

NOW WHAT?

a pocket survival guide to being a new councillor

Introduction

Being a councillor represents a big investment by you as a citizen in your community. There is a lot to learn and you need to learn quickly if you are to be effective in your new role.

New councillors can quickly become buried under the weight of paperwork that their new job entails. The Local Government Information Unit provides a range of information services and training and development opportunities to help councillors be more effective. The Unit has produced this guide to the essentials to keeping on top of the task right from the start.

Local government is the heart of local democracy. It works with communities for communities, but it won't work without the dedication of you and thousands of other councillors across the country. You will have many roles as a councillor - we hope this guide helps you play them to the best of your ability.



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Contents

- 1 So what's the job? 2
- 2 Managing your time 4
- 3 Personal effectiveness 8
- 4 Getting things done 12
- 5 Working with officers 14
- 6 Talking to the media 17
- 7 Getting it right 19

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So what's the job?

So you've been elected. That might turn out to have been the easy part. You have taken on a job that does not have a job description and you'll find you have to make up many of the rules as you go along. Done well, it could be the most rewarding thing you'll ever do. You'll be involved with individuals and groups with a range of problems and priorities. Different people will have different perceptions about you: some will think being a councillor is a full time job for which you are being handsomely paid; others will hold you responsible for things which happened (or didn't happen!) before you were elected.

1. Representing the people

That means speaking up for individuals and groups in your area, whether they voted for you or not. And you won't always agree with them because you have to consider the wider needs of the community as well as individual concerns. Talk to fellow councillors about how they keep in touch with their constituents.

Surgeries are the most common method, but there are others. Do what you say you will do and make sure the people concerned see such things as copies of the letters you write on their behalf and the replies. Think about how you deal with people, seek advice from experienced councillors as soon as possible and find out what training is available.

2. Political accountability

As a councillor you'll share in collective political decisions. Electors will keep an eye on whether you are keeping your manifesto promises. You will need to be prepared to answer for the actions of your group as well as yourself.

If you are an opposition councillor the role of checking and questioning the decisions of the controlling group will fall to you. You also have an important role in putting forward political alternatives to the council's policies.

Don't forget that you are accountable to your local party - the people whose organisation helped put you where you are today.

3. Community/civic leader

Another important part of the job is working with other groups and organisations to build up a bigger picture of what actions would best serve your community. For example, you will need to build links with the police, the health service, the benefits agency and other local quangos. Good relations with these bodies will also make it easier for you to speak to them on behalf of your constituents.

4. Representing the council

You may be called upon to represent the council on organisations such as charities, trusts or voluntary groups. Here you will have to make sure you can put forward the views of the council and, importantly, report back to the council on what has happened.

Managing your time

When you first walk into your new role it's important to be aware that the most important resource is both your time and how you are able to use it. This short section is designed to help you get a decent return on the time you invest and to help you make sure that you don't forget about the rest of your life.

1. Take stock

Understand the current pressures on your time. Many councillors have to work full time. If you do, find out not only how much time your employers will allow, but also what time of the day they expect you to be there. Yes, it's democracy but your absence will still have an impact, so try to understand what that will be. You might be able to do something - by way of changing the way you work - to alleviate the pressures. You are legally entitled to some time off to carry out your public duties and council officers can advise you about this.

And what about family, social and other commitments? It can be useful to keep a time diary for a week so you can see for yourself how you are spending your time. You will probably be surprised at how your time gets eaten up. But once you've got that you will be in a better position to make informed judgements about your investment in council business and to allocate your time.

Think, too, about the time you set aside to deal with constituents' problems. Do you want to be available 24 hours a day, or will you

establish some 'no go zones'? Will you take calls about council business when you are at work or should you keep work and council separate? There's no right way or wrong way - you need to find out what is best for you.

There are two universal rules in time management.

1. There is never enough time.
2. Your time use should reflect your priorities and requires an ability to manage competing pressures on you.

2. Take a look at the territory

Councils exist on meetings: there are committee meetings, group preparation meetings, pre-meetings, agenda meetings, working group meetings, party-related meetings, external business meetings. And more besides. Talk to someone who has been on the council for a while and ask them to help you understand the likely commitment.

3. Define what kind of return you expect to get on your time

Simply being in meetings doesn't necessarily achieve anything. But you'll have to do a fair bit of that. Being seen to be there can be important, particularly for a new member. If there are votes to be held you'll be expected to take part. Your absence will be as conspicuous as your presence in the first months. Most party groups have whips to advise and cajole.

Try to define how else you'll measure the difference you make. If you know what skills you bring to the table you'll be in a better position to do this. It may be that you're good at asking questions which focus attention on the key issues. That can help prevent meetings lasting longer than necessary.

4. Be aware of the laws of gatherings

Whenever a group of people comes together universal laws of behaviour take over. Complex and difficult subjects may be overlooked in favour of the trivial. Different sorts of meetings work in different ways: a full council meeting usually will be formal and ordered; a meeting of a local residents' association may be harder to keep on track.

Meetings can be encouraged to behave in different ways. Simply changing the way that chairs are set out in a room will have an effect on how people act. Similarly, sitting people in different places will affect actions. And the agenda can be sequenced to make the meeting go badly or well.

While at first you are likely to be attending rather than chairing meetings, it's important to try to understand what factors make them productive and effective. When time is limited and demands are high you need to muster everything you can to get the best return on your collective time.

Another rule is that meetings, unless well managed, will expand to fill a space slightly bigger than the time available. Before you go into a meeting know what's on the agenda and why you need

to attend. What are you going to get out of it? Focus on getting that as effectively as possible.

5. Learn from the experts

Don't underestimate the skills you will need to chair meetings effectively. Some people are good at meetings. Watch them and learn. Look at how they bring people in who want to speak. Examine the way they close down debate without being rude. Look at their body language when they want to signal that time is running out. Listen to the way they cue others (with nods and "hms") to encourage contributions. Learn and steal. You'll be better as a result. It's worth finding out if your council offers any training on chairing meetings.

Personal effectiveness

Knowing what your own strengths and weaknesses are is critical to your success. There's no point in kidding yourself - if you don't address your weaknesses you won't grow into the challenging role that you're about to undertake. And you can always build on your strengths.

Some skills you might need to hone.

1. Speed reading

Paper will arrive by the dumper truck from the minute you walk into office. Even those councils who have put their councillors on-line find there's a rainforest full of documentation that just has to be on paper.

If you find yourself reading all of it carefully you'll be months behind schedule within weeks. Learn to scan through papers looking for the important bits. Talk to colleagues and officers and look for clues on what you need to read.

2. Listen and watch

Listening is hard work. It is one of the least valued of all skills and yet it's the most important. Listen not only to what people say but also watch how they say it. People will give out all sorts of information about themselves in the way they say things. Listen to experts and people who have been around for a while. And

keep a note of all the interesting things that you're told (even if it's just a mental note). Practice listening even when you're not interested and try to recount what you've been told.

3. Find ways of accessing key information quickly

It's said that the brain never forgets anything - it's just that we don't know how to get access to the information that it has remembered. Organise some sort of filing system for the things you can't keep in your head. And keep some sort of reference system so that you can find your way into information in several ways - name of meeting, nature of business, key words, useful links. And so on.

Don't underestimate the willingness of others to help you put your hands on the right stuff at the right time.

4. Network

Networking - building productive relationships with others - is a critical skill. Remember everyone has their own priorities. And they'll want to use their time productively. If you present yourself as someone who can help them they'll be more than happy to work with you.

Network strategically. Think in advance of the kinds of people, skills and contacts you'll need and set out to find them. It probably sounds a bit ruthless but in a mutually productive relationship others will be thinking the same way.

5. Practice rapport-building skills

Getting on with people is vital in any sphere of life. You may begin by believing that just because you are a councillor you will automatically earn respect. Think again. Respect has to be earned as much in the town hall as it does in the rest of the world. So practice building rapport - understanding others' points of view, knowing their concerns, listening to their views and desires, speaking in their language, being respectful and honest.

6. Hone your influencing and negotiating skills

There are many ways to skin a cat. And when you want to get things done you'll need to bring all sorts of things into operation. When you want to change hearts and minds, plan your approach.

Get feedback on your negotiations. It's important to know as much about failure as it is about success. Address your shortcomings. Build on your strengths.

7. Don't be frightened of looking dumb

Some people won't ask questions on things they don't understand because of the fear of looking stupid. Some use language which doesn't connect because they are busy trying to impress with big words. Part of the privilege of being a councillor is being able to ask obvious questions. You are asking them on behalf of people who don't get into the corridors of power. If you start off by challenging jargon when you hear it you should avoid the trap of using it when you know more about the subject.

8. Work on your presentation skills

As a councillor you will constantly be making presentations. Whether it is to a worried constituent or trying to convince your fellow councillors to follow a particular course of action you will need to master a variety of communications skills. Presenting information is one aspect, but you will also need to know how to report back from meetings or discussions. Learn from good practice. There's plenty of it around.

Getting things done

1. Know where you're going

Real progress is the sum of a number of actions designed to achieve a specific goal. Very few palaces can be built in a day. So you've got to know where you're going before you set out. You need vision and you need to set out your objectives. But vision alone won't get results. Relentlessly pursuing a goal by taking action does that.

2. Carry people with you

If you try to do everything alone you'll end up that way. Don't allow yourself to become isolated. Work with others to achieve things. Getting other people to support your ideas means understanding what they want, what motivates them and giving them credit. But when people don't go along with you remember that there are future alliances to build - so don't sulk publicly.

3. More unites than divides

There are issues that affect the local community which can unite politicians of all parties. Some projects are more likely to be successful if they have the support of all politicians, so try to find and exploit your common ground.

4. Know the difference between the urgent and the important

It will be clear by now that you'll have many different roles as a councillor. An easy trap to fall into is allowing one role to swamp the others. The greatest danger lies in ignoring strategic issues because you are overwhelmed with things that have to be done today. Stand back for a moment. How urgent is urgent? Be realistic about what you can do and be wary of raising peoples' expectations. Learn to prioritise. Talk to experienced councillors about how they handle their casework. Set aside time to spend reading, thinking and discussing policy issues.

Working with officers

Politicians focus on outcomes - what will happen. Officers broadly make those things happen. It's a partnership. Both parties are important.

1. Understand their pressures

If you want something done you won't be able to go to a room in the town hall filled with people who've got nothing to do. In most councils there is little or no spare capacity. Everyone is working flat out. People have their jobs to do and other pressures on their time. If you want something done, someone will have to rearrange their priorities to help you. Officers will do that but to get them to do so you'll have to understand their perspective.

2. Know what can and can't be done

No-can-do culture is probably more common as a myth than it is as a reality. There will be some who will find 32 reasons not to do something but by and large local government officers want to help make things happen. But you've got to be realistic. Resources are tight. Councils already do a massive amount of business. If you want to get something done try to make it fit with existing priorities.

All the same, don't be put off by the 'we tried that and it didn't work' response. Something may well have been tried before but life moves on. The time might be right now.

3. Be polite, authoritative and earn respect

As a councillor you are a public figure. Behave so that people can look up to you. They'll be more likely to help you if you do.

4. Talk to successful members

Just about everyone will be longer in the tooth (in political terms) than you. Talk to them about how they work with officers. They'll be able to show you the ropes.

5. Learn to share the credit

You'll get a lot more done in life if you are able to pass on credit for things you've achieved. First, it recognises that we can achieve very little on our own. Virtually everything is a team effort, one way or another. Second, people will be more likely to help you in future if they feel that they've benefited from you directly.

6. Normal rules apply

It can be easy to forget the niceties of every day life in the hustle and bustle of council business. But saying "please", "sorry" and "thank you" can make a big difference to your relationships.

7. Help officers see life from your point of view

Politics can be frustrating. Managing the competing pressures on your actions, given the various groups you represent, can be very hard. Not all officers know what it's like. Few will know what you face at that moment. Share. Help them to appreciate your perspective.

8. Elephants remember

It's not difficult to make enemies in politics. So if you embarrass officers, publicly berate them, bad-mouth them or whatever, it may come back and haunt you. Remember, most officer careers are longer than the political equivalent. And they talk to each other. You can very quickly build a reputation for being someone not to be dealt with.

Talking to the media

As a new councillor you are unlikely to be asked to speak to the media on behalf of the council but you may be asked about local issues. You should also be on your guard for journalists who come to you because you are new in the hope that you will be more likely to make an unguarded comment than more experienced colleagues. Your council should have guidelines on who talks to the media.

1. Back to school

It's flattering when the local media ring you up and want to hear your views. Flattery is one of the basic tools in the journalist's toolbox. How will you perform? Pre-empt the event by approaching the officers who run your council's press office to see if they can arrange some useful practice before the real thing.

2. Have something to say

Again it's nice to be obliging. But it's not unheard of for people to turn up for a media interview thinking only about 'the questions they're going to ask me' rather than 'what do I want to say?' What's the point of this investment in time and reputation you are about to make? Which piece of business is it going to push forward?

3. Check you don't clash

What are other people in your group saying on this? What is council policy? Think through how you want to be positioning

Now what?

your point. It is an opportunity to make enemies and lose alliances as well as win profile.

4. Understand the interview process

It's as big a set piece as a full council meeting, with its own little rules and conventions. Understand what the journalist is after. Ask them. Then decide if you want to play ball. Watch for the language a journalist uses when asking questions. Sentences which begin 'Is it not true...?', 'Surely you agree...?', and 'Can you just explain...?', are often twisted around into 'A local councillor has agreed that...?', when in the cold light of day, you don't. Be as clear as you can about where you stand.

5. Being quoted

What you've said will be used, and used again, if the journalist thinks it's good. We can't all come up with a line like, 'the hand of history on my shoulder', and in very few circumstances would it be appropriate. Us ordinary souls are more likely to be quoted if what we've said is clear, to the point, said with conviction and, if we can muster it, just a bit of pith.

6. Being upfront

Once you are feeling confident, don't wait to be asked. There are acres of column inches and hours of airtime to be filled up, with journalists always hungry for more stories. Make using the media one of the tools you use to achieve your objectives. It's a useful part of persuading big numbers of people of the reasonableness of what you want to do, and of being seen to be an active councillor.

Getting it right

This is not at the end because it's least important, but because it's at a place where you can easily find it again. The nineties has seen much interest and publicity about the standards of people holding public office. The council's senior legal officer should explain the laws about what you should and shouldn't do, when to declare an interest and so on. Your council should have its own code of conduct, as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (the Neill Committee). The Committee has published its Seven Principles of Public Life, which are a good basic guide to the ethos behind taking a job as a councillor.

1. Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

2. Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

3. Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals

for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

4. Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

5. Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

6. Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

7. Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

LGIU members can order further copies of this guide (minimum order of 10 copies) from the Unit for £2 a copy (non-members £2.50). Cheques should be made payable to the Local Government Information Unit and sent to Jenny Bailey, LGIU, 1-5 Bath Street, London EC1V 9QQ. (Telephone - 0171 608 1051.)

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reputation is a public relations agency that aims to help you improve your organisation's image. We have extensive experience in PR, journalism and communication training. We offer a full range of PR services on terms to suit you.

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