

Councillors guide

A guide for new councillors 2014/15





Welcome to local government!

This guide, produced by the Local Government Association (LGA), is designed to provide you with the key information that as a new councillor you need to know. It explores some of the main issues and challenges facing local government today and includes useful hints and tips from experienced councillors.

Whether you have a few hours to spare or just 10 minutes, you will find useful information in this guide about the areas in which you may become involved. You can find further information on the LGA website: www.local.gov.uk



Foreword

On behalf of the LGA, I would like to offer you my warmest congratulations on becoming a councillor. Taking office is one of the most important civic duties a citizen can perform and I hope that this guide will help you as you represent your community, advocate on behalf of residents and work with your fellow councillors.

Becoming a councillor can be a daunting process and I want to assure you that the LGA is here to support you. We are a membership body with 412 member authorities that cover every part of England and Wales. Our members represent more than 50 million people and spend around £113 billion a year on local services. They include county councils, district councils, metropolitan councils, English and Welsh unitary councils and London boroughs, along with fire and rescue authorities and national park authorities.

This guide offers practical advice on becoming a councillor and outlines the range of services the LGA has to help you settle into your role and connect with other councillors. You could not have chosen a more challenging, or exciting, time to enter local government. Every day, elected members face tremendously difficult decisions as demand for services increases and funding from central government falls. Local government is trusted by our residents over national government, and we firmly believe that local councils and councillors are best placed to respond to the challenge of rising demand in a time of austerity, to safeguard public services and to lead communities to a secure new future. As a new councillor you are at the forefront of this debate.

Being elected as a councillor is only the start of your journey in local government. We are here to support you every step of the way, so please do make best use of this guide and of the services the LGA offers.



Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell
Chairman of the LGA

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1. Welcome to the LGA

Welcome to the LGA – the national voice of local government

The LGA works with councils in England and Wales to support, promote and improve local government. As a councillor elected to one of our member councils, you automatically have access to the services that we provide.

We are politically-led and cross-party, and work with and on behalf of councils to give local government a strong, credible voice at a national level. We lobby and campaign in Westminster and Brussels on behalf of councils in England and Wales.

Having one politically-led membership body gives local government the capacity to:

- pick up emerging government thinking and ensure that local government's views are heard in the centre of government
- think ahead to shape and develop the policies that councils need
- work with public, private, community and voluntary organisations to secure their support for local authorities' priorities and their understanding of our perspectives
- ensure that the right issues are raised with the right people at the right time, increasing their chance of resolution
- speak with one voice to the public through the national media
- take responsibility for driving innovation and improvement across the local government sector.

Campaigning on your behalf

One of our key roles is to campaign on behalf of our members on issues councils have identified as priorities. We have campaigned on a wide range of issues, from local government funding to securing vital changes to the social care system.

In 2013 we launched Rewiring Public Services, an ambitious campaign which

proposes new approaches to public service delivery in an environment of ever-reducing funding. Rewiring has transformed the debate about the future of public services and brought to the attention of national politicians the challenges faced locally by councils.

As councils continue to face tough times, it has never been more important for us to speak with one strong voice. Councils tell us that lobbying on their behalf and defending the reputation of local government in the media are two things they value most from the LGA. In the last year we produced nearly 23,000 media stories, many of which were national – that's 61 a day. We have secured numerous opportunities in Parliament to press for changes in the current legislation affecting local government, amendments to proposed legislation, to raise issues and concerns on your behalf and to ensure local government receives praise for the work it does. We also arranged 104 speaking slots for councillors at the main political party conferences.

In the last year the LGA achieved a number of wins for local government. These include:

- recovering most of the £1 billion that councils had tied up in the failed Icelandic bank Landsbanki
- an extra £400 million for local government's new public health responsibilities
- an additional £100 million of capital funding to extend free early education for two-year olds from 2013
- government agreement to fund increased business rates relief
- a move towards five-year funding settlements (indicative financial statements)
- no further cut in the local government grant in 2015/16
- partial lifting of the housing borrowing cap
- the return to some local authorities of top-sliced New Homes Bonus money.

You can find out more about our campaigning work on our website:
www.local.gov.uk

2. The councillor's role

As a democratically elected local representative you have a unique and privileged position – and the potential to make a real difference to people's lives.

However, being a good councillor is hard work. Every day you will be expected to balance the needs and interests of your local area, your residents and voters, community groups, local businesses, your political party (if you belong to one) and the council. All will make legitimate demands on your time – on top of your personal commitments to family, friends and workplace.

As a councillor you will have many different roles to balance. As the local elected representative you will engage with residents and groups on a wide range of different issues and take on an important community leadership role. At the council you will contribute to the development of policies and strategies, including budget-setting, and you may be involved in scrutinising council decisions or taking decisions on planning or licensing applications.

Representing your local area

A councillor's primary role is to represent their ward or division and the people who live in it. Councillors provide a bridge between the community and the council. As well as being an advocate for your local residents and signposting them to the right people at the council, you will need to keep them informed about the issues that affect them.

In order to understand and represent local views and priorities you will need to build strong relationships and encourage local people to make their views known and engage with you and the council.

As a local councillor, your residents will expect you to:

- respond to their queries and investigate their concerns (casework)
- communicate council decisions that affect them
- know your patch and be aware of any problems
- know and work with representatives of local organisations, interest groups and businesses

- represent their views at council meetings
- lead local campaigns on their behalf.

Good communication and engagement is central to being an effective local representative. Working with local organisations, such as the parish or town council, is one way to keep in touch. Chapter 5 examines some ideas to help you become a more effective communicator.

Community leadership

Community leadership is at the heart of modern local government. Councils work in partnership with local communities and other organisations – including the public, voluntary and community and private sectors – to develop a vision for their local area and to work collaboratively to improve services and quality of life for citizens. Councillors have a lead role in this process.

Developing council policy

Councils need clear strategies and policies to enable them to achieve their vision for the area, make the best use of resources and deliver

services that meet the needs of local people. As a local councillor you will contribute to the development of these policies and strategies, bringing the views and priorities of your local area to the debate. How you do this will depend on the committees and other forums you are appointed to. However, the council's policy framework must be signed off by full council, on which every councillor sits.

As a new councillor you may be appointed to the council's overview and scrutiny committee. For more information on what that entails see Chapter 8.

Planning and regulation

Councils are not just service providers, they also act as regulators. As a councillor you may be appointed to sit on the planning and regulatory committee, considering areas such as planning applications and applications for licenses for pubs and restaurants and ensuring that businesses comply with the law. In these roles, councillors are required to act independently and are not subject to the group/party whip. Most councils arrange special training.

Code of conduct and standards

As a councillor you will be required to adhere to your council's agreed code of conduct for elected members. Each council adopts its own code, but it must be based on the Committee on Standards in Public Life's seven principles of public life (see next page). These were developed by the Nolan Committee, which looked at how to improve ethical standards in public life, and are often referred to as the 'Nolan' principles.

These principles apply to anyone who works as a public office-holder. This includes all those elected or appointed to public office, nationally and locally, and everyone appointed to work in the civil service, local government, the police, courts and probation services, non-departmental public bodies and in the health, education and social care services. All public office-holders are both servants of the public and stewards of public resources. The principles also apply to everyone in other sectors delivering public services.

Under the Localism Act, all standards matters became the responsibility of

local authorities, which are required to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by elected members. You must register any disclosable pecuniary interests for yourself, your spouse or a partner you live with within 28 days of taking up office. It is a criminal offence if you fail, without reasonable excuse, to declare or register interests to the monitoring officer.

Seven principles of public life

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must

submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for doing so.

Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to change poor behaviour wherever it occurs.



Councillor Sarah Stamp

Conservative

St Edmundsbury Borough Council & Suffolk County Council

When I was first considering becoming a councillor, it quickly became obvious that women, and particularly those with young families like me, are severely under-represented in local government. At 37 I am considerably younger than most of my colleagues and can often bring a different viewpoint to discussions. To start with I was quiet in meetings, but it didn't take long for my confidence to grow.

The hours are flexible and mostly fit in well with family life. My children are always very proud to be invited to civic events, but they also love donning high-visibility jackets and taking part in community litter-picks. It's teaching them a real sense of community ownership.

By far the most rewarding thing is the feeling that I am genuinely making a difference in my community. Listening to residents' problems and often resolving them is really satisfying. I say 'often' because the complexity of some issues means that there is no simple

solution, which can be frustrating. However, by communicating well and being available, I can reassure people that someone is on their side and they have been listened to – even if the outcome is not what they wanted.

Three pieces of advice I would give to new councillors are:

- always allow yourself time to read through papers and prepare properly for meetings
- listen to and learn from your more experienced colleagues
- become involved in the local community.

3. An introduction to local government

Local government touches the lives of everybody, every day. Councils deal with everything from schools to care of older people, from roads to rubbish, libraries and local planning. Behind all of this is a web of legislation and bureaucracy that most people don't need to see. As a councillor, understanding how it works will help you to represent your local community.

What do councils do?

Councils work with local people and partners to agree and deliver on local priorities. They provide a wide range of services either directly, in partnership with others or by commissioning them from a third party.

Since the Local Government Act 2000, councils have been responsible for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas. More recently, the Localism Act 2011 and changes to the way that public health, welfare and the police are organised have given councils and communities more influence over the way their local area is managed.

Councils provide more than 800 services to local communities. Most are mandatory, which means that

by law the council must do them. Some mandatory functions are tightly controlled by central government, resulting in a similar level of service across the country.

Other services are discretionary, which means the council has discretion over the type and level of service it provides. They range from large economic regeneration projects right down to the removal of wasp nests. Councils have been allowed to charge for some discretionary services, such as leisure facilities, for some time. They now have a general power to charge for discretionary services, provided it is not prohibited by other legislation and the council does not make a profit.

How is local government organised?

Successive reorganisations of local government have created a complex and often baffling array of arrangements which vary from area to area. Much of England has two tiers of local government – county councils and district councils – with responsibility for services split between the two. Other areas have a single unitary authority responsible for all local services.

Two-tier areas:

- county councils provide services that cover the whole county, such as education, waste disposal and adult social care
- district councils (sometimes called borough or city councils) are smaller and provide local services such as refuse collection, environmental health and leisure facilities.

Unitary areas:

- metropolitan councils are unitary councils set up in 1974, covering large urban areas
- London boroughs are unitary councils, although the Greater London Authority provides some services including fire, police, transport and strategic planning
- unitary authorities may cover a whole county, part of a county of a large town or city. Their names vary – for example Cornwall Council, Nottingham City Council and Reading Borough Council are all unitary councils. Wales has unitary councils.

Town, parish and community councils

In some areas, the most local tier of local government is a parish or town council (community councils in Wales). They maintain local amenities such as recreational areas, footpaths and cemeteries. The parish council is also consulted on highway and planning applications.

A councillor may serve on one or more tiers of local government – so a county councillor may also be a district councillor and a parish councillor.

England has 27 counties split into 201 districts, 56 unitary authorities, 37 metropolitan districts, 32 London boroughs plus the City of London, 31 combined fire and rescue authorities and 10,000 town and parish councils. Wales has 22 unitary councils and 1,000 community councils.



Councillor Arun Photay

Conservative

Wolverhampton City Council

My top tip would be: don't be afraid to ask, because there is no such thing as a daft question.

I work in the private sector, so when I was first elected I found processes in the council to be slower and not always as efficient. However, the directors and staff are extremely helpful and knowledgeable. Their support enables me to deal with residents' issues promptly while learning from them myself.

I am a great advocate for getting young professionals and young parents more involved in local government. Unfortunately, some of the most important meetings are held during the day, which can make it difficult for them. Although progress is being made, some councils have a long way to go before they are fully inclusive of their communities.

Shortly after being elected, I received a telephone call at 11pm one night. Someone had threatened a local resident and they felt too afraid and intimidated to contact the police. I calmed them down and explained the importance of getting help from the police, then contacted the police on their behalf. This was one of my first experiences of being a councillor, and the satisfaction I got from helping someone was truly immeasurable.

If you have a real passion to do good for the people of your ward and your local area, then you will not go far wrong as a councillor.

Who does what?

	Shire areas			Met areas	London	
	Unitary	County	District	Met district	Borough	GLA
Education	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Highways	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Transport planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Passenger transport	✓	✓		✓		✓
Social care	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Housing	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Libraries	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Leisure	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Environmental health	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Trading standards	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Waste collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Waste disposal	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Planning apps	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Strategic planning	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Local tax collection	✓		✓	✓	✓	

How are decisions made?

Councils have obtained new powers over their executive governance arrangements allowing them to operate one of the following four models:

- a leader and cabinet
- a committee system
- executive arrangements with a directly elected mayor
- arrangements prescribed by the Secretary of State.

Most councils operate a leader and cabinet model. The full council elects a leader who in turn appoints and chairs the cabinet. Each cabinet member has a specific area of responsibility – for example children and young people, housing or resources. The cabinet meets regularly (weekly or fortnightly) so decisions are made quickly. The cabinet may also be called the executive.

In some areas an executive mayor is elected for a four-year term. The mayor has greater powers than a council leader and may or may not be a member of the majority party on the council. He/she proposes the budget

and policy framework and appoints and chairs the cabinet, which can be single or cross-party.

Some councils opt for a committee system. The council establishes a number of committees, each with a specific area of responsibility. The political groups appoint elected members to those committees. More members are actively involved in decision making, but it can be slower to reach decisions.

Increasingly, areas are creating joint decision-making arrangements such as combined authorities or joint leaders' boards to deal with important issues that cross local authority boundaries such as economic growth and transport.

The LGA has produced a practical guide for councils considering changes to their governance arrangements. 'Rethinking governance' can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/nnrw649>



Councillor Sam Phripp

Liberal Democrat

Mendip District Council & Somerset County Council

My hometown of Frome lies in the most north-eastern corner of Somerset, and it's the view of many that it suffers by being remote from our centres of government. I stood for council because the area was getting a raw deal and deserves better.

One of the big things I've tried to do is to be as approachable as possible. Years of grey-suit government have got us nowhere, so I've gone out of my way to make sure that people know who I am and that they can contact me any time.

People have been surprised to get emails back from me after midnight, happy that they can report a litter problem in the fruit and veg aisle at ASDA and bemused that I'd take notes on a pothole while ordering a drink in a nightclub.

Meetings are probably about 40 per cent of what I do. They need to happen, and I enjoy them, but

I believe that the job of a good councillor is to put the message across about what the council is doing and how they can get involved. It's about empowering people, not bogging them down in paperwork and proposals.

If I can help people realise that their councillor is a helpful human being, rather than another suited clone, then I'll have achieved point one of my ever-growing 'to do' list.

Whichever system an authority opts for, it must have a full council on which all councillors sit. This is responsible for setting the policy framework, agreeing the budget and spending plans, electing the leader of the council and making constitutional decisions. It is also a forum for debate on major issues affecting the authority and its local area.

In councils with a directly elected mayor, the budget and framework are proposed by the mayor and can only be amended or overturned by the council with a two-thirds majority.

Councils that do not opt for the committee system must establish **overview and scrutiny** arrangements, through which non-cabinet councillors can scrutinise decisions. This is covered later in this guide.

Finally there are some regulatory and quasi-judicial functions over which the cabinet does not have responsibility – for example determining planning applications and making decisions on licensing. These are delegated to a separate **planning and regulatory committee**.

The constitution

As a new councillor you will receive a copy of the council's constitution, which sets out how the council conducts its business, including:

- who is responsible for making decisions and how decisions are made
- procedural matters (set out in the standing orders)
- role of officers
- standards and ethical governance.

It is important to familiarise yourself with these parts of the constitution, in particular the standing orders. These specify the terms of reference of the council's various member structures, the rules on declarations of interest, the timings and order of business at council meetings and the rules of debate.

Agendas and minutes

By law the council's formal meetings must be held in public, although the public and press can be excluded for discussions on some confidential items (known as 'Part 2'). Councils must give at least five days notice of a meeting. The agenda must be

made available at least five days before the meeting. The minutes should be available on the council's website and available on request. The cabinet must also publish its forward plan showing the key decisions to be made in the next four months.

Defamation and privilege

Councillors can be sued for defamation if they say or write anything that will 'lower a person in the estimation of right-thinking people'. However, in council meetings they have qualified privilege to allow freedom of speech. This can protect you against being sued for something you say as part of your duty as a councillor, or to defend or support the interests of the council – but it only applies if you can show that you honestly believed what you said and were not motivated by malice.



Councillor Helen Powell

Independent

South Kesteven District Council & Lincolnshire County Council

As I got to a stage in life where I had more time on my hands, I began to become involved with local issues. This led to me becoming a town councillor.

I really enjoyed helping to find solutions to problems and I found it very rewarding to help the public. I embarked on some successful projects for the town, including a charity DVD about the heritage of our local area and developing a dance and drama class for the disabled.

When I was elected to the district council, the training sessions offered to us were useful and interesting. However, I found it hard to get used to the committee meeting system, which can take a long time to get anything decided. It would have been useful to shadow another councillor in the early days to watch how they undertook the role.

Since being under the wing of the LGA Independent Group,

everything has been so much more informative, helpful, encouraging and fulfilling. I feel I'm making a difference. We have really useful monthly supper clubs where we exchange ideas, hear about new policies, help each other with campaigns and meet new councillors and supporters.

I am amazed at the issues we are tackling now and the extent to which we are planning ahead for the future of our area. I really enjoy working on projects that will enhance our communities.

The council workforce

A council's paid employees are called **officers**. Unlike civil servants, who work for the government, local government officers have a duty to support the whole council, not just the cabinet. This means that they must remain politically neutral.

Very simply, councillors set the strategic direction and agree the policy framework of the council; officers are responsible for delivering the council's policies and for the day-to-day operation of the organisation.

Officers fall broadly into two main categories: front-line and support.

Front-line employees deliver services to the public – for example teachers, social workers, care assistants and refuse collectors.

Support staff ensure that front-line services and the democratic process can operate smoothly – for example through administrative, finance, legal, communications and IT support.

Councils also deliver services through various partnerships and outsourcing arrangements. These staff are not directly employed by the council but are affected by decisions made by councillors.

Officers are not accountable to individual councillors or to the political group in control of the council (with the exception of political assistants). Specific provisions will be included in the standing orders about the involvement that individual councillors can have in the appointment and dismissal of staff and in setting employment policies.

Many councils have protocols or policies to govern councillor/officer relations. All councillors have a general duty of care towards officers, but the protocol will set a framework for members to promote equality and respect the impartiality and integrity of staff.

By law every authority must appoint three key officers:

1. A head of the paid staff – usually the chief executive (or may be called the managing director) who advises councillors on policy, procedure and legislation.

2. A monitoring officer – responsible for advising councillors of the legal framework within which they operate and for ensuring that they understand if their decisions or actions could lead to a legal challenge or be found to be maladministration.

3. A section 151 officer – usually the director of finance, whose task is to monitor the financial affairs of the council.

The senior management team will head up the main functions or departments of the council. Good member/officer relationships are important to a high-performing authority, but the relationship between the leader or elected mayor and the chief executive is particularly important and can have a profound effect on the council's performance.

Top tips:

Key to good councillor/officer relations are:

- mutual trust and respect
- an understanding of your respective roles and responsibilities
- clear and open communication
- flexibility and good work practices
- avoiding close personal familiarity.

Supporting localism

The Localism Act 2011 introduced new freedoms and flexibilities for local government and new rights and powers for communities and individuals. These include:

- **A General Power of Competence** which gives local authorities the power to do anything that individuals generally may do, provided they are not precluded from doing so under any other legislation. It includes the power to take reasonable action 'for the benefit of the authority or persons resident or present in the area'. It gives local authorities the opportunity to develop new and innovative business models in ways that were previously disallowed, and is designed to promote innovation and creativity.
- The **community right to bid** allows extra time for parish councils, voluntary and community groups to prepare bids to buy assets of community value if they come up for sale.
- The **community right to challenge**, where voluntary and community groups, parish

councils and two or more members of local authority staff can express an interest in running a council service. If this expression is accepted, it triggers a procurement process for the service.

- Planning reforms including **statutory neighbourhood planning** in England, involving communities more directly in planning for their areas and a community right to build, giving communities the freedom to build new homes, shops, businesses or facilities without going through the normal planning application process.

This could include anything from requiring contractors to buy supplies locally to choosing a bus company that offers to provide an additional dial-a-ride service, or working with businesses that pledge to take on local apprentices. It could also mean working with local voluntary and community organisations to help them take on services previously delivered by the council or private sector.

For more information go to:
www.local.gov.uk/localism

Improving local wellbeing

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, which came into force in 2013, requires public bodies, including councils, to consider how the services they commission and procure might improve the **'economic, social and environmental wellbeing'** of the area.



Community pubs

- Pubs can help bring communities together. Recent years have seen a big increase in communities saving their local pub from closure and redevelopment by buying and running it themselves.
- The Localism Act gives communities the mechanism to achieve this. A pub can be listed as a community asset and the community right to bid used to raise funds to buy it. Almost 300 pubs have been listed as assets in this way, providing communities with an opportunity to bid for the pub if it is put up for sale.
- For further information and examples, go to the Campaign for Real Ale website: www.camra.org.uk/listyourlocal

The LGA and Locality (the leading national network for community organisations) have produced a guide, 'Empowering communities: making the most of local assets', looking at the leadership role of councillors in making the most of community assets. Download it from the LGA website: www.local.gov.uk



Councillor Michael Deon-Burton

Independent

London Borough of Havering

The challenges you will face as a councillor can be awesome, but they are put into perspective by comments from residents who you have helped. It is a real pleasure to hear a resident say 'the future is now a little brighter' when you have intervened on that person's behalf to solve a dilemma or a perceived injustice.

It is a great honour to have the title 'Councillor' before your name. Remember that your views are just as valid as any on your local authority. If there is something you do not know, take the time to gather all the facts before making a decision – this is half the battle.

Hearing the word 'winner' following an election is just the start. My primary piece of advice to new councillors would be to grow a second skin quickly as you find your way through the new requirements on you and the political life of the council. Don't be daunted.

It is my opinion that in no other arena, at such a grass-roots level, can an individual affect the lives of those who often feel unheard or ignored, or can a singular or collective decision have the potential for such a positive effect on people's lives. Despite the hours worked, the rewards are priceless.

Looking back on my period as a councillor, I sincerely say that I would not trade it for all the proverbial tea in China. Oh, and it's not against the rules to enjoy yourself.



Equality and community cohesion

At the heart of the Equality Act is the public sector equality duty, which aims to tackle discrimination and inequality by embedding equality considerations in the day-to-day work of all public bodies. Public bodies must have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- advance equality of opportunity between different groups
- foster good relations between different groups.

Councils must publish one or more equality objectives every four years, information to demonstrate compliance with the duty each year, and information on their employees and others affected by their policies and practices.

Councillors are expected to understand the impact of cutting budgets and to mitigate potential negative outcomes, especially the cumulative impact on specific groups of people, including employees. Getting this right will ensure fairness and equality of opportunity for local people.

For more information go to: www.local.gov.uk/equality-frameworks



Councillor Amina Lone

Labour

Manchester City Council

I am a single parent of four children and have been a councillor for three years. It has been the single biggest learning curve of my life, after having children. The current economic, political and cultural climate makes this a particularly challenging time to be involved in local government.

I wish someone had told me the real truth about the personal sacrifices you make – the evening meetings, bureaucracy and endless campaigning. I'm glad I have learnt that perseverance, working as a team and seeing the difference you can make in an individual's life can be so rewarding.

My advice would be to take it easy in the first year, watch, listen and learn from those more experienced than you. Build a small team of trusted colleagues you can share confidences with. Work as a team with officers and use their expertise and resources to support your community.

Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask questions and push boundaries, especially if you're told 'that's the way it has always been done'. Individuals who show leadership, strength and are hard working are needed as councillors and community advocates more than ever.

Enjoy it, and learn and grow at every opportunity, because there is nothing comparable to it. It's a bit like giving birth to a child: once you have done it, it changes you forever.

4. Support for councillors

Councils provide support to councillors in their role as democratically elected representatives, although the level and type of support provided will vary. It might include:

- induction and training
- access to accommodation in the council's headquarters, such as a members' room
- office equipment such as a mobile phone, computer and printer
- access to media and general communications advice
- research support.

Some support is provided for all councillors, other support is provided via the individual political groups. If you are an independent member, your council may have an independent group office. The leader of the council and cabinet members are mostly likely to have access to dedicated support, along with the chairs of scrutiny in some authorities.

Induction and training

Most councils offer induction courses for new councillors to familiarise them with their new role and with how the council works. Your induction should

introduce you to the people who you need to know – both members and officers – to do your job effectively, and show you how and where to access the information you will need. It should also run through the legal framework you will be operating within.

Some councils provide a wider range of training for councillors. This may build your knowledge in a particular service area, such as education, adult social care, housing or planning, or develop your skills – for example effective scrutiny, working with the media, presentations, political leadership, influencing or time management.

From time to time, your council may hold briefings and away-days to bring everyone up to date with the big issues affecting the authority and its local area, or joint events where officers and councillors work together to formulate strategy and build good working relationships.

Accessing information

Most of the information that you need to be effective in your new role as a councillor will be available online. Your council's website and intranet

will contain lots of information on the council, the way it works, its services and the local area.

Increasingly, council papers are provided electronically rather than in paper form. Many councils have good teleconferencing facilities that allow you to attend meetings remotely, or they may allow you to join meetings via telephone or Skype.

Officers have a duty to ensure that councillors have access to the information that they need in order to make well-informed decisions. They may do this by producing factual reports, making presentations or arranging visits – for example to allow members of the planning committee to visit a site that is the subject of a planning application. In some councils, the larger political groups may have a political assistant who can carry out research on their behalf.

Allowances

All councillors are entitled to a basic allowance for being a councillor. Those with additional roles may also receive a special responsibility allowance (SRA) which reflects the level of responsibility and

the expected time commitment. Allowances are set by the council on the recommendation of an independent remuneration panel. Some councils may also cover the cost of childcare and other caring responsibilities, travel and subsistence.

Allowances are subject to income tax and it is your responsibility as a councillor to ensure that you pay the correct amount. Some incidental costs, such as use of a home office and telephone, can be deducted before calculating the tax to be paid.

HIGHLIGHTING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

THE LGA DEVELOPMENT OFFER



Councillor development programmes

Inspiring local communities and creating a better future for the people and places we represent takes ambitious leadership, and effective political leadership is at the heart of healthy democracy. The LGA's range of political leadership development programmes supports councillors to become more confident, capable and skilled and better prepared to make a difference.

As a local politician, finding the time to reflect, build up your networks and challenge yourself can be tricky. The Highlighting Leadership development programmes provide opportunities to do just that, for those at the very beginning of their political careers through to experienced leaders, building the leadership capacity of individuals and the wider sector.

For new councillors in particular, the Community Leadership Programme provides resources such as e-learning tools to support you in your role as community leader, facilitator and broker.

The Focus on Leadership series provides seminars and workshops to help councillors in their existing roles and provide a bridge to more senior leadership positions. Examples include the popular Young Councillor's Weekender, which supports councillors to build networks with peers early on in their careers, and the Effective Scrutiny Programme – a development opportunity delivered in partnership with the Centre for Public Scrutiny for scrutiny committee chairs.

The Next Generation Programme offers ambitious and talented councillors an unparalleled party political development opportunity, developed within party political traditions and with party political experts.

Themed learning opportunities for portfolio holders or service committee chairs are available in the Leadership Essentials programme, which concentrates on specific portfolio areas such as planning or adults' social care or on a specific theme such as demand management.

For councillors in leadership positions, including group leaders, portfolio holders, portfolio shadows and committee chairs, the highly regarded Leadership Academy delivers accredited leadership development opportunities, all year round.

For more information go to: www.local.gov.uk/councillor-development

5. Communication

To be a good councillor, you also need to be a good communicator. The following broad principles can help you.

Listen as well as promote

As an elected representative it is important to let local people know what you have been doing, but it's equally important to listen to people and groups in your area, such as:

- local residents
- fellow councillors and officers
- local MPs
- your political party or group
- local organisations (businesses, voluntary and community sector, partners)
- the media
- community and faith leaders.

Make the most of available help

Most councils have a communications team whose job it is to represent the council from a corporate point of view, reflecting the policy decisions made. They are not allowed by law to write or send out press releases on behalf of individual councillors, but

they can still help to promote council work you have been involved with. If you think you have a newsworthy item, your communications team can advise you on how best to promote it.

Learn about the different communication channels

Find out what methods of communication are available to you and who their audience is (for example council and party websites, newsletters and magazines, e-newsletters, social media channels and focus groups). A good place to find out more about developing your approach to communications is: www.lgcomms.org.uk

Develop a positive relationship with the local media

Local journalists are always looking for good stories. By building and maintaining a positive relationship with the reporters in your area, you can establish yourself as a valuable and credible contact for news and comment.

Journalists you have built up trust with will often call you looking for tip-offs.

Think about the stories you can offer – even if they are not necessarily council-related. If you have a story of interest, don't assume that issuing a press release will automatically do the job. Get to know the local media's deadlines and give reporters as much notice as possible.

Present a story

The best news stories are those that tell the TRUTH: Topical, Relevant, Unusual, Trouble or Human.

Remember that your greatest strength with the media is as a community leader. A local reporter may not be interested in a political press release, but they will take notice if you are campaigning on behalf of your residents on high-profile local issues.

Know your residents, relate to their concerns, understand their ambitions and be their champion. Work with local community groups. Often they will be involved in campaigns of interest to the media that can help boost your profile. And think pictures: if a story has an obvious visual angle involving local people, it is far more likely to be covered.

Meet people where they are – on and off line

Good communications needn't cost a lot – sometimes just the price of a coffee.

- Visit local meeting places – for example cafés, local shops, outside the school gate.
- Newsletters (on paper or by email).
- Events and meetings.
- Surgeries, in person or online – provide opportunities for local people to ask questions or raise concerns (for example, use Skype to carry out some of your surgeries).
- Social media – for example Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. Make sure your content is accurate, informative, balanced and objective, and if you are in any doubt speak to a member of your legal team or check your council's social media policy.
- Blogs and websites – set up a basic website or blog. For those just starting out with this technology, the Knowledge Hub is a good place to get blogging.

Develop your public voice – and understand who is watching

Whether you are involved in a conversation on Twitter or in the pub, it is important to remember who might read or hear what you say and what impact it might have.

- Be aware of how your public voice comes across.
- Behave online as you would in person.
- Make sure written copy is in plain English, accurate and relevant to your audience.



6. Access to information

Freedom of information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives people rights of access to the information held by councils and other public bodies. The legislation aims to give people a better understanding of how organisations make decisions, carry out their duties and spend public money.

The Act creates two principal obligations for councils:

1. All councils must adopt and maintain a publication scheme setting out details of information they will routinely make available, how the information can be obtained and whether there is any charge for it.
2. All councils must comply with requests for the information they hold unless an exemption from disclosure applies. Councils usually have up to 20 working days to respond to a request.

As a councillor, the decisions you make and the actions you take are all subject to public scrutiny. Your allowance, along with any expenses that you claim, will be published on the council's website.

Data protection

The Data Protection Act 1998 regulates how personal data (information about a living person) is held and processed. It applies to information held on computer and on paper. Personal data includes a person's name, address, religion, ethnicity, trade union membership, political opinions, criminal convictions, physical and mental health.

The Act is underpinned by eight common-sense principles:

- process personal data fairly and lawfully and ensure that it is:
- only kept for one or more specified and lawful purpose(s)
- adequate, relevant and not excessive for the specified purpose(s)
- accurate and kept up to date
- kept for no longer than is necessary
- processed in line with the rights of individuals
- secured against accidental loss, destruction, damage, unauthorised or unlawful processing
- not transferred outside the EEC.

If you handle personal data in line with the spirit of these principles, you will go a long way towards ensuring that you comply with the law. However, this is a complex subject, so if in doubt talk to your council's data protection officer.

The Act requires every organisation processing personal data to notify the ICO unless they are exempt. Notification costs £35 a year and not doing so risks a fine of up to £5,000.

As a councillor, there are three ways in which you might use personal data.

1. When considering issues and making decisions as part of the council's business – for example in committees or working groups. This should be covered by your council's notification.
2. As a member of a political party canvassing for votes or working for the party. This is usually covered by the party's notification but do check. If you are not a member of a political group you will have to notify the ICO yourself if you wish to process personal data in this way.
3. Carrying out casework in your ward/division. In this case you are the data controller and are required to notify the ICO yourself.

It is for each councillor to determine whether they should notify as a data controller. You should consider what personal information you hold and process in relation to your own ward/division casework and, if necessary, submit formal notification on the ICO website.

Further advice can be found at: www.ico.gov.uk

Open data

Central government has placed a strong emphasis on transparency and all councils have been asked to publish data on expenditure, as well as other accountability and performance information.

Open data can support innovation and improvement in public services. The 'making a difference with data' project (www.madwddata.org.uk) was set up to spread understanding about open data and transparency. It will show how information obtained from organisations such as the police, NHS and councils can be used by citizens to raise issues, campaign and influence decisions.

Using data

Data and statistics can be useful in showing how things in your ward compare with the local or national situation. This can help councillors to understand their ward and develop strategies for improvement. Information that can be useful includes:

- **education** – the performance of local schools and colleges
- **housing** – the number and type of council properties within your ward, waiting lists, vacancies, re-let times and waiting times for repairs and maintenance
- **environment** – response times for fly-tipping incidents, standards in local food outlets, traffic congestion, pollution and missed bin collections
- **safety** – crime and anti-social behaviour statistics, the number and type of road traffic accidents, the number and type of fire and rescue incidents
- **facilities** – use of libraries, leisure centres, parks and playing fields.

LG Inform, a service run by the LGA, can help you find up-to-date data about your local area and the performance of your council. See the following page for more information.

Know your patch

Have you ever wondered what proportion of your residents are employed or how many local schoolchildren are obese? How does that compare to other places?

Our new and improved **LG Inform** service gives you and your council easy access to up-to-date published data about your local area and the performance of your council and fire and rescue service.



In addition, we now offer **LG Inform Plus** to complement LG Inform. This subscription service gives users the power to drill down from authority wide information to much smaller areas, such as wards and neighbourhoods.

www.local.gov.uk/lginformplus

7. Local government finance

The local government finance system was never designed as a coherent whole. It is complex and has evolved over many years so it has a reputation for being difficult to understand. Part of your role as a councillor will be to debate and agree your authority's budget, so it is important to know the basics.

Local authority spending in England falls into three main areas:

- spending on capital projects such as roads or school buildings (capital expenditure results in the creation, acquisition or enhancement of an asset)
- revenue spending on council housing
- revenue spending on all other areas (mainly pay and the other costs of running services).

Councils cannot use capital resources to fund their revenue expenses without specific government authorisation. For example, staff salaries cannot generally be paid using the proceeds from the sale of a building.

Spending Reviews

Central government plans public spending on a multi-year basis through Spending Reviews. The 2010 review set total public sector budgets until March 2015, and a smaller 'spending round' in June 2013 covered budgets for a further year to March 2016. By then, councils will have seen a reduction over five years of 40 per cent in their core funding from government.

Local authorities find out their individual funding assessment for the next financial year in December, though the draft local government finance settlement. Once it is approved by Parliament in February, councils know how much they will get from government.

They can then estimate the total business rates they will collect and retain, look at how much they will spend in the coming year, and calculate the amount of council tax revenue needed to meet the shortfall between their spending needs and expected income from other sources. Dividing the council tax requirement by the 'council tax base' (roughly speaking, the number of properties in the area) will give the council tax that must be charged for a band D

property (the rates for other bands are a fixed portion of the band D charge).

Councils must hold a local referendum if they want to raise council tax above a threshold decided by central government (two per cent in 2014/15). The result is binding, so councils must put in place a contingency budget, with a rise below the threshold, to be enacted if the referendum returns a 'no' vote.

Business Rates

Business rates are a tax levied on the owners of non-residential properties. Until 2013, business rates collected by councils were paid into a central pot to be redistributed to councils as grant funding. There was no connection between the amount of business rates a council collected and the level of funding it received. From April 2013, councils can retain a portion of business rates raised locally – the 'local share'. Central government will continue to set the maximum increase in the business rates multiplier and decide what share of business rates can be kept by councils (currently 50 per cent).

What this effectively means is that a council will receive more funding if it experiences real-terms growth in its local business rates base, and lose funding if it experiences a real-terms reduction. The system is designed to incentivise councils to promote local economic growth by rewarding them for every new business they help to put on the map.

Budgets

Revenue and capital budgets cover all the costs of the council – employees, services, buildings and so on. They represent the fundamental tools that councillors use to make their policies and strategies come alive.

The budget process enables councillors to:

- review spending priorities
- monitor actual spending
- control spending by service departments and budget holders
- enable redirection of resources
- identify gaps in provision
- plan ahead.

Generally, the ruling group or coalition will present a set of budget proposals to full council following consultation with officers and local residents.

This tends to use the previous year's budget as the starting point, with adjustments made to reflect changing service priorities, statutory duties and, increasingly, savings. The budget will also include reserves and contingencies to manage risks.

All councillors have a critical role to play in monitoring budgets and ensuring money is spent on delivering the council's policies and strategies. The budget year runs from April to March. The cycle is largely driven by the need to set council tax, which must be done annually. As well as an annual budget, the council will have medium-term financial plans that look three to five years ahead.

The four main stages of the budgeting process councillors should think about are:

1. Planning and setting the budget:

what does the council want to achieve?

2. Scrutinising the proposed budget:

does it comply with the council's policies?

3. Monitoring the budget throughout the year:

is there an over- or an under-spend?

4. Reviewing the budget:

did the allocated budgets achieve the desired type and level of service?

Income and expenditure

Revenue and capital income comes from a range of sources and is spent on services that benefit local people. Most revenue comes from:

- business rates: the 'local share' and the net effect of any tariff or top-up
- revenue support grant, the largest single grant stream, funded mainly from the 'central share' of business rates, which is non-ring-fenced (so can be spent on anything)
- specific government grants, some of which are ring-fenced for specific services
- council tax.

Income from fees and charges to residents and service users (such as planning fees, social care contributions, commercial waste, parking and leisure) is a relatively small proportion of income. Councils also receive a 'new homes bonus' for any increase in the number of residential properties in their area to encourage housing growth.

For more information go to: www.local.gov.uk/finance



Council tax support

In April 2013, council tax benefit, which had been administered by councils and funded by central government, was abolished. Now, the funding, minus a 10 per cent reduction, is paid directly to councils through a non-ring-fenced grant. Each billing authority must design its own council tax discount scheme, the intention being that councils have a direct financial stake in reducing the national benefits bill.

Authorities can choose to replicate the old council tax benefit system, absorbing the loss in funding themselves, or to pass on some or all of the funding reduction to claimants by increasing their council tax bills. The cost of the scheme is shared between all the bodies that levy council tax (local authorities, town and parish councils, fire and rescue authorities and police commissioners).

This change raises a number of issues that must be taken into account in budget setting and financial planning:

- councils must now bear the financial risk of any increase in claimants
- the entitlement of pensioners must be protected at its previous level (so if the funding reduction is passed on in full, the reduction in support to working age claimants is actually much greater than 10 per cent)
- early indications suggest that collection rates have decreased, particularly among those who previously paid nothing
- after 2013/14, funding for council tax support is not identified as a separate grant but 'rolled up' within the overall funding settlement (which is generally cut year-on-year). Councils must either reduce their support to claimants every year or find savings elsewhere in their budgets.

8. Holding the council to account

Overview and scrutiny

Overview and scrutiny lies at the heart of local accountability. It is the principal democratic means, between elections, of ensuring that decisions made by the council and its partners are held to account. In many councils scrutiny has built up a reputation as a strong voice in the policy development process and a place where ideas for improvement can be debated and evaluated.

Councils that have opted for a committee system are not required to have an overview and scrutiny committee. Those with a cabinet system or an elected mayor must have at least one.

Overview and scrutiny has some specific statutory powers – such as the scrutiny of health bodies and some other partner organisations. For this reason, some councils operating a committee system have chosen to have an overview and scrutiny committee as part of their structure.

Many councils now carry out the bulk of their detailed scrutiny work in informal, time-limited task groups. These can carry out investigations into any issue, collecting evidence from a wide range of sources. They

make recommendations which, through a scrutiny committee, are sent to the council's cabinet to be either accepted or rejected.

The formal arrangements for scrutiny can vary depending on the type of authority and the governance model it operates under. In two-tier areas, the county council has some specific powers for scrutinising health issues. Although district councils don't have the same specific powers, they can use their scrutiny functions to explore health issues. Councils need to plan carefully the range of health scrutiny powers they delegate, as different arrangements may apply in different circumstances. Districts also take the lead responsibility for crime and disorder scrutiny in their areas.

Getting it right

Scrutiny has no formal powers to stop the cabinet doing something (or to make it do something) but it is far from toothless. If members work to build positive relationships with the cabinet and external partners, and make recommendations clearly based on evidence rather than partisan politics, it can act as a constructive, critical friend and can have significant influence over policy.

This is best achieved by scrutiny carrying out timely, relevant work that focuses on tangible outcomes for local people, and producing meaningful and realistic recommendations. The executive has a responsibility to ensure that scrutiny is properly resourced and supported and that they engage with it openly and honestly.

Health scrutiny

County and unitary councils have specific responsibility for holding the health service to account when local health bodies are planning 'substantial variations' to services.

Health scrutiny is one of the most important ways that councils can respond to the concerns of local residents about their health and wellbeing. It enables councillors to scrutinise how local needs are being addressed, how health services are run and how they can be improved.

It can be a challenging task, as health scrutiny can play an important part in identifying failures and poor care. Councils need to recognise its important role – not only in holding acute trusts and other health bodies to account, but in bringing about

change to improve health and reduce health inequalities.

Further information

The Centre for Public Scrutiny promotes the value of scrutiny and accountability in public services. It is part-funded with an LGA grant specifically to provide advice and guidance to councillors and officers with a scrutiny role. Visit www.cfps.org.uk for more information and a range of recent case studies; telephone 020 7187 7362 or email info@cfps.org.uk for advice.



Housing Ombudsman Service

The Localism Act 2011 transferred responsibility for dealing with housing complaints from the Local Government Ombudsman to the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) from 2013. The remit of the HOS has been extended to cover the tenants of local authority housing as well as those of registered providers of social housing.

Tenants of registered providers can request that their complaints be considered by a 'designated person' once they complete their landlord's internal procedure. Such a person can be an MP, a local councillor or a recognised tenant panel. The designated person may help resolve the complaint directly, refer the complaint to the ombudsman or decline to do either. In the latter case, the complainant can approach the ombudsman for its consideration of their complaint.

For more information go to: www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk



Local Government Ombudsman

The Local Government Ombudsman investigates complaints from the public (people and businesses) about the administrative actions of councils. It also covers school admissions appeals panels and adult social care providers. It is free to use, and the Ombudsman must investigate complaints in a fair and independent way.

Each council has its own system for handling and resolving complaints. If the complainant is not happy with the council's response they can complain to the Local Government Ombudsman, either directly or by asking their local councillor to refer the complaint on their behalf. The Ombudsman will consider a councillor's comments on any complaint referred.

The Ombudsman does not regulate councils or overturn properly taken decisions. It examines the administrative process involved and, if things have gone wrong, obtains redress for people who have suffered injustice. In these instances, it will ask the council to review its procedures to avoid similar complaints arising in the future – so complaints to the Ombudsman can help a council to improve its services.

For more information go to: www.lgo.org.uk

9. Children's and adults' services

Children's services

Children's services are going through a period of major reform. Among the current issues of interest for councillors working in this area are:

- the role of councils in education and the increasing number of academies
- school funding
- reform of the 0-25 special educational needs and disabilities legal frameworks
- a focus on adoption and adoption scorecards
- a growing number of looked after children
- child sexual exploitation
- a new Ofsted inspection framework
- sector-led improvement
- early years education funding
- raising the participation age for compulsory education and training
- the impact of the health reforms and the transfer of public health commissioning responsibilities for under-fives to local authorities in 2015
- youth unemployment and re-engaging young people.

As with other services, there are significant pressures on funding and a drive for increased productivity. This has led to a need to identify new ways of providing children's services, better commissioning and a shift to prevention and early intervention.

Priority areas

The LGA's Children and Young People Board currently has a work programme focusing on:

- promoting growth and prosperity by re-engaging young people and encouraging businesses to support them
- ensuring children's health is seen as an important part of public health services
- supporting councils to implement new legal duties, from September 2014, for under-25s with special educational needs and disabilities
- helping councils to improve their performance in children's services through peer review, other sector-led improvement activities and support for lead members
- supporting the role of councils in education.

For more detail on the work of the board, the issues facing children's services and the support available to councillors working in this area, visit www.local.gov.uk/children-and-young-people

Adult social care

Adult social care and support is currently being reformed and councils are dealing with significant change, to a demanding timescale, against a backdrop of reduced resources.

Reform of care and support services has been several years in the making and has drawn on a number of sources including the Dilnot Commission, which examined how care and support should be paid for; and the Law Commission, which reviewed the range of laws and statutes covering care and support. The Care Act 2014 provides a new single legal framework for care and support. It contains provisions covering adult social care reform, care standards, health education and research. The Act covers areas including:

- general responsibilities of local authorities (wellbeing, prevention,

integration, information and advice, provision of a diverse and quality provider market)

- the individual's journey through the system (assessment, national eligibility, charging, care planning, a cap on care costs)
- safeguarding adults at risk of abuse or neglect
- provider failure and market oversight
- transition to adult services.

The LGA, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) and the Department of Health are working together on implementation of the Care Act.

For more information, visit: www.local.gov.uk/care-support-reform

Safeguarding and improvement

There is currently no central inspection framework and local government leads its own approach to improvement in adult social care. The LGA coordinates a bespoke programme of support delivered through the Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care programme.

The Winterbourne View Joint Improvement programme is working to support local areas to transform health and care services for people with learning disabilities, autism or challenging behaviour. Councillors, as local leaders, have a key role in working with local health partners, as well as representing service users and their families, to ensure that individuals can live fulfilling and safe lives in the community.

All councillors share a responsibility in relation to safeguarding adults. As well as formal representation on safeguarding adults boards, councillors may become aware of individual cases of abuse through their work with local residents which they need to raise. They can also to ask questions of the council, and other organisations, about the safety

of adults in their area and the quality of services being provided.

For more information on adult social care, visit:

www.local.gov.uk/adult-social-care

10. Councils and health

The biggest influences on the health of individuals and populations are the social, economic and environmental conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Despite concerted action over several decades, health inequality – the gap between the healthiest and least healthy in society – is widening. This has led to major changes to the way service providers work together to identify health priorities and improve outcomes.

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 introduced new powers and responsibilities for councils. All unitary and county councils must now:

- set up health and wellbeing boards
- develop joint strategic needs assessments and joint health and wellbeing strategies
- promote integration of health, social care and other services to improve health outcomes
- procure Local Healthwatch, a patient and public involvement body which acts as the consumer champion and community voice on behalf of patients, carers and the community on health, adult social care and public health issues.

Health and wellbeing boards

Health and wellbeing boards bring together the political, professional, clinical and community leadership in an area to identify the key health challenges, agree priorities and drive integrated activity that improves health outcomes for local people. They are statutory committees of the council but are unlike any other council committee. Their membership includes at least one councillor, the directors of adult social care, children's services and public health, and representatives from local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and Local Healthwatch.

Health and wellbeing boards have a lead role in relation to the Better Care Fund (see 'hot topic' below). They are also responsible for developing and agreeing local plans for driving forward the scale and pace of health and care integration.

Another major change has been the transfer of many public health services and staff from the NHS to unitary and upper-tier local government. Councils' public health

responsibilities range from the schools weighing and measuring programme to sexual health and dental public health. Many are embedding public health activities into their wider work, ensuring that mainstream plans and activities all work towards improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities.

Most local health services are commissioned by CCGs, led by GPs, which commission local health services from providers in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Some health services (including GPs, dental, pharmacy, ophthalmic and very specialist services) are commissioned by NHS England.



Integrated care and support

Integrated or coordinated care and support across health and social care has become increasingly high profile as councils, CCGs and health providers look to make the best use of resources to deliver better care.

The LGA, ADASS and NHS England have been working with ministers to develop a pooled budget for local areas to integrate care and support.

The Better Care Fund is a £3.8 billion fund shared between CCGs and local government at the level of the health and wellbeing boards. It has been designed to help local areas join up services around the needs of individuals, making better use of decreasing resources across the system.

Health and wellbeing boards have, by now, signed off plans from their corresponding local authority and CCGs. These plans will demonstrate agreed local intentions about how money will be shifted in a way that benefits health and care, against a number of national conditions.

Around £1 billion of the pooled fund will be dependent on progress on delivering against these plans. There is a minimum amount that areas will be able to pool, but many are expected to pool larger budgets in recognition of the critical link between health and social care. Many will also be looking to pool budgets around other services such as public health, housing and children's care.

Councillors and health

Councillors have an important role in identifying the health and wellbeing priorities for their communities. Some will occupy key positions on health and wellbeing boards. Others will be non-executive directors on the boards of mental health, community and acute trusts or be involved in voluntary and community organisations.

For further information, visit:
www.local.gov.uk/health



11. Councils and the economy

Although the national economy is beginning to recover from recession, in many areas businesses are still struggling to stay afloat, unemployment – especially youth unemployment – remains high, and some people are finding it increasingly difficult to feed and clothe their families. Economic recovery is also uneven across the country.

Although economic development is not a statutory duty, councils play a vital role in supporting their local economies and driving growth, by:

- ensuring that local people can learn the skills that they, and local businesses, need
- supporting growth and investment in new and existing businesses
- enhancing the quality of life for their communities
- improving infrastructure – for example through improved transport or broadband.

Councils are increasingly innovative in how they deliver services to help local economic growth and support businesses. Services such as environmental health, trading standards, licensing and building control can encourage

new businesses. Aligning housing, planning and transport strategies can create the conditions for businesses to grow.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up about 99.5 per cent of England's business base, and local government has a critical role to play in supporting them. For example, some councils are joining up with lenders to provide flexible and cost-effective finance options for businesses; others are promoting apprenticeship schemes, marketing the strengths of the local economy and adopting business-friendly charters or concordats.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

Every council area is covered by a Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) – a voluntary partnership of councils, other parts of the public sector and businesses. LEPs recognise that local economies do not follow council boundaries – for example, people travel to work in different areas. They have a strategic role in determining the economic priorities and leading economic growth and job creation.

LEPs are taking on significant new responsibilities, as Government has devolved decision-making over most of England's allocation of EU funds to them until 2020. It has also committed to negotiating 'growth deals' with every LEP on the basis of their strategic economic plans, which set out the long-term vision and investment plans for their area.

These growth deals, starting in 2015, are expected to have influence over other growth-related services, such as skills provision, along with a share of a £2 billion local growth fund. In return, the Government will expect commitments from councils within LEPs regarding use of the proceeds of asset disposals and a means of collective decision-making by all local authorities within a LEP.

For more information go to:
www.local.gov.uk/economy



Councillor viewpoint

Councillor Julie Smith

Liberal Democrat
Cambridge City Council

In 2012 I returned to the executive of the council after a couple of years on the back benches. My previous portfolio was arts and recreation, quite high profile and occasionally very sensitive: your idea of great children's play equipment may be someone else's idea of desecration of a green open space.

My current role could scarcely be more different: customer services and resources. I used to think this sounded dull, but I couldn't have been more wrong. The portfolio covers a wide range of back office functions – HR, legal, accountancy, IT and so on – as well as the council's commercial property portfolio, markets, tourism, our customer services centre, and revenues and benefits.

There are lots of meetings, usually with officers. Come budget time, they are all seeking to persuade me of the merits of their proposed bids and savings. Much of the

work is internal and not very newsworthy. However, revenues and benefits inevitably affect a lot of residents.

I have been involved in politics for almost as long as I can remember: I studied it, I now teach it and in my 'spare time' I practise it. I'm lucky that my day job as an academic gives me the flexibility to attend meetings. Life is never dull, but a few more hours in the day would mean more sleep and fewer diary clashes.

Welfare Reform

The Government is implementing a large-scale reform of the welfare state, and councils are at the forefront of delivering these reforms. They are working in close collaboration with partners including Jobcentre Plus, the learning and skills sector and the voluntary and community sector.

The Government's stated aim is to simplify the benefits system and improve work incentives. It is making significant changes to entitlement and to the way both in-work and out-of-work benefits are calculated and administered. This will generate estimated savings of more than £15 billion a year across the UK by 2015.

Councils have a central role in both implementing the reforms and managing transition and impact for local people. The reforms are extensive, contentious and politically contested. Some of them are detailed below.

Universal credit

Universal credit will ultimately be the main delivery mechanism for most working-age benefits, simplifying the existing system into one monthly payment per household. Housing

benefit, previously usually paid directly to landlords, will instead be paid to claimants. Roll-out began in 2013 with the aim of transferring most claimants by 2017. Responsibility for administering housing benefit will transfer from councils to the Department for Work and Pensions. However, councils and their local partners will continue to have a key role in helping people to make their claim, manage their finances and access housing and employment.

The benefit cap

This places a cap on the total benefits for most households where no adult is in work, currently £500 week for families and £350 for single people, and was rolled out nationally in 2013. The greatest concentration of affected households is in London. It is currently applied as a reduction to housing benefit, administered by councils, but will ultimately be administered nationally as a cap on universal credit.

Removal of the spare room subsidy

Unofficially referred to as the 'bedroom tax', this is also known

as the social sector size criterion or the under-occupancy penalty. It applies to housing benefit recipients in social housing who are deemed to have a spare bedroom/s, with some exemptions. Housing benefit is reduced by 14 per cent for one spare room and 25 per cent for two or more. Councils have been given discretionary housing payment funds to support residents with a convincing case for needing an extra room.

Local housing allowance

Local housing allowance is the maximum level of rent for which housing benefit can be paid. In 2011 the Government revised it down from the 50th percentile to the 30th percentile of average local rents.

Local welfare support

Many aspects of the former social fund have been transferred into local welfare support. This is primarily aimed at helping people with specific crises or circumstances that require one-off financial support. It is also designed to help people through periods of stress and transition, for example leaving prison or escaping domestic violence. The funding was

localised in 2013 in the form of a non-ringfenced grant. The Government has said it will end the specific grant in 2015/16.

There have also been changes to incapacity benefit, disability living allowance, tax credits and other benefits. See Chapter 7 for detail on the localisation of council tax support. Your council will have produced information and guidance for local residents which can help you understand the impact and implementation of all these changes locally.

12. Councils and the environment

Planning

As a councillor, you are likely to become involved in planning at some point. Planning is led by the Local Plan, a strategic framework outlining how the local area should develop. Some councillors sit on the planning committee, which deals with planning applications, balancing the economic, environmental and social impacts of new development to achieve the ambitions set out in the Local Plan.

Planning decisions can impact on housing, job creation, climate change, investment, infrastructure and the quality of people's lives. They are often controversial and finding the right balance between conflicting perspectives can be challenging. Community involvement is critical in both plan-making and dealing with applications.

The Local Plan

This is written by the council in consultation with community groups, the voluntary sector, businesses, neighbouring councils and organisations such as the Environment Agency. It sets out the council's approach to development in the area and is used as the basis for

planning decisions. It must include certain topics required by national policy but the local interpretation, and the weight placed on these, will vary.

The Local Plan must be examined by the Planning Inspectorate. If agreed then the local authority 'adopts' it, making it the statutory plan for the area. Plans must be kept up to date, or councils risk decisions being made against national, rather than local, policies.

Neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood Plans are written by parish or town councils or neighbourhood forums. They are a new tool to give communities more influence over the type, location, size, pace and design of development in their area (provided it fits with local and national policies). These plans become part of the development plan for the area once they have been passed by an examiner and ratified by the community through a referendum. Councillors can encourage communities to take advantage of this new tool, help them understand the process, act as a liaison with the council and contribute to the development of proposals in their ward or division.

Planning applications

Often called development management, this is the part of planning that most people are familiar with and is the main way of implementing the Local Plan. Decisions are made in two main ways: officers can determine some (usually straightforward) applications, leaving the planning committee to focus on the strategic or controversial applications.

As a councillor you may be lobbied by individuals or groups in relation to local planning applications. If you are not on the planning committee, you can ask to address it as the local councillor when it considers the application. If you are on the committee, you can get involved and express your opinions in advance of the decision as long as you retain an open mind, listen to all the evidence and do not predetermine the decision. Check your council's code of conduct for guidance on getting involved in planning proposals.

For further information, visit the Planning Advisory Service website: www.pas.gov.uk

Housing

Housing authorities have different arrangements for meeting local housing need. Some run their own housing stock directly or through an arms-length management organisation. Others may have transferred their stock and work closely with local housing associations to place residents on the council housing waiting list.

Demand for housing is steadily increasing, and there are lots of opportunities for councils to support the development of new housing. This can include working in partnership with housing associations or the private sector, using public sector land, building new homes and bringing empty properties back into use.

Waste

Councils have duties to collect and dispose of waste and the arrangements for this vary. In two-tier areas, district councils are responsible for waste collection and county councils for waste disposal. Some metropolitan districts and London boroughs are combined waste and disposal authorities,

but others have responsibility for collection only, with disposal provided by statutory waste authorities. All unitary councils have responsibility for waste and disposal. Councils have different approaches to frequency of collection and the services offered, and some have joint arrangements with neighbouring authorities.

Climate change and extreme weather

The Climate Change Act 2008 set a target for an 80 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 in order to mitigate the potential impacts of a changing climate, which include increased flood risk and heatwaves. In 2013, the Government launched a national adaptation programme.

Climate Local is the LGA's initiative to help councils take local action to reduce carbon emissions and build resilience to the changing climate. In signing up to it, councils commit to addressing local risks and opportunities, such as helping residents to save money on their energy bills or reducing excess winter deaths.

Extreme weather can have a major impact on council services and

property. In recent years drought, snow, heatwaves, storms and flooding have affected many parks and buildings, damaged roads and bridges and created challenges in maintaining essential services such as schools and home-based care. With extreme weather predicted to increase, councils are being encouraged to assess their local risks and put in place appropriate long-term risk management strategies.

A range of resources designed to help councils understand the business case and take action on climate change are available at: www.local.gov.uk/climate-local



Hot topic: flooding

As a local councillor, you can play a key role in encouraging communities to improve their resilience to flooding. Did you know...

- in the UK today, around five million properties are exposed to some degree of flood risk
- damage to properties and contents due to river and tidal flooding costs, on average, £1.3 billion a year.

Unitary and county councils are responsible for local flood risk management. As the lead local flood authority, they work with other risk management organisations to manage flood risk from all sources. Their responsibilities include:

- investigating and reporting flooding
- managing flood risk from surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses
- producing a local flood risk management strategy

- approving, adopting and maintaining sustainable drainage systems on new developments (awaiting implementation).

Further information can be found at the LGA's flood risk portal: www.local.gov.uk/floodportal

Transport

Councils play a vital role in keeping people and businesses moving so they can work, shop, use local services, visit friends and families and deliver goods. Their role includes:

- transport planning
- maintaining highways and managing traffic
- supporting public transport
- promoting road safety.

Locally managed roads make up 98 per cent of the road network and are the responsibility of highway authorities – top-tier and unitary authorities. In London, the Highways Agency manages motorways, Transport for London manages major trunk roads and local authorities manage the local network.

Transport planning

Strategic transport authorities (county and unitary councils, passenger transport authorities and London boroughs) produce long-term transport plans and strategies. These typically aim to support more sustainable and healthier transport systems, manage carbon emissions and improve public health and safety, while also supporting the local and sub-regional economy.

Maintaining highways and managing traffic

Councils spend a significant portion of their budget on maintaining roads and managing traffic. This includes fixing potholes, gritting and clearing main roads in the winter, and inspecting, regulating and providing information on roadworks, such as those carried out by utility companies. Fixing potholes is expensive, so where possible councils will try to spend their limited funding on planned works and improvements that make roads surfaces more resilient to extreme weather.

Parking enforcement is another key role for councils. Parking controls exist for many reasons, but they are

typically designed to:

- ensure roads are safe
- enable traffic to flow freely
- manage the competing demands of residents, businesses and commuters
- provide parking for disabled people, health and care workers.

Public transport

Councils provide public transport as a part of their wider overall transport strategy and to help meet the needs of local communities. In most places outside London, local bus services are run by private operators. Many routes which would not be commercially viable rely on financial support from, and contracts with, the council. The national concessionary fares scheme provides free off-peak bus travel for older people and eligible disabled people, and is administered by councils.

Councils also provide home-to-school transport and support demand-responsive transport as a cost-effective way of providing vital services in areas of low demand. They may provide grants to community and voluntary sector-run schemes for those who find it difficult

to access other forms of transport. District and unitary authorities are responsible for licensing the provision of taxis and private hire vehicles.

Road safety

Councils play an important role in promoting road safety through design features such as traffic calming, cycle lanes, improving visibility and road layout design. They look at engineering solutions in areas with accident problems and carry out safety audits on new roads and changes to existing road layouts. Many also deliver a programme of education, publicity and training to increase the skills and knowledge of local road users.





Councillor Julie Morris

Liberal Democrat
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

It may seem easy to represent your residents when your party is in control of the council, but there is plenty that can be done in opposition too.

When you challenge major party policies, you have to make sure that your arguments are clear and truly representative of residents' views. Keep residents up to date on issues that may affect them and let them know you are at their service.

The methods we use to keep our residents informed and engaged are tried and tested. We publish a regular newsletter, liaise with the local press, keep our website up to date and hold surgeries and consultations. If, as a new member, you feel that you're not getting a response with these techniques, don't give up. It may just take some time for residents to feel comfortable with you.

One example of the contact we have with our residents was when the council had a choice of two traffic-calming schemes. We targeted 200 households along the proposed route prior to the release of the official council documents. By delivering tick-box questionnaires in person and asking people to place the completed forms sticking out of their letterboxes, we got a great response. As well as gathering opinions on the traffic scheme, we collected useful data for our next campaign.

13. Safer, stronger communities

Police and crime panels

Since 2012, all areas outside London have had directly elected police and crime commissioners (PCCs) who are responsible for holding the local police service to account. In London, the elected mayor performs this function. These commissioners have a duty to ensure that there is an efficient and effective force in their area, to set the strategic priorities through a five-year plan, set the police precept, and hire (and fire) the chief constable.

The work of every PCC is scrutinised by a police and crime panel. In London, the panel is a committee of the Greater London Assembly. Police and crime panels must scrutinise the PCC's police and crime plan, the annual report on progress against that plan, the proposed precept and some senior appointments. The panel can veto the precept and the appointment of a chief constable. Panels have a minimum membership of 10 councillors and a maximum of 18 (with a maximum of 20 members, including two independent appointees). A different system operates in the City of London.

For more on the role of PCCs, visit the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners website: www.apccs.police.uk

Fire and rescue services

Fire and rescue services are delivered in four different ways. In some counties, fire and rescue is part of the county council. In others it is delivered by a stand-alone organisation called a combined fire authority (made up of members from a number of councils). In large cities, responsibility falls to the metropolitan fire authorities. In London, the fire and rescue service is governed by the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, a functional body of the Greater London Authority.

Fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) are statutory bodies made up of a politically-balanced committee of local councillors which oversees the service's policy and delivery. Councillors on county and unitary councils can be nominated to serve on the combined or metropolitan FRAs by their councils. County councils with responsibility for fire and rescue will also have a portfolio holder leading on these services.

Regulatory services

Regulatory services in councils (usually taken to include environmental health, trading standards and licensing) have two important functions: protecting communities and supporting local businesses. It is estimated that some 50 per cent of business contact with councils is through regulatory services, which gives them an important role in facilitating economic growth, maintaining consumer confidence and supporting the high standards that make an area attractive to investment and tourism.

The LGA has developed an online training module for councillors looking at how regulatory services can support local businesses and residents. To access it go to: www.local.gov.uk/community-safety/-/journal_content/56/10180/5483225/ARTICLE

Licensing

Councils are responsible for issuing more than 150 different licences, consents, permits and registrations covering a diverse range of trades and activities. The most commonly known form of council licensing

permits the sale of alcohol, and councillors have a very specific role in this through licensing committees.

Licensing exists to protect consumers and businesses. Done well, it supports local economic development in a way that manages the risk of potentially dangerous or irresponsible activities harming individuals, businesses and communities. It provides assurances to residents about the businesses they engage with and boosts consumer confidence in an area.

The LGA is calling for full reform of the licensing framework in order to deliver a de-regulatory approach that frees up business and council time while maintaining important safeguards for local communities and businesses.

For more information, visit: www.local.gov.uk/regulatory-services-and-licensing

The voluntary and community sector

The term 'voluntary and community sector' (VCS) includes voluntary and community organisations, national and local charities, tenants' and residents' organisations, faith

organisations and other community groups that are largely volunteered. It can also include housing associations, social enterprises and co-operatives that are non-governmental, value-driven and principally reinvest their financial surplus in social, environmental or cultural objectives.

Working with this sector is a significant part of every councillor's role. They are important partners because they:

- deliver services and contribute to the quality of life in an area
- represent the views of community interest groups, including vulnerable and marginalised people
- build and sustain stronger communities through the social networks and community action they generate.

VCS organisations vary greatly in size, capacity and influence. They often represent a particular perspective or section of the community. For this reason, you should ensure that you are able to listen to a range of groups.

Historically, most councils gave grants to local VCS organisations, either to cover their core costs or contribute to a particular aspect of their work. Councils can also commission them to deliver specific services or outcomes. In recent years, financial pressures and the need to demonstrate value for public money mean that many councils have moved away from giving grants and are instead commissioning voluntary or community groups to deliver certain activities or services.

More information is available from:

National Council for Voluntary Organisations www.ncvo.org.uk

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action www.navca.org.uk

Social Enterprise UK
www.socialenterprise.org.uk

14. Improvement and innovation

Efficiency and productivity

Local government is the most efficient part of the public sector. Councils are developing new and innovative approaches to service delivery in response to the significant cuts to public spending and the increased demand for services.

Each council is responsible for its own performance and improvement, and councils collectively are responsible for the performance of the whole sector. The improvement support available from the LGA is being refreshed all the time in response to what councils tell us they need. Recently we have developed a new finance support offer which includes a financial health check, a budget challenge and new tools to allow councils to assess their own financial position and consider opportunities and threats to their financial strategy.

Our Productivity and Commissioning programme also includes a number of initiatives designed to help councils reshape their services and increase efficiency. These range from our Productivity Expert programme (which provides funding to individual

councils to enable them to engage an expert to help deliver efficiency savings) to broader programmes with groups of authorities, such as our Adult Social Care Efficiency programme, helping councils take forward their efficiency and transformation agendas in adult social care.

At a time of immense financial pressure and increasing public expectations, councils face their greatest challenge yet to reshape services in a way that meets local need and is cost effective. As a new councillor, you are in a unique position to be able to look with fresh eyes at what your council does.

Peer challenge

A peer challenge allows councils to review and transform their services and deal with performance issues. It is voluntary and tailored to the needs of an individual council. Every council is entitled to one free-of-charge corporate peer challenge; county and unitary councils may also qualify for a children's safeguarding peer challenge.

A corporate peer challenge includes:

- a challenge team, agreed with the council, including experienced councillors and officers
- a pre-visit, up to one week on site, end-of-week feedback and a final written report
- a review that is shaped to focus on the council's own priorities.

Recent peer challenges have focused on:

- how joint working between two councils can improve service delivery and efficiency

- new ways of working, service delivery and relationships with citizens/partners
- corporate priorities such as regeneration and economic development.

For more information visit:
www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

The LGA's extensive evaluation of sector-led improvement demonstrates that councils value the support being provided and that it has been helpful to their improvement journey. To find out more about our improvement services, visit: www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement

or contact the LGA Principal Adviser for your region
<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/11823/Regional+Allocations>

Productivity questions for newly elected councillors to ask

1. Given the budget reductions required by all councils, how clearly articulated and understood is the political vision for the future role, size and shape of your council?
2. Does the council have effective contract management processes that help to maximise the opportunities and potential savings this could bring?
3. Is the council able to influence how the resources held by other partners in the local area are prioritised and spent?
4. Does the council have a prioritised medium-term financial strategy, and does this allow for the appropriate level of reserves?
5. Have all potential savings been identified and agreed for the next three years, and is the council on track to make these savings?
6. Does the council have a politically supported shared services strategy to reduce management, support and back office costs while protecting front-line services?
7. Does the council and its partners have a comprehensive view of the publicly owned assets in the local area, and are there plans to use them to generate income?
8. Is the council working with a full range of social care providers to effectively but sensitively reduce demand on high-cost children's and adult social care provided directly by the council?
9. Does the council make efforts to identify and mitigate against the risks relating to procurement fraud?
10. What is the council doing to generate income?
11. Are there plans to provide increased access to services and information online and by smart-phone to enable more customers to self-serve?

For more information visit:
www.local.gov.uk/productivity

Where to find out more

The Local Government Association website

www.local.gov.uk

The LGA website is updated daily to provide the latest news, information and guidance for councillors and officers. From here, you can sign up for **email bulletins** – handy digests of the latest news, analysis and best practice, and **on-the-day briefings** – summaries of important events and developments that affect local government. Topics might include the Budget, the Queen’s Speech or new legislation.

The LGA’s four **political group offices** (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Independent) each have their own pages, accessed from the main home page, with links to major events, publications and group activities. The Independent Group represents independent councillors and those who belong to any of the smaller political groups, with the exception of the BNP.

The latest **analysis, guidance and good practice** on the issues that affect councils and their residents are covered under the following broad headings:

- children and young people
- community safety
- culture, tourism and sport
- economy and transport
- environment, planning and housing
- finance and localism
- health, adult social care and ageing
- workforce
- European and international.

First is a bi-weekly news magazine for LGA members. Firstonline can be found on the website and includes a section devoted to councillor comment and opinion:

www.local.gov.uk/first-blogs

The LGA’s **Twitter** handle is @LGAcomms which provides timely updates and information on its work. The Twitter handle @LGAnews provides updates on its media work promoting local government.

Political group offices with Twitter handles are:

LGA Labour Group:
@LGA_Labour

Liberal Democrat LGA Office:

@libdemlocalgov

LGA Independent Group:

@LGA_Independent

Other handles of interest include the District Council Network (@districtcouncil) and Centre for Public Scrutiny (@CfPScrutiny).

Knowledge Hub

<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk>

Knowledge Hub is the public sector's professional social network which helps people in local government connect and share information online in a secure environment.

Whether it's being a member of a group or making personal connections with other councillors, Knowledge Hub helps you find, share and discuss information that is relevant to you, your work and your community.

You can:

- join groups to take part in discussions
- connect with other users and share learning and good practice
- search to find the information you need
- receive emails on what interests you
- catch up with people you are connected to
- publish your own blogs and share with a wider audience via social media.

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The information contained in this guide was believed to be correct at the time of going to press. Opinions expressed by individuals remain their personal views and do not necessarily represent those of the Local Government Association (LGA). The content does not purport to give legal opinion and councillors should raise any points of law with the relevant officer. The LGA cannot take responsibility for errors or omissions.

References to government, government policy, plans and intentions refer to their status in May 2014.

Some councillors quoted in the text may no longer hold the office ascribed to them.

The Councillor's Guide 2014/15 is available to download free of charge from the LGA website: www.local.gov.uk/councillor-development



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We consider requests on an individual basis.