



Westminster Scrutiny Commission

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Title:	House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee Report – <i>Councillors on the Frontline</i>
Report of:	Policy & Scrutiny Manager
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1. Executive Summary

1.1 In 2012 the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee (CLG Select Committee) undertook an investigation into the roles of councillors in local government. On 10th January 2013, the Committee published its report with twenty-seven recommendations to the Government. The report and recommendations focused on seven key areas:

- the role of councillors as **leaders of communities** and **neighbourhoods**;
- recruitment and diversity of councillors – and the implications for representation and local democracy;
- **skills, training and support** for councillors;
- **the practicalities of being a councillor** – including time commitment, time off work, casework and remuneration;
- **localising decision making to divisions, wards and neighbourhoods**;

- **oversight, facilitation and accountability;** and
- **strategic leadership, governance and responsibilities**

1.2 The CLG Select Committee considered that the role of councillors was changing and becoming increasingly community-based. In future, councillors would be expected to spend more time supporting their constituents, working with external organisations (such as GPs, schools, police, local businesses and voluntary organisations) and ensuring communities make the most of all the opportunities available to them. The report argued that councils should be devolving power and resources to their members to enable them to fulfil this role. The Committee considered that the incoming Government had to fully embrace localism and give local authorities, and councillors, real ability to make decisions. As such the report stated that it would be important that communities had councillors to whom they could relate. They considered that the membership of many local authorities did not reflect the demographic make-up of the communities that they served. It was considered that local authorities had to do more to promote democratic engagement, and popularise the idea of becoming a councillor.

2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

- The Commission may wish to consider if there are any recommendations in the Commons Community and Local Government Select Committee report, published in 2013, which could be implemented locally in Westminster.
- The Commission may wish to consider if Councillors are fully supported and have opportunities for development as part of their role as a Councillor in the City.
- The Commission may wish to ask the Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, Clive Betts MP, about the most important recommendations from the report and how best to support councillors in their roles.

3. Background

3.1 The Select Committee investigation identified a number of recommendations and conclusions based on their work which could be implemented locally. However the report was wide-ranging and invited a whole range of evidence on a number of topics relating to councillors in local government.

3.2 Councillors in the community

The investigation found that to support communities, councillors needed to be working closely with external organisations and providers of public services. By forging close relationships with GPs, schools, neighbourhood policing teams, voluntary organisations and local businesses, councillors could broaden their understanding of the key issues facing their community. It was seen as important that councillors should have a role in bringing organisations together to share intelligence and provide a co-ordinated and effective response to local needs.

3.3 The report also urged all councils to consider how best to provide support to their councillors and assist them to ensure they have an active role in their communities. The Committee considered that councils should be seeking to devolve power and resources to councillors at the local level, to enable them to fulfil this role. This devolution was envisaged as taking a number of forms:

- enabling councillors to become "mini mayors" at the ward or community level;
- delegating budgets (*such as Westminster's 'Ward Budget' programme*)
- or establishing area committees with decision-making responsibilities.

The Committee considered that approaches would depend upon the characteristics of the area and the type of authority, but it was important that examples of good practice were collected and publicised. It was thought that councils and the Local Government Association should work together to ensure that good practice is shared and that authorities learn from each other.

3.4 The Committee were also aware that local government was increasingly delivering services through external providers. In these cases, it was seen as important that the role of the councillor would not be reduced. It was critical, in the view of the Committee, that councillors should be able to influence the way services are delivered, and should not be prevented from doing so because their authority was in a long-term contract where there may be no access for local politicians to intervene in relation to service quality. The Committee highlighted the importance of councils taking care when drawing up contracts to ensure that contracts allowed councillors to shape service delivery and have regular contact with frontline staff.

3.5 Structures and Elections

The Committee report supported the development of parish and town councils in areas that were currently "unparished" where communities wished to see

them created, and they welcomed the Government's commitment to make it easier for communities to establish local councils.

- 3.6 It was also recommended that councils give formal consideration to their electoral arrangements, ward composition, and, in collaboration with other authorities in their areas, their structures. If, following such consideration they were minded to make a change, they should request that the Secretary of State or the Local Government Boundary Commission for England initiate a review or, if within their powers, make the changes to the arrangements themselves.

3.7 Representation and Diversity

The Select Committee were concerned that the composition of many councils did not reflect that of the communities they served. They thought that it was important to state that they were not looking for absolute "reflectiveness" (which would be impossible to achieve). There was also an acceptance that councillors did not necessarily have to come from a particular section of society to represent that section effectively. Nevertheless, it was thought that healthy democracy depended upon different sections of society feeling a connection to those who represent them.

3.8 Promoting Local Democracy

The CLG Committee considered that local authorities should be actively promoting democratic engagement and explaining to the public what the role of councillor entailed. The repeal of the *Duty to Promote Democracy* was thought to be a spur to show that councils could develop and implement their own approaches to the promotion of local democracy, without the need for central government direction. Whilst the Members acknowledged the budgetary constraints in local government, it was recommended that councils put in place strategies for democratic engagement, in accordance with their local circumstances. These strategies should include a focus on engagement with under-represented and hard-to-reach groups. In particular, councils should be taking steps to promote the active involvement of young people.

3.9 Time Commitment and the Attitude of Employers

The report recommended that councils should assign, to each councillor, an officer who could assist them in managing their casework, which currently happens in Westminster. Further to this, the committee highlighted that the Ministry of Defence was giving serious consideration to the ways in which employers could be encouraged to support military reservists. The Department for Communities and Local Government could conduct a similar review. They recommended that the Government should consult on how employers could be encouraged to provide support to their staff who served as councillors. The suggestion from the committee was a 'kitemark-style' recognition scheme and the introduction of a financial incentive scheme.

3.10 Remuneration

The select committee recommended that the Government gave councils the ability to transfer responsibility for setting allowances to independent local bodies. Unlike the current panels, which can only make recommendations, these bodies would make decisions about levels of allowances that councils would be required to accept.

- 3.11 It was also recommended that the Government gave councils (or, if the recommendation above was accepted, local allowance bodies) the power to include a capped element to compensate for loss of earnings as part of a councillor's allowance. This would have addressed their concern about the current situation, where a large proportion of councillors may be retired and do not have the same need as employed councillors to increase allowances. Allowances could remain low and act as a deterrent for those considering whether to stand for election in future.

3.12 Councillor Performance

The Committee were pleased to hear about the steps political parties were taking to put in place 'councillor contracts'. As they had observed, it was important that the commitments made by political parties at a national level were translated into action on the ground. They pressed parties to ensure arrangements were in place for the active monitoring of contracts. The Committee also wanted to encourage local authorities to put in place light touch arrangements for reporting councillor performance. As part of this, councillors could be asked to complete a brief annual self-assessment to be made public in an accessible format. This would cover attendance, but also details of the work councillors have carried out within their communities.

3.13 Training, Development and Support

The report considered that authorities should review the training they offered to ensure it met the needs of councillors. In particular, training should reflect the changing roles of councillors, and ensure that councillors understood the implications of the Localism Act 2011 and other legislation. However, it was thought that councillors themselves must ultimately be responsible for ensuring they have the skills they need to carry out their duties. They suggested that, as part of the performance reporting process, councillors made public note of any training they had completed in the course of the preceding year. It was considered that training should be seen as a benefit, not a cost, to local taxpayers.

- 3.14 On the one hand, the Committee were encouraged that a number of councils had chosen to ring fence their member development budgets; on the other hand, they were concerned by reports that the staffing to support this member development was being reduced in a number of authorities. Despite budgetary constraint, the Committee considered it essential that there were sufficient resources to meet member development needs. It was considered that without

training and development, councillors' effectiveness and job satisfaction would suffer.

- 3.15 The Committee considered that at a time when councillors were being called on to make increasingly difficult decisions about service reductions and budget priorities, this was not the moment to reduce their ability to undertake these vital tasks. Members thought that councillors had more need than ever for the support and resources to enable them to fulfil their decision-making and scrutiny roles.
- 3.16 The committee consider that training should be provided to potential candidates before they stood for election, to give them some knowledge of what they could expect from being a councillor. They encouraged councils and political parties to work together to organise "taster courses" and briefing sessions for those considering standing for election.

4. The Government response

The Government response to the investigation is published as an Appendix to this report.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers please contact Mark Ewbank x2636
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BACKGROUND PAPERS

CLG Select Committee (2013) Councillors on the Frontline [HC : 432]