

AGENDA MANAGEMENT SHEET

Name of Committee	Overview And Scrutiny Coordinating Group
Date of Committee	30 April 2008
Report Title	Representing the Future: The Report of the Councillors Commission
Summary	This report summarises some of the outcomes of the Councillors Commission. It seeks the views of the Group on whether or not there should be any scrutiny exercise commissioned by the Group to assess what the Council currently does to support the recommendations and what it might do in the future.
For further information please contact:	Jane Pollard Overview and Scrutiny Manager Tel: 01926 412565 janepollard@warwickshire.gov.uk
Would the recommended decision be contrary to the Budget and Policy Framework?	No.
Background papers	None

CONSULTATION ALREADY UNDERTAKEN:- Details to be specified

- Other Committees
- Local Member(s) N/A
- Other Elected Members Councillor Richard Grant
- Cabinet Member
- Chief Executive
- Legal Sarah Duxbury
- Finance
- Other Chief Officers
- District Councils
- Health Authority

Police

Other Bodies/Individuals

FINAL DECISION YES

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS:

Details to be specified

Further consideration by this Committee

To Council

To Cabinet

To an O & S Committee

To an Area Committee

Further Consultation

Agenda No

Overview And Scrutiny Coordinating Group - 30 April 2008.

Representing the Future: The Report of the Councillors Commission

Report of the Strategic Director of Performance and Development

Recommendation

That the Group comments on the report

Considers whether or not any scrutiny exercise should be undertaken and if so who by and the terms of reference of any such exercise.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Leaders Liaison Group considered the Councillors Commission report at its meeting on 28 February 2008. Leaders Liaison Group agreed that the report should be put to the three groups (and the independent member) for consideration and that suggestions would be brought back to Leaders Liaison Group as soon as possible.
- 1.2. Councillor Richard Grant has suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Group might wish to commission a scrutiny exercise to look at what the Council already does to support the recommendations in the report and what it might do in the future.
- 1.3. The following paragraphs are basically a repeat of the report received by the Leaders Liaison Group for the information of members.
- 1.4. The past 12 months have seen a growing focus on the role of councillors in local government: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation produced a report on "Ward Councillors and Community Leadership: A Future Perspective"; and the Councillors Commission reported their findings of a review into the incentives and barriers to serving on councils, in a report titled "Representing the Future".
- 1.5. This report summarises the main points of these two documents and considers the implications for Warwickshire County Council. It will also

draw on relevant elements of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, the White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities”, and their potential implications on the role of councillors.

2.0 The Councillors Commission: Representing the Future

2.1 Introduction

The Councillors Commission was set up by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government back in February 2007 as an independent review into the incentives and barriers that encourage or deter people from standing for election as councillors.

It was established on the back of the Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, which seeks to “encourage more people to put themselves forward for election so that over time the age, gender and ethnic composition of councils becomes more representative of the communities they serve”.

At present, the average age of a councillor in England is 58.3 years; only 3.5% are under the age of 30; women comprise only 29.3% of councillors; and only 4.1% come from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The backdrop of the work of the Commission has been the widespread uncertainty and debate about the nature of the relationship between the citizen and the state. Despite impressive improvements in performance, local government remains highly undervalued by the public. According to the Commission, this is due to a combination of poor awareness and understanding, distaste for organised politics and negative perceptions of councillors and their motives for seeking elections. For example, a survey carried out by the Electoral Commission in 2007 showed that 71% of the population trust politicians ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’.

The Commission was also asked to find ways of encouraging ‘able’ and ‘qualified’ people to become councillors. This is not to say that potential councillors must be educated to a particular level, or have a managerial or professional background, but a good ward councillor will have the ability to reflect and represent the experiences of the communities in which they live.

The Commission published its report and recommendations on 10 December 2007.

2.2 The incentives and barriers to standing for election

The Commission suggests that people become councillors for a variety of reasons, most commonly:

- Serving the community
- Improving the local area
- Strong feelings about a particular local issue
- Support for a political party

- A family tradition of political activity and public service
- Being asked to stand
- Frustration with a council, or serving councillors

They argue that the main barriers to standing for election as councillors are as follows:

- a) Lack of awareness of what councillors do, how they could get selected, and what support might be available;
- b) The culture of local government and local politics – over-confrontational styles of political discourse in the council chamber put many people off;
- c) Lack of confidence, particularly amongst women and those from ethnic minority communities;
- d) Time commitment – particularly for parents, for those working long hours, and for those in rural areas where travelling time can add many hours to a councillor's day;
- e) Employment and employers' attitudes – there is a widespread lack of appreciation of the potential benefits a councillor can bring to a business;
- f) Legal restrictions such as the first-past-the-post electoral system, which discourage more diverse types of candidate, and publicity restrictions on local authorities promoting the role of councillors and recruiting potential new ones;
- g) The structure of local government – non-executive positions being seen as distanced from council decision-making and therefore less appealing.

2.3 The Commission Recommendations

The Commission makes 61 recommendations, aimed at local authorities, government and political parties.

The majority of the recommendations require no legislation but do require action from local authorities to improve the prospect of attracting a wider range of people to come forward to stand as councillors. The government is expected to respond with its implementation plan in March. Local authorities are urged to consider the recommendations and to press the relevant bodies to introduce the measures which they agree should be brought into force.

In deliberating the issues, the Commission's recommendations sit behind the following 5 core principles:

Local authorities are key to local democratic engagement.

Promoting a sense of efficacy – a feeling that the individual is able to influence the democratic process and the course of events – is key for better engagement.

Councillors are most effective as locally elected representatives when they have similar life experiences to those of their constituents.

Key to effective local representation is the relationship and connections between councillors and their constituents.

The following is a summary of the recommendations specifically for local authorities:

Promoting Democracy:

Local authorities should:

- Disseminate clear and accessible information on how local governance works.
- Do more to promote civic participation e.g. in tenant and residents' associations, school governorships, in becoming a councillor, etc.
- Provide information and facilitate democratic engagement in respect of the parish and town council tier.
- Provide councillors with the tools to work effectively at the interface of local representative and participatory democratic processes.

Councillors' roles:

- Develop and introduce clear role descriptions of what is expected of councillors.

Direct contact:

- Assist councillors to be more visible and accessible in their locality by:
 - a) providing and supporting opportunities for democratic engagement where councillors can meet with their constituents face to face;
 - b) placing councillors at the heart of well-supported area and neighbourhood- based structures;
 - c) utilising councillor-led scrutiny processes to enable councillors to interact with their communities;
 - d) making much more active use of digital and social networking technologies.

The public eye:

- Promote the role of councillors using a range of communication tools, e.g:
 - a) Using the media and communications resources of the council to work to build positive relations with the local media;
 - b) Making use of council newsletters and other media publications;
 - c) Harnessing technological solutions – such as email, web 2.0, blogs and texting – to make councillors' activities more visible.

Campaigns:

- Sign up to the LGA/IDeA Reputation campaign.

Youth engagement:

- Develop and implement strategies to engage meaningfully with young people.

Support:

- Adopt modern business and meeting processes which seek to remove potential barriers to participation. This should include:

- a) ensuring meeting times are accessible to both members and the public, with a preference for early evening meetings to enable working councillors to attend;
 - b) ensuring meetings are chaired efficiently and have agreed maximum lengths;
 - c) making use of modern technology to enable involvement in meetings without the need to attend in person;
 - d) ensuring paperwork for meetings is concise and focused and provided in a timely fashion;
 - e) making meetings as welcoming and inclusive as possible.
- Support councillors to develop their skills by offering:
- a) a flexible and time-sensitive induction programme, which utilises a range of learning methods;
 - b) an option for 'refresher' and 'ongoing' training for all councillors;
 - c) personal development plans regarding development needs and opportunities;
 - d) opportunities to be partnered with mentors within and/or outside one's own council;
 - e) self and peer review schemes leading to tailored support packages for councillors;
 - f) training in approaches to community development.
- Political awareness and an appreciation of the councillor role should be regarded as a core training need for local authority officers.

Exit interviews:

- In order to understand and address the needs of and opportunities provided by individuals who stop being councillors, local authorities should undertake exit interviews, with a view to:
- a) providing the council with systematic evidence of why councillors decide not to stand for re-election and whether anything can be done to address this; and
 - b) providing individuals with opportunities for them to continue to be civically engaged.

Allowances:

- All councillors should be entitled to access to the local government pension scheme, and any allowances for serving on joint authorities should also be taken into account.

Effectiveness:

- In order to maintain confidence in local councillors, Local Authority Standards Committees should be empowered to suspend and claw back part of the basic allowance on the limited occasions where councillors are measurably failing to fulfil their role description.

3.0 Ward Councillors and Community Leadership: A Future Perspective

3.1 Introduction

This report investigates how the role of elected members in England is likely to change over the next five years as neighbourhood working becomes more widespread, and central government's proposals to strengthen community governance are put into practice by many local authorities.

It draws together the perspectives of councillors, officers and community organisations from four different local authorities: Newcastle, Salford, Suffolk and the London Borough of Newham.

The report considers local aspirations for the role, views on the skills and attributes that future councillors are likely to need, the impact that changes are likely to have on members' relationships with communities and council officers, and the implications for councillor recruitment.

The report links closely with the Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, in which the Government makes a strong statement about the importance of ward councillors as local political and community leaders.

3.2 Aspirations for change

The report revealed that many councillors feel distanced from decision making within councils and local strategic partnerships, and disaffection with the 'backbench' councillor role.

They identified the following six areas for change to the current ward councillor functions, which reflect their desire to act as 'connectors' between communities and the council:

1. Community engagement: councillors need to be more actively engaged with all parts of the community if they are to be effective leaders. They need to be empowered and supported to engage with residents and community groups using a range of different tools.

2. Advocacy: councillors need to be able to speak freely and openly challenge the executive.

3. The political role: councils need to acknowledge and value the political dimension of the role and not see this as a barrier to improving local services.

4. Local action: councillors and community organisations want elected members to be able to tackle local issues directly, especially persistent problems concerning local public spaces such as fly-tipping, graffiti or unkempt parks and green spaces.

5. Influence: councillors must have real opportunities to influence strategic decisions about how mainstream services are allocated spending, and at a

point where local priorities and intelligence can be fully reflected in how services are planned and delivered.

6 Local intelligence and information: members need more and better quality intelligence about local issues in order to make informed decisions and more effectively influence strategic decision making.

To fulfil this connecting role, the report claims that councillors need to change in two directions: they need to be more proactive and community-focused, and at the same time have much stronger links to strategic service planning, particularly over decisions taken 'beyond' the ward that have a local impact.

3.3 Defining the future ward councillor role

The 'ideal' future ward councillor role is identified as having 6 core dimensions:

1. Political representative: the ability to connect with all parts of the community and represent everyone fairly, and to balance local concerns with the political demands of the group manifesto.

2. Community advocate: be a skilled advocate for people from different backgrounds, cultures, and values; have the confidence to speak freely and challenge the executive.

3. Community leader: exercise community development skills – support local projects and initiatives, and educate people about local participation; be a good communicator – explain what political decisions and structures mean to constituents and community organisations; be sensitive to difference and issues of diversity and equality; have knowledge and skills to engage people in a variety of ways (not just meetings); be a conflict broker.

4. Service transformer: understand the complex business of local government and services provided both by the council and others; have the confidence and ability to hold service providers to account; be able to work in partnership with a range of agencies and interests; ability to understand local problems and use this knowledge locally and strategically in local action planning; setting and monitoring service standards.

5. Place shaper: being a local figurehead/role-model that people feel they can turn to; be able to shape the very local environment – ability to identify priorities, work with officers and service providers to address public realm problems, manage delegated locality budgets.

6. Knowledge champion: be the primary source of local intelligence flowing between the community and the council; have the skills to collect and analyse local information and use it to benefit the community.

3.4 Obstacles to developing new roles

To achieve the new 'empowered' councillor role, major cultural changes are required on the part of local authorities, political parties, communities and

members themselves, towards valuing frontline aspects of councillors' work (such as community engagement and advocacy), and supporting them to operate in this capacity.

In the short term, councillors need to develop different skills to make the transition to a more empowered role and will need new types of support to do this.

The following support areas were identified as being needed:

- **Defining the future role:** establishing a clear-cut definition of the future ward councillor role will be important if members are to take on new responsibilities.
- **Skills, learning and development:** councillors need more personalised training that takes into account specific local challenges, such as dealing with community conflict, understanding equalities, community cohesion issues, or new approaches to community engagement. Training needs to be more flexible to reflect time pressures councillors face.
- **Information:** councillors need access to better quality intelligence about council business, service performance and local issues in order to make more informed decisions.
- **Officer support:** councillors identified the importance of officer support in enabling them to respond rapidly to community concerns and to deal with service improvement.
- **Member support:** councillors expressed serious concerns about their capacity to fulfil a more complex and demanding future role without better basic support. Support needs include: better administrative back-up (access to paperwork for meetings, appointments and surgeries, support with casework), help with community engagement, training to use ICT.

3.5 Policy and practice implications

In response to their findings, the researchers recommend a number of reforms to current policy and practice, including:

1. A Ward Councillor Compact

The primary recommendation is for the development of a Ward Councillor Compact, a voluntary two-way agreement between the council and elected members.

- The Ward Councillor Compact would:
 - help to define the future role and address issues about support, development, and performance standards, among others;
 - set out the council's expectations of the role, encouraging basic minimum standards of activity in each of the dimensions and functions of the job, possibly combining specific tasks with suggested approaches, skills and behaviours;

- set out the council's commitment to provide minimum levels of support and training for members. This could be based on IDeA's recommendations for all councillors to have access to a package of basic support measures including a community induction; support for every councillor to be in e-mail contact from home; enabling councillors to draw on council resources to conduct surveys of local opinion; and providing them with a single officer as a channel for complaints.

2. Reforms to political parties and councillor recruitment

- Parties should agree a series of 'national standards' for the operation of political party groups, particularly in relation to diversity, recruitment and selection.
- There should be cross-party support to significantly reduce, if not prohibit, the use of whipping in all aspects of local democracy other than Full Council.
- There needs to be significant improvement in councillor remuneration – there should be cross-party cooperation in opening a genuine national debate about member allowances and support.

3. Skills, support and information

- Councils need to invest in more effective ward-based information systems that allow authority-wide performance data to be disaggregated down to a ward/neighbourhood level and disseminated to councillors in a relevant and timely manner.
- Councils need to develop a more strategic approach to councillor learning and development.
- Councils need to identify a named officer to offer direct support to each ward councillor.

4.0 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act makes a number of provisions to strengthen the role of the 'frontline' councillor. Most significant is the provision for individual members to make decisions in relation to their electoral division; and the Councillor 'Call for Action'.

These areas were picked up in the member seminar on the Act and are referred to in the separate report on this agenda.

It will be for the Council to decide whether to devolve powers to individual Members. If a decision is made to allow individual Councillors to have a certain level of devolved powers in relation to their division, it is likely that

additional officer support will be required to help them manage this new responsibility.

With regards to Councillor Call for Action, Councillors will be able to refer matters to overview and scrutiny. It is likely that some training will need to be provided as to what and how issues can be taken forward.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

The role of a councillor in local government is changing in recognition of the growing democratic deficit and the need to re-engage citizens in local public services. The focus is now on 'frontline' councillors who will lead and empower their communities. The message from the Commission is that local authorities should look at how they support councillors to carry out their new roles.

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