

A councillor's workbook on handling casework



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There are a number of complementary workbooks and elearning modules which will also assist you when looking at the issue of casework and how to deal with it effectively. Topics such as community leadership, neighbourhood and community engagement and facilitation and conflict resolution will also enable you to look at your wider ward councillor role and how best to consider matters brought to you as a community leader or advocate for others. The councillor workbooks can be found at

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/community-leadership/councillor-workbooks>

To access the elearning modules please go to <https://lms.learningnexus.co.uk/LGA/>

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

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 in dealing with the casework you may receive in that role. 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, when dealing with casework. 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.

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 and 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 your role in handling casework.

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.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information that may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendices to the workbook.

What is casework?

Dealing with the people in your community, understanding the issues and concerns they face, and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action in response to their queries, is an important and valued role for any councillor. The problems and issues local people raise with you are often referred to as 'casework'.

Casework can sometimes lead on to policy development or issue campaigning, but can be distinguished from these by virtue of the fact that casework usually deals with the resolution of an individual problem.

Where does your casework come from?

Casework will often be picked up by councillors through their day to day activities as an elected representative of the area, ie through letters, telephone calls, emails and door knocking. The period before, during and after an election is likely to be a particularly popular time for people to raise issues or concerns.

The amount of casework you receive can vary considerably and it is probably true to say that the higher the level of deprivation in your area, the more casework you are likely to face. But if the casework in your in-tray is consistently sparse, ask yourself the crucial question – is this because you represent a very self-sufficient community, or is it because your profile is too low?

However it is important to know how your casework might be generated and to be aware of the likely issues in your ward which could give rise to increased casework referrals.



Casework – some examples

Direct query – a neighbour asks if you could find out what progress has been made in processing her application for a renovation grant.

Indirect query – a daughter, ringing up on behalf of her frail, elderly parent, asks if her mother is entitled to claim council tax benefit.

Complaint – a local housing tenant e-mails you to complain about the repeated vandalism to her council property.

Service request – a shopkeeper asks if you could arrange for an extra trade waste collection at his premises.

Community issue – a group of parents lobby you to prompt the council to remove a burnt out vehicle from a nearby park.



The role of a councillor has many facets. When residents contact you, they are frequently at their lowest ebb, have exhausted all avenues open to them and are desperate for help. Sometimes it is the first time someone has really listened to them, often I visit them in their own homes, allowing them to feel comfortable. Being a councillor isn't clinical, we occupy the rough, blurred edges of council work; the butter in the sandwich, not always necessary, but can help to keep the pieces of bread together!

Casework comes in all shapes and sizes, from the right size bin and its collection to supporting a family to receive the right school placement. When a child has specific needs, whether educational or medical, the views of parents are often ignored. They deal with the situation 24/7, yet their point of view can weigh so little. The prospect of months and years of uncertainty, tribunal, and professionals making decisions can be all too overwhelming. Councillors can bridge that gap, listen, relay information and support, but most are not in a position to make decisions.

Councillors also attend meetings, reading and digesting copious amounts of material. No one warns you! Councillors must take their role seriously, participate in scrutiny, and attend events that effect people and local government. A need for a general understanding of what's happening.

The highlights include being invited to the foster carers excellent tea party for our looked after children and succeeding in resolving residents problems.

Councillor Liz Hazell
Walsall council



Challenge 1 – your recent casework

Using your existing knowledge or any research you are able to carry out on the council's behalf, think about the nature of any casework you have dealt with in recent months. Briefly describe any examples you can think of under the headings below and summarise any action you took to tackle the queries or concerns raised:

Direct query	Action taken
Indirect query	Action taken
Complaint	Action taken
Service request	Action taken
Community Issue	Action taken

Reflect on the examples you have given. Do you feel comfortable that you did everything you could to resolve these matters? To what extent were your residents satisfied with your help and advice? Have you made any efforts to check whether the matters raised affected other local people who may not have approached you for help?

Raising your profile – prompting others to get in touch

Raising your profile is not just about being honest enough to admit that many people in your ward will not know who you are and may be even less likely to recognise that you are their local councillor. Taking steps to make yourself known, and available, to local people should help you to ensure that the bulk of the casework you deal with represents the issues of greatest concern to local residents.

It is likely that you will have tried some of the more traditional ways of raising your profile in the community, eg media and press coverage, meetings with community groups, posters or leaflet drops. But are you also using, or considering, other, more interactive, approaches to prompt others to get in touch?

For example:

Advice surgeries – these enable you to meet residents, discuss their concerns and build an understanding of what can be done to tackle the issues raised. In a traditional advice surgery, councillors advertise a time and place when they will be available to speak to residents, eg perhaps a couple of hours on a Saturday in a local library or village hall. An alternative is to run a street surgery, where councillors knock on doors to solicit casework. Both approaches require careful planning and good advertising to ensure that opportunities for engaging with local people are maximised.



Case study

I believe that casework is the most important work we do as local councillors – it's the work which most closely connects us with the residents who make up our electorate, and whom we have a duty to represent.

Although I attend residents' associations and community meetings, I don't hold my own surgeries. I prefer to go looking for casework – I gather most of my casework by knocking on doors and asking whether there is anything I can help with. This way I get to speak to the many people who, for all sorts of reasons, would never come to meetings – or who think the problem they have is too small to bother anyone with.

For my first few months as a councillor, I kept a notebook and gave each item of casework a single page. I would carry it about with me and quickly note things like names, addresses, phone numbers, and progress updates – and then finally strikethrough the page when the issue was dealt with. I was on my third notebook after a few months, and decided I needed a better system. I spoke with one of my more experienced colleagues from another local authority, and he sent me a customised spreadsheet he'd made to record casework, which I've been using now for well over six months. The way we record casework is really important – because it's essential that we have the information to hand in order to follow things up, chase loose ends, and keep contact information easily to hand.

Cllr Niall Hodson, Sunderland City Council



The Local Government Association's (LGA) Councillors Guide and the workbooks on Effective ward councillor, Community leadership and Neighbourhood and community engagement provide some useful complementary advice on whether to hold advice surgeries, the alternatives you may wish to consider and how to engage with your community effectively.



Alternatives to surgeries

- Being super-visible at local meetings
- 'Rolling surgeries'
- Encourage telephone calls (or even video calls!)
- Liaison with local agencies such as schools, children's centres, advice agencies
- Social media
- Are you seen as the 'go to' person?

Councillor Ed Turner
Oxford City Council



Keeping a high profile

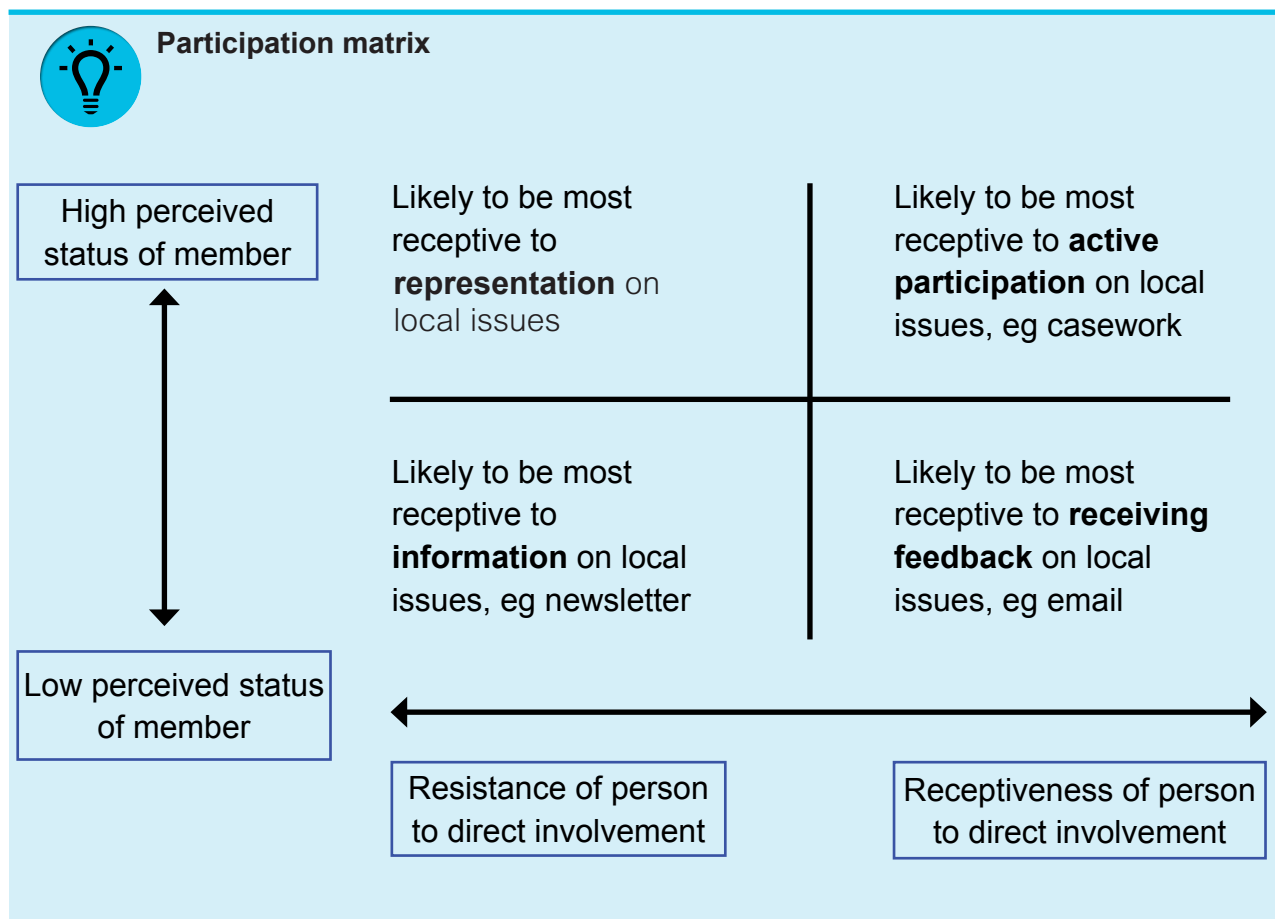
Publish a regular newsletter, liaise with the local press, keep our website up-to-date, and hold surgeries and consultations. Getting a response may take time for your residents to get to know you if you are newly elected

Blogging/ Vlogging – a weblog, 'blog', or video blog (Vlog) are online versions of journals updated on a regular basis, like a diary. Visually it looks just like a website, but usually has a simpler design and fewer pages. A growing number of ward councillors are now using blogs/vlogs to publish reports of their activities on the web and to solicit responses from their residents via e-mail or online surveys. Blogging can help to prompt local people to raise issues of concern and can enable others to give their views on any matters identified.

As community leaders, ward councillors must do what they can to represent the voices of all sections of the community. This may include championing the interests of people who often find it difficult or uncomfortable to articulate their issues or concerns, eg some younger, older or disabled citizens or some people from minority ethnic groups. A proportion of your casework is therefore likely to be concerned with 'speaking for the unheard.'

But don't imagine that everyone will want to come to you with their casework queries. While some people will want to engage with you and actively participate in a dialogue about their issues and concerns, others will be content to let you represent their interests or just keep them informed about what is going on locally. Much of this will depend on each person's perception of 'authority' figures generally, and their receptiveness to direct engagement.

The participation matrix below shows levels of participation that residents like. For example, if one constituent has a high opinion of the councillor but is resistant to direct involvement then they will prefer to receive information about local issues rather than direct feedback. It is worth considering this when you are in your ward.



Dealing effectively with the casework you generate

Dealing with casework will require you to develop your own simple, but effective, ways of managing both the information and paper flow. If you have been a councillor for some time, you have probably developed systems for doing this by default, ie finding out, by trial and error, what works well for you and what doesn't.

Some councils have begun to explore the use of technology-based solutions to help councillors – so-called e-Casework systems. But a sensible use of the equipment you already have available in your home or office and an efficient paper-based record system will serve just as well. Good note-keeping and diary management are essential, as well as a good filing system.

For those councillors that like to make use of technology, spreadsheets and databases can help to store, search and retrieve details of individual cases, alongside the use of email as an essential communication tool. It is also worth noting that many electoral rolls are now available electronically, offering you the possibility of being able to merge this information with a proprietary data management system to cut down on the time required to search for people's names and addresses.

Whatever your preferred approach and regardless of the systems you employ, there will be a number of general steps that you will need to take in handling the casework you generate. These are discussed in the sections below.



Three tips for dealing with casework

Install a dedicated telephone line – use an answering machine or service for calls outside of normal hours.

Use a simple form to capture the key facts about each case, i.e. names, addresses, contact details, casework history, others involved etc.

Make a record of all calls, conversations and action taken – it doesn't have to be onerous, a simple diary 'log' is usually sufficient.



Handling casework in a digital environment

The use of information and communications technology can also assist councillors by enabling residents to send electronic documents and photographic evidence relevant to some casework situations, eg it is not uncommon for residents to send councillors digital photographs of potholes in the road or community sites that have been blighted by vandalism.

Like many people, a growing number of councillors are finding that the use of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter is helping them to raise their profile and build engagement with their residents. While blogging/vlogging, emailing and the use of social media may not be every councillor's preferred route for generating casework, it is likely that some people who might be unwilling or unable to attend an advice surgery may prefer the ease and comfort of corresponding with their ward councillor from their own home and at a time that suits them.

As with any work a councillor does it is an ever changing landscape. In the context of large cuts to local government financing as well as councillors working harder than ever before to make sure their communities are represented casework too has changed. Broadly speaking councillors received queries from the residents via telephone, letters or ward surgeries; this was certainly still very much the case in 2011 when I first became a councillor.

Recently we have seen a channel shift towards emails and social media with it being much less common now to receive a letter or surgery request. As times change we are receiving more enquiries through social media, sometimes in a direct message through Facebook or Twitter, these are what I refer to as reactive inquiries. A resident asks you for advice or help and you react. The other way to engage with residents is if you keep an eye on some of your local community groups on Facebook. There will sometime be queries or complaints about how the council has taken a decision or a concern about their personal situation; If you can support them, why not pop on a post advising that you can help and ask them to call or private message you. This is how I proactively seek to help residents where possible.

The final important principle of handling casework is never promise what you cannot deliver. Managing expectations is now essential, whether that be how long it will take to get back to a constituent with a response or what and can be done due to financial or legal restraints. If we cannot help the resident in the way they wish is there an alternative and if not explain why something cannot be done. Never offer advice that you are unsure is accurate, if you do not know the answer to a query just explain you need further clarity on the matter before giving a response. I find most people appreciate honesty from their councillor and are happy to work with you within the constraints of local government if you explain this to them from the outset.

Cllr Amy Cross Blackpool Council



Challenge 2 – the casework challenge

Think about the systems you employ for handling casework. Write down how you would find out the following information about the cases you have dealt with in the past year:

The proportion of cases successfully resolved?

The number of people under 30 that have contacted you with casework queries?

Look again at what you have written. Could you make any changes to the systems you employ to enable you to extract this and other useful information more readily?

Identify what the problem is

You will need to establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. This will include identifying whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past. It is worth approaching each case with a degree of humility – some residents with evidence of failure by ‘the council’ may see you as their last resort and some may be angry about the way they have been treated.

Avoid promising to sort out every problem, but do offer a sympathetic ear. While you can use your knowledge, contacts and advocacy skills to assist people, it is best to try and get people to help themselves. And keep the discussion focused on solutions and what can be done, rather than looking for scapegoats and people to blame.

Your residents will be looking for support, but they’ll be looking for answers and solutions even more. Understanding the nature and scale of the problem presented will often require you to use your judgement. Some people may try to use you or may avoid telling you everything you need to know. Before you can assist, you need to get all of the relevant facts and information.

Refer the problem to the appropriate council department

Having identified what the problem is, you should communicate with the council officers who handle councillors’ enquiries or relevant service officers, if that is how your council operates. You may want to put your concerns or questions in writing, although most councillors find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or email is quicker and easier in sorting out casework problems.

Remember also to give clear instructions to the council officers, either to write to your constituent with a copy for you, or to work through you. Don’t leave them to decide which approach you favour. And remember to copy the constituent in on what you have sent to officers unless it is confidential.



The LGA’s workbook on Handling complaints for service improvement, written in partnership with the Local Government Ombudsman, will provide you with useful information on what matters should be dealt with by you directly and what should be referred on to other agencies such as government departments or statutory bodies

Get in the habit of taking copies of all correspondence and treat your residents’ affairs with appropriate confidentiality, ie always ask permission before sharing their information or views with a third party and take steps to protect the information you store about them. If you are in any doubt about your legal responsibilities regarding data protection, speak to your council’s legal department.

Casework – dealing with anger

People who approach members about serious or intractable problems can often be stressed or angry. Remember:

- be polite and assertive but never aggressive – this will only increase the tension
- don’t promise more than you can deliver – this will create problems in the long run
- avoid taking personal responsibility for a problem – the blame and hostility may shift on to you
- approach the council if you need help or training in dealing with awkward customers
- don’t respond to racist, sexist or offensive remarks – draw the discussion to a close.



Challenge 3 – the casework challenge

Consider the following casework example. Write down the steps you might take to tackle the issues presented:

The Oaks is a council estate in your ward. It was built in the 1960s and is made up of three streets arranged in a horseshoe, down the centre of which run some old garages which were originally designed for residents' use. The estate gets its name from the woodland which once covered the site. You have been approached by Mrs Dyer, an elderly constituent on the estate, who wants the council to take some action to tackle her concerns. You already know that parts of the estate are run down and can look untidy. You are now being told that the garages on The Oaks have become a 'no go' area for local people. Cars are apparently being abandoned on a regular basis and the empty garages have become a haven for groups of teenagers who create noise and havoc into the night. She also tells you that the buildings are being used for drug dealing and storing stolen cars.

Look again at the ideas you have written down. To what extent have you rushed into a list of possible 'solutions' to the problems presented before checking out the relevant facts?

If the problems presented are widespread, you might expect to have received comments or complaints from other residents. Could you speak to others on the estate, of different ages, to get a more balanced view? If the alleged cases of noise, drug taking and vehicle abandonment are a reality, isn't it likely that the council or other partner agencies (eg the police) will have some evidence for this? It may be that Mrs Dyer is correct in her assessment and that action is needed to tackle a growing community problem, but some early legwork and a few reality checks might help to strengthen your understanding of what is really going on.

Data protection – some considerations

The Data Protection Act 1998 gives people rights regarding personal information that others hold about them and imposes controls on individuals and organisations that use personal information.

The act applies to councillors in the same way that it does to council employees and covers paper records and computerised systems using equipment owned by councillors or provided by the council.

Councillors are regarded as data controllers if they process personal data and are required to notify the information commissioner of the reasons why they hold and process personal data. Councillors using personal data must keep it secure and misuse of data is a punishable offence.



Registering as a data controller

As a councillor there are three distinct roles you perform where you may process personal data and therefore are required to comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 and to register as Data Controller.

1. Council committees and council meetings work (this is covered by your council's notification).
2. Campaigning for election or otherwise acting on behalf of a political party (you should be covered by the party's notification), but check with your constituency chairperson or secretary. Councillors who do not belong to a party will not be covered and therefore will need to notify.

3. Carrying out ward casework eg acting as a representative, in which case, in addition to complying with the requirements for processing personal data, you are the 'data controller' and are required to notify the Information Commissioners Office. In 2011 the Information Commissioners Office wrote to councillors urging them to check their data protection obligations, as failure to register by councillors who handle personal data risks a fine of up to £5,000.

The ICO has issued data protection guidance for elected and prospective members of local authorities:
www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/sector_guides/political.aspx

Thus as a councillor you should decide if you are processing personal data and the role in which you are doing so. If you are make sure you comply with the Act and also check if you need to notify.

This is a complex subject and councillors seeking more information should visit the Information Commissioner Office website for further information at <https://ico.org.uk/>

The Data Protection Act 1998 legislation will be replaced with the General Data Protection Regulation as of May 2018. However at the point of publication of this workbook, the LGA is not yet aware if any of the information above will be subject to change or amendment. However it is assumed that the requirements affecting the need for councillors to register as data controllers will be heightened if anything.



Challenge 4 – helping people to help themselves

Consider the following examples of casework. Write down the steps you would take in helping people to resolve the issues presented.

Two older residents who have complained to you about the ‘inappropriate language’ used by staff in their local library.

A single mother, with literacy problems, who has come to you asking if you can help her to fill out various benefit claim forms from the council.

An elderly resident who says he cannot afford to continue with his council tax payments and wants you to let the council know that ‘he would rather go to prison than ‘pay up’

Reflect on your answers to the cases above. Is there a risk that you are taking on too much personal responsibility in seeking to resolve these matters? To what extent are some of the issues raised outside of your control or influence?

Provide feedback

After you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.

Consider the wider issues

Reflect on the issues raised by the casework and let your co-councillors know. A number of similar concerns raised with councillors may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. Where you have had a success, it is worth letting your fellow ward councillors know in case they face a similar situation. And always try and publicise your success to local residents through leaflets and newsletters.

Some of your casework queries should prompt you to think about 'the bigger picture', ie why problems have occurred in the first place, whether the issues presented by your residents are just the 'tip of the iceberg' in terms of wider community concerns or whether the case is likely to affect other local people.

A good example might be a sudden increase in the numbers of people coming to you with complaints about housing benefits payments. It is possible that the four or five people you find yourself talking to have isolated and unrelated problems. But equally the cases may be symptomatic of a wider concern – the introduction of a new computer system perhaps, or a change in the rules surrounding benefit entitlement. Your efforts may be focused on tackling the symptoms of the difficulty, when you really need to be speaking to officers about the cause of the problem.

Monitoring your effectiveness

Periodically, it is always sensible to review your approach to casework and consider whether what you do could be improved. For example:

- ask your councillor colleagues how they tackle the information and paper flow and whether they have any good tips you haven't thought of
- ask your residents for feedback on what they felt you did well in responding to their queries and anything you could do to improve
- look up the websites of other councils or individual councillors' blogs to see what others are doing to improve their response to casework
- monitor a number of key facts and statistics about your casework to ensure that you are targeting the people that need the most help and are being effective in resolving as many queries as you can.

It may be that your periodic reviews will highlight weaknesses in your systems for recording and storing information which you can address. Perhaps it will flag concerns about the volume of cases you are dealing with, which should prompt you to think about ways of getting other councillors or officers to help you with some of the burden. Equally, the activity might demonstrate how much of a difference you have made to people's lives through your casework interventions and underline the importance of being visible and accessible to local people as a ward councillor.

Monitoring your performance

How many people contacted you with problems in the last year?

Who were these people – gender, ethnicity, age, class, employment status?

How did people contact you?

How many cases were you able to resolve satisfactorily?

How does this compare with previous years?

What was the profile of the problem, eg housing, social services, benefits etc.?

How does your casework load and type compare to that of other councillors?



Challenge 5 – seeing the bigger picture

Look at the individual cases presented below and write down some of the potential 'big picture' issues that might underlie each.

Four separate cases reported to you of wheeled bins not being emptied on one estate.

A number of complaints about the long queue in the council's main reception area.

A rise in the number of queries you have received about on-street parking by people commuting in from areas outside of the ward.

Look again at the examples above. How often do you think about the potential 'big picture' issues when you are dealing with your real casework queries?

Casework can be both rewarding and frustrating in equal measure. Each case will be different and each must be handled with a degree of humility as residents with evidence of failure by 'the council' may see their ward councillor as a last resort. The reasons for any real or perceived failures by the council can be many and varied, eg the unhelpfulness of staff, some of the jargon in council literature or the unavailability of services at hours that suit people's busy lives.

In presenting their issues to you, residents may have multiple problems or deprivations: illiteracy, lack of numeracy, illness or fear of authority. In providing casework support you should act as a 'one-stop shop', wherever possible, in listening to and responding to their concerns. This ability to make a difference to the lives of local people sits at the very heart of your community leadership role.

For further advice on this particularly difficult area there is a councillor workbook entitled Supporting residents with complex issues. Along with an accompanying elearning module of the same name this will enable you to look at this area to consider how best to advise and assist with issues raised by your ward residents

Final summary

Where do you go from here?



Challenge 6

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

a) What key action points can you identify to improve your effectiveness as a ward councillor in dealing with casework, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing, etc.

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

The Councillors' Guide, Local Government Association 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

Useful websites

The LGA website is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government and contains guidance and case studies on the community leadership role of councillors. It further provides advice on the effective use of social media and communication with your local residents or businesses. www.local.gov.uk



Local Government Association

18 Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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