partnership working is shifting with new opportunities emerging.

However, the central concern for councils and councillors remains to promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their areas, achieving sustainable communities. The key role is to:

- provide for local communities – articulation of aspirations, needs and priorities
- co-ordinate the actions of public, private, voluntary and community organisations
- shape and focus existing and future activities of these organisations to meet community needs.

Whether you are working at the ward or whole council level, to produce a community strategy there must be a process of community planning. Key stakeholders must be involved in this process. These could be large groups like the police, health authorities and schools, or smaller ones, such as voluntary groups, local businesses and community groups.

Partnerships of all kinds are at the heart of community planning and neighbourhood renewal agendas. While, multi-agency in their composition, their purpose is to bring together statutory, non-statutory, private, voluntary and community organisations for the purpose of promoting and improving residents' quality of life. Having an agreed strategy can provide a framework for different organisational processes and mobilising a wide range of agencies, organisations and community interests.

Partnerships should:

- build consensus around an agreed vision for the future
- see their own interests in the context of a bigger picture
- encourage the development of sustainable communities
- identify conflicting objectives and needs
- build trust and closer working relationships, where appropriate
- develop a clear understanding of each partner's roles and responsibilities
- review existing partnership and consultation arrangements
- share data and analysis
- share resources and provide a coordinated response to community priorities
- shape and focus existing and future activities of agencies
- produce a community strategy.



Activity 3

(a) What have you achieved in partnership with others – as a councillor, in your private life or in a job – that you could not have achieved alone?

(b) What were the advantages of working in partnership?

(c) What were the disadvantages?

(d) What lessons have you learnt as a result?

Partnerships will not necessarily be cosy, friendly affairs where everyone thinks the same way – have you thought about how you will deal with representatives of other organisation and groups who may have different views and who may even be hostile or aggressive?

Final word

Community leadership is essentially about councillors, as democratically elected representatives of their communities, working with local groups and organisations and enabling them to make the best use of their combined skills, talents, expertise, and imagination for the benefit of local citizens.

At one level it is simply about being a good neighbour. At another it could be about driving through major changes affecting everyone in the community involving such things as health, transport, planning, crime and education.

It is down to each individual councillor to have the enthusiasm, commitment and vision to seize the opportunities available that will lead to thriving communities.



Activity 4

(a) Does your council actively encourage and support your role as a leader in your community – and if not how will you change things?

(b) Do you have the encouragement and support of fellow councillors – and if not how will you change things?

(c) Do you feel you have the support of council officers – and if not how will you change things?

(d) How good are your relationships with other groups and organisations represented in your ward?

(e) What three things will you do after completing this workbook to develop your role as a community leader for your ward?

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

The councillors' guide www.local.gov.uk

Community engagement and community
The Next Question: The future of local
leadership, (September 2011), NLGN,
www.nlgn.org.uk/public

Keeping it REAL Responsive, Efficient,
Accountable, Local services (November 2011),
LGA,
[www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/
keep-it-real-responsive-e-67c.pdf](http://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/keep-it-real-responsive-e-67c.pdf)

Useful links

The following organisations' websites have
pages discussing community leadership.

Some also have publications for download.

Local Government Information Unit
www.lgiu.org.uk

New Local Government Network
www.nlgn.org.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk

Useful websites

The LGA website is a valuable source of help
and advice for all those in local government
www.local.gov.uk

The LGA website has many pages discussing
community leadership and a number of
publications, a series of case studies, the
Knowledge Hub, and development programmes
for councillors and council officers. For more
information please go to
[www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-
political-leadership](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership)



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