

# Who'd be a councillor?

**T**alk to members of the general public about local politics and very often the response is negative and cynical. Councillors are seen by many as entirely political animals, driven by party ambition and preoccupied with local feuds. But ask people about their own local councillor and these stereotypes are often withdrawn as stories emerge of kindness in times of personal need; of hours spent organising local events and attending meetings; and of solidarity with residents in the face of top-down changes to schools or post offices.

Councillors themselves are dismayed by the negative perceptions of their role. In interviews and workshops with councillors in four very different councils, the Local Government Information Unit and Young Foundation have revealed a picture of a dwindling band of local activists, passionate about connecting local needs with big picture strategies and theories, and only too aware of the accusations and limitations they need to address.

Councillors, officers and community organisations from Newcastle, Newham, Salford and Suffolk took part in the study, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. With Dame Jane Roberts' Councillors Commission due to report to government in the next month, what has emerged is a clear view about what the future ward councillor role should look like, but also a wide range of short and longer term challenges that will need to be addressed to stand any chance of countering the stereotypes and widening the appeal of a much maligned role.

In our interviews with councillors, we were amazed by the countless number of amusing and apparently insignificant incidents to which they are called. One told a story of being called out late at night to help a couple put together their pre-pack double bed. Another spoke of a request of her to feed a constituent's cats while she was on holiday. Most spoke of being on duty 24/7 and the pressures this puts on their time and families. But it is through such encounters – and invaluable ward surgeries – that the detailed picture of local needs emerges and that gives the councillor the ability to understand and represent local problems and concerns. In management-speak, councillors are 'knowledge champions' – a primary source of local intelligence and a triangulation point for weighing up local needs.

Undervalued, underprepared and often undermined... A radical rethink is needed over the role of elected members, say **Ed Cox** and **Saffron James**

But interviews and workshops also revealed deep frustrations about the extent of their knowledge and what they feel able to do with it. There was significant concern about the gaps in councillors' knowledge. Some were acutely aware of large sections of the community with whom they had little contact and there was considerable realism about the time and support that would be necessary to make engagement with the wide diversity of local residents more effective and knowledge more complete. But tensions were also apparent with others who offer 'representation' through community organisations and other communities of interest. Too often we found that councillors hold rather unsophisticated positions and there is a need for better understanding of the mutually complementary roles different people can play.

Frustrations were also evident about the quality and quantity of local 'data' which could better inform local decisions. Most councillors spoke of being bombarded by emails many of which were completely irrelevant to their needs, but at the same time how very difficult it is to get hold of some simple facts about their wards in time for important meetings or to pass on to residents.

Perhaps the greatest frustration was the ward councillor's ability to influence. There was a strong sense that however much knowledge, community engagement and leadership a councillor could achieve, they faced significant barriers in shaping

the strategic decisions about how mainstream services are planned and delivered. The powers of the council executive and plethora of decisions taken in partnerships and agencies where councillors have little or no role mean, for many, their knowledge can be used for little more than local action.

So what are the ways forward? The research has demonstrated a number of simple short-term measures could rapidly enhance the ability of ward councillors to better connect with their communities. A clear-cut definition of the role may reduce tensions and ambiguities with constituents and community groups. Councillors recognise their need for more personalised training that takes into account the more specific local challenges they face – not least in understanding equalities and community cohesion issues and new approaches to community engagement. And councillors need better support too – our research proposes a 'ward councillor compact' that sets out the council's commitment to provide minimum levels of support, training and information to elected members alongside a clear set of skills, behaviours and activities that officers might expect from them.

In the longer term nothing short of a culture change is required. The incentives for officers to work more collaboratively with councillors need to be increased and this will require some strong leadership from both council leaders and council officers. But perhaps most significantly, political parties will need to think again about their recruitment and selection procedures, about the operations of local political groups, and about the use of political whipping. Only cross-party support, driven at the national level, is likely to unblock some of these challenges and counter the cynicism that currently undermines those present and future councillors who are passionate about making a local difference.

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