

The Role of Elected Members

We discussed councillors and the democratic mandate in our first response to the Commission. In that response we argued that the democratic mandate keeps councils responsive and accountable, and facilitates community leadership. It is complemented (not undermined) by public participation, and councillors have an important role to play in connecting with citizens.

In this response to the second call for evidence we briefly expand on our earlier submission and provide some specific evidence and commentary in relation to two of the questions posed by the Commission:

- How can / should local elected members encourage participatory democracy in their local areas?
- What is the community leadership role of councillors and how can this be successfully carried out? What might councillors need?

When encouraging participatory democracy, councillors (and councils) need to think about things from the perspective of the people they are looking to engage. They need to have some understanding of what motivates people to participate, and what sustains that participation. These issues were explored in a major piece of research published in 2011, [Pathways through Participation](#). The research found, amongst other things, that **participation is personal**, and that it is **more bottom-up than top-down**. Any attempt to encourage participation must take into account – and not work against – the differing and multiple motivations people have for becoming involved. Individuals define their own participation and react negatively to imposed agendas which often include the more formal type of consultation exercises used by national and local government. This has implications for the way that councillors encourage public participation. It requires them to be facilitators, communicators and advocates, and not seek necessarily to control or constrain that participation. They need to be enablers, and help to take down barriers.

The need for new skills to support the role of councillors was discussed at the [Local Society](#) seminar which Involve co-hosted in February 2011. Discussions included developing a new set of core competencies for councillors – in their role as 'cabinet member for a ward' and social entrepreneur of the community - and making maximum use of the different experiences and skills of young people and new councillors. The seminar brought out a number of examples of work to develop councillors' skills to match their changing role, such as Stevenage Council which offers councillors training in social enterprise. Another example is outlined in the case study below:

Case study 1: One of the ward councillors in Winshill ward in East Staffordshire borough was instrumental in facilitating the development of a Youth Council for the ward. Young people are elected on to the Youth Council, which has an input into some of the [decisions affecting the ward](#). It also provides those young people with practical experience of civic and democratic activity. As a result [another parish is considering following suit](#) in establishing its own Youth Council.

Councils and councillors should also consider how they can make their public engagement more participatory and deliberative. A case study from the USA exemplifies this point:

Case study 2: Consider the far-away small town of Kuna, Idaho in the United States. Citizens and officials there have created a two-track process for making local policy. On a rather conventional low participation track, representatives and administrators decide routine matters without elaborate public communication. But on issues that are likely to prove controversial and when public sentiments are difficult to discern, officials and community organisations convene participatory and deliberative meetings in which citizens are invited to learn about the issue in more detail and consider the merits and costs of various options. This process utilises the Study Circles model: participants are given briefing materials and organised into small, facilitated discussion groups that also come together in large group meetings. These discussions are intended to help participants learn about issues, debate options, and prepare questions and recommendations for policy makers. Kuna has convened study circles on issues ranging from multi-million dollar school bonds, student drug testing, local tax policy and town planning.

Source: From 'Citizen Participation in Representative Democracy' by Archon Fung. In *Post Party Politics: Can participation reconnect people and government?* Published by Involve 2006.

What other things can councils do to support their councillors in remaking this connection with the public at large? Here are a few practical suggestions:

- Involve all councillors in an open discussion about the objectives and benefits of wider community engagement and public participation.
- Use councillor training to address softer issues, such as confidence, and to develop practical solutions to the challenges involved in engaging the public. Consider peer mentoring as part of this, and facilitate the sharing of good practice.
- Think about how councillors can engage with all of their constituents, not just with those who ask for help. Good old-fashioned door knocking, and good new-fashioned social media, might be two ways.
- Help councillors to manage public expectations, and make sure they have access to the information they need to support public participation. For example, do councillors have a good handle on the diversity of different communities in their wards? The [councillor in the community](#) website is an example of a web-based information resource.

The Commission might also find it helpful to consider and build on other examples of role descriptions for councillors, such as this one developed by Saffron James and Ed Cox for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2007¹:

Role	Skills
Political representative	Ability to connect with all parts of the community and represent everyone fairly. Ability to balance local concerns with the political demands of the group manifesto.

¹ *Ward councillors and community leadership: a future perspective*. Published by Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2007. Can be accessed at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/ward-councillors-and-community-leadership-future-perspective>

Role	Skills
Community advocate	<p>Be a skilled advocate for everyone – including people from different backgrounds, cultures and values.</p> <p>Have the confidence to speak freely and challenge the executive.</p>
Community leader	<p>Exercise community development skills – support local projects and initiatives, and educate people about local participation.</p> <p>Be a good communicator – explain simply what political decisions and structures mean to constituents and community organisations.</p> <p>Be sensitive to difference and issues of diversity and equality.</p> <p>Have knowledge and skill to engage people in a variety of ways (not just meetings).</p> <p>Be a conflict broker.</p>
Service transformer	<p>Understand the complex business of local government and services provided by both the council and others.</p> <p>Have the confidence and ability to challenge the executive and hold service providers to account.</p> <p>To be able to work in partnership with a range of agencies and interests.</p> <p>Ability to understand local problems and use this knowledge locally and strategically in local action planning.</p> <p>Setting and monitoring service standards.</p>
Place shaper	<p>Being a local figurehead/role model that people feel they can turn to.</p> <p>Be able to shape the very local environment – ability to identify priorities, work with officers and service providers to address public realm problems, and manage delegated locality budgets.</p>
Knowledge champion	<p>Be the primary source of local intelligence flowing between the community and the council.</p> <p>Have the skills and ability to collect and analyse local information and use it to benefit the community.</p>