



THE YOUNG FOUNDATION

Developing Officer and Member Soft Skills
A Neighbourhood Action Network (NAN) Action Learning Day
22 January 2008

The Young Foundation held an Action Learning Day on developing officer and members soft skills as part of its [Neighbourhood Action Network](#)ⁱ on 22 January 2008. This report summarises the main themes and issues emerging from the day.

The aim of the Action Learning Day was to explore the soft skills and attributes that elected members and officers are likely to need to work effectively at a local level as neighbourhood working becomes more widespread, and central government's proposals to strengthen community governance are put into practice by many local authorities.

The day provided an opportunity for NAN partners to share their current issues and concerns about the role of elected members in neighbourhood working and consider the new skills, approaches and tools that members and officers will need to adapt to the changing role.

The day also provided an opportunity for the Young Foundation to share findings from its practical work on building relationships between councillors and officers. This included NAN work on organisational culture and embedding engagement as well as [recent research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) that explores how the role of elected members in England is likely to change over the next five years.

The Young Foundation invited experienced practitioners from two different organisations to give presentations about their work on approaches to developing officer and member soft skills. They included:

- Milly Camley, Head of Mayor's Office, Debbie Forde, Head of Member Services, and Councillor Kay Scoresby, [London Borough of Newham](#)ⁱⁱ gave a presentation on the project they have initiated to develop members' soft skills to enhance neighbourhood working in Newham.
- Richard Masters, Programme Manager – Managerial Leadership, [IDeA](#)ⁱⁱⁱ, contributed to the thinking on managerial leadership.

These presentations were followed by a workshop on how local authorities can develop the skills of members and officers to work together more efficiently.

I. Summary of presentations

I.1 Vicki Savage, Young Foundation

Vicki spoke about the Young Foundation's findings from practical work it had done with local authority partners on the skills and changing roles of officers and members.

Young Foundation work

- As part of NAN, the Young Foundation implemented practical projects with the Surrey County Council, and the London Borough of Hackney, on the role of councillors. We worked with the London Borough of Lewisham and the London Borough of Haringey on organisational culture. The Young Foundation has also completed work on the frontline role of councillors as part of the Transforming Neighbourhoods project and completed a report with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the future role for frontline councillors.

Context

- **Local context:** Neighbourhood working now combines engagement, governance and service management and delivery. Neighbourhoods are changing more rapidly than ever before and councillors and officers are being asked to work in increasingly more complex environments.
- **National context:** There is a move towards an enhanced frontline role for non-executive members which offers the potential for significant new responsibilities around councillors engaging communities and being community champions and leaders.

Councillor roles and skills – Common themes:

- **Culture:** In every local authority it was observed that some councillors are clearly more comfortable with local working, while others prefer more strategic activities.
- A range of skills and attributes have been identified as those that councillors will require in the future. These include:
 - **Political representative:** The ability to connect with all parts of the community and represent everyone fairly.
 - **Community advocate:** Advocate for everyone – including people with different backgrounds, cultures, and values; having the confidence to speak freely and challenge the executive.
 - **Community leader:** Be a community development worker – support and promote local initiatives; be a good communicator – explain what political decisions and structures mean; be sensitive to difference and issues of diversity and equality; have knowledge and skill to engage people in a variety of ways (not just meetings); be a confident broker.
 - **Service transformer:** Understand the complex business of local government and service provision; confidence and ability to challenge the executive and hold service providers to account; ability to understand local problems and use this knowledge tactically and strategically.
 - **Place shaper:** Be able to shape the very local environment – have the ability to identify local priorities, work with officers and service providers, manage locality budgets.

- **Knowledge champion:** Be the primary source of local intelligence – flowing between community and the council and working closely with officers; have the skills and ability to collect and analyse local information and use it to benefit the community
- Young Foundation research in Haringey suggests that councillors will need “**soft skills**” such as **action planning, the ability to engage new communities, conflict resolution and brokering**, to manage these future challenges. This raises the question of what tools, structures, and support councillors will need to carry out their new role.

Officer roles and skills – Common themes:

- The challenge of partnership working, especially in context of place shaping.
- The most effective partnership working is a result of individual relationship building.
- Challenge of working across agencies.
- Some officers are ‘thrown in at the deep end’ at public meetings without adequate training.
- The experiences of some officers’ in our local authority partners raises the question of whether there is a need for a core set of competencies and support/training before officers represent the council at public meetings.
- Sometimes there is a lack of recognition that members and officers do different jobs at the neighbourhood level.
- Cultural and emotional factors should not be underestimated: fear of change, reluctance to abandon established ‘comfort zones’, relying on entrenched stereotypes are common factors amongst local authority officers, the third sector, other public services and neighbourhood groups.
- Neighbourhoods are constantly changing. Working within them is sometimes made more difficult by: transience of population; range of models and new ways of working; culture of avoiding risk – accountability verses flexibility to innovate.

1.2 Milly Camley, Head of Mayor’s Office, Debbie Forde, Head of Member Services and Councillor Kay Scorseby, NB Newham

Milly Camley, Debbie Forde and Councillor Kay Scorseby from [London Borough of Newham](#) spoke about their work developing and supporting councillors’ roles in the borough. They outlined the Influential Councillors Scheme, described how it had shaped their model of working and suggested ways in which this work would continue in the future.

Influential Councillors Scheme

- The presentation outlined how the Influential Councillors Scheme has been applied in Newham, especially in the context of their legislative model with a directly elected mayor.
- The Mayor saw the scheme as an opportunity to define the community role of councillors. It enabled the Mayor to devolve power down to those below – ‘triple devolution’.
- The project was influenced by research undertaken alongside the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that showed that Councillors need to be more actively engaged with all

parts of the community. Councillors needed to be able to tackle issues directly and have more and better quality information about local issues in order to make informed decisions.

- The scheme is now in its second term and the Mayor has emphasised the importance of the community role by establishing a community executive chaired by the Deputy Mayor.
- **How it works** – There are nine community lead councillors who are each responsible for an area. The lead councillors decide on the priorities for the neighbourhood and are responsible for bringing together community work at a local level. They work with other local councillors and are supported by a team of four officers. Quarterly influential councillor meetings for north and south take place. These act as a forum to exchange ideas and support each others work.
- Councillors act as advisors, providing a real view of the local community. They provide local expertise and act as community leaders but have a democratic responsibility, unlike activists. The scheme assists the councillors, by giving them tools to respond, strengthening their relations with community groups and partners, championing local issues and putting them at the heart of decision making.
- There are three main types of support available to Councillors focusing on information, consultation and relationship management.

Community Forums

- Community forums are an opportunity for residents to get involved in activities to shape local areas. There are currently nine in Newham. Each forum is setting up a team of volunteers who will work with councillors to help shape communities. The aim is to boost participation in the community forum events and to promote active citizens.

Next steps

- Roll out new working agreements in all forum areas.
- Create a “local fund plus” (see below).
- Create area teams for ASB and Newham magazine area supplements.

Manor Park Pilot

The Manor Park Pilot focused on changing from a top-down, to a bottom-up way of working within the neighbourhood. There were two core strands to the pilot: service reviews and local projects.

Service reviews took place through consultation with community lead councillors and local councillors meeting local groups or residents to identify local issues. Lead councillors then met with officers from the relevant service areas to agree actions. Local councillors agreed projects with local community to improve an area. It proved beneficial as officers often do not live in the area in which they work and are not aware of the issues.

An example of a local project was the ‘Food on the Go’, initiative that encouraged local businesses to be more responsible for waste and local recycling project.

One outcome of the pilot was the establishment of a £500,000 local fund for 2007/8 that allows councillors to approve funding to meet a specific local need. Funding must be allocated

to one-off projects with no revenue implications. Projects should promote the Council's corporate aims, and be for services provided by the Council. It can not be granted to voluntary organisations.

Councillors participated by committing on average three hours a week to the project. They visited community organisations, meeting with members of the business community, attending community forum steering group and public meetings, 37 take-away shops as part of the 'Food on the Go' project, meeting with council officers and taking part in a street audit.

Discussion Points

Following the presentation there was a roundtable discussion, from which the following themes emerged:

- The need to recognize potential tensions between elected councillors and community leaders when trying to position councillors at the fore of community decisions and activities. While each have different perspectives, experiences, and skills to bring to the agenda we do not necessarily need to adopt and either/or approach, but investigate ways in which both can work together to serve community needs.
- There's also a need to recognize competing tensions within communities that can extend to neighbourhood management teams. Often many different individuals and groups are trying to work on the same agenda.
- It's important to note that there is no one typology of working as relationships vary greatly depending on context. However, there is potential for the Newham model to be adapted to fit different areas. Councillor shadowing proposed as a good way to learn from others.
- Councillors have a responsibility to represent everyone, including those who did not vote for them.

1.3 Richard Masters, Programme Manager – Managerial Leadership, IDeA

Richard Masters from [IDeA](#)^{IV} outlined the various skills and attributes officers and members should develop, in order to improve their communication, management and leadership techniques, so that councils can serve people and places better.

Role of Leadership

- Leadership is a multifaceted task which involves 'juggling' outcomes, interests and emotions. Officers and members must address these three areas individually, asking themselves, what they wish to achieve, what interests and voices are there around this change and what challenges will individual groups face? Only by addressing these areas separately can officers and members begin to address them simultaneously taking into account their own personal strengths and weaknesses around these issues.

Thirteen key points for successful leadership and management:

1. Success is dependent on gaining and maintaining high levels of political confidence and approval.
2. A clear plan and sense of purpose is essential

3. An unimpeachable moral position
4. A chief executive is the head of the administration but not part of it
5. Avoid being 'the story' – eschew the limelight
6. Intellectual capacity and ability to explain concepts is important
7. Effective management between leadership and opposition councillors
8. Competency negates fear
9. Empathise with arduous working arrangement of Council
10. Do not work with a political faction against leadership
11. Do not be distracted from day job by conferences or special roles
12. Trust, truth and tolerance between chief executive and leadership
13. Keep in mind objectives

Overall, leaders must be flexible, strong and intelligent.

2. Workshop Session

The presentations were followed by a workshop on the tools and techniques of how local authorities can develop the skills of members and officers to work together more efficiently.

Themes

- Change cannot come through developing skills alone, there has to be a **change in the organisational culture**, led by the chief executive and supported by the senior executive team.
- Officers and councillors need to be professional when dealing with each other and not put each other in unfair positions, for example, members berating junior officers in public for political gain. Developing **codes of conduct** for meetings could be one way to introduce this.
- Some officers can be intimidated by the prospect of engaging members and can shy away from open, **honest conversation**. How do you build structures that allow honest conversations to happen?
- There needs to be a **change in the philosophy** of how councillors and officers think about their job. For example, neighbourhood working is about keeping Newcastle green and clean, not about managing services.
- There needs to be clarity within organisations as to who has responsibilities for dealing with councillors. For example, should only senior officers be obliged to develop working relationships with elected members and should junior staff treat queries from members with the same 'customer service' attitude they use when dealing with the general public? Should there be one point of contact within local authorities for councillors?
- Training is important but **there is no "one size fits all" solution**. For example, the majority of councillors in Kings Lynn are have more traditional values and ways of working. They do not necessarily respond well to a more modern team approach to working.

- A problem with an internal hierarchy of members and officers was identified. This is problematic, especially for new members who do not yet have a full understanding of council organisation. The perceived hierarchy creates a fear of asking for information.
- Some councils have a problem with an internal hierarchy of councillors and officers. This can be especially problematic for new members who do not yet have a full understanding of council organisation. The perceived hierarchy creates a fear of asking for information.

Tools and techniques

- **Train** councillors on their role and what it involves, potentially as part of a compulsory induction process. Perhaps hold joint training sessions with councillors and officers and use it as an opportunity to define the expectations, pressures, demands and limitations of respective roles.
- Train officers on the political nuances of local authorities when they begin.
- The induction process should be followed by **continued support** whenever it is needed and the opportunity to develop understanding.
- Bring in **external facilitators** to hold an open discussion where all parties have the chance to speak honestly and discuss specific issues.
- Invite councillors to NAN Action Learning days.
- Councillors need to be **empowered** to work in neighbourhoods. Political leadership can be beneficial to empowering councillors including potential directives from party whips.
- **Information is power** – officers need to log calls, capture data, develop ward profiles and pass the information on to members so they know the needs of their community.
- Organise **walkabouts** to stimulate councillor participation in practical work.
- Develop community action plans or work plans to provide shared purpose and goals.
- Take the politics out of issues or **manage the politics by focussing on the needs** of the community.
- **Action learning** – discuss the outcomes of specific activities undertaken in the neighbourhood with the councillors and officers involved. Reflect and review activities asking why they did, or did not achieve certain objectives and try to learn from that.
- **Involve** elected members in the development of new partnerships from the very beginning, so they do not feel at a disadvantage.
- **Model behaviours** that you would like to see repeated in colleagues.
- Have **less experienced councillors to shadow more experienced councillors**.

Many thanks to [NESTA](#), [IDeA](#), and to the NAN partners who participated in the session.

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The Young Foundation is a unique organisation that undertakes research to identify and understand social needs and then develops practical initiatives and institutions to address them

www.youngfoundation.org

Endnotes

ⁱ For further information about Neighbourhood Action Network go to:

www.youngfoundation.org/work/local_innovation/consortiums/neighbourhood_action_network

ⁱⁱ For further information see

www.newham.gov.uk

ⁱⁱⁱ For further information see:

www.idea.gov.uk

^{iv} For further information see:

www.idea.gov.uk