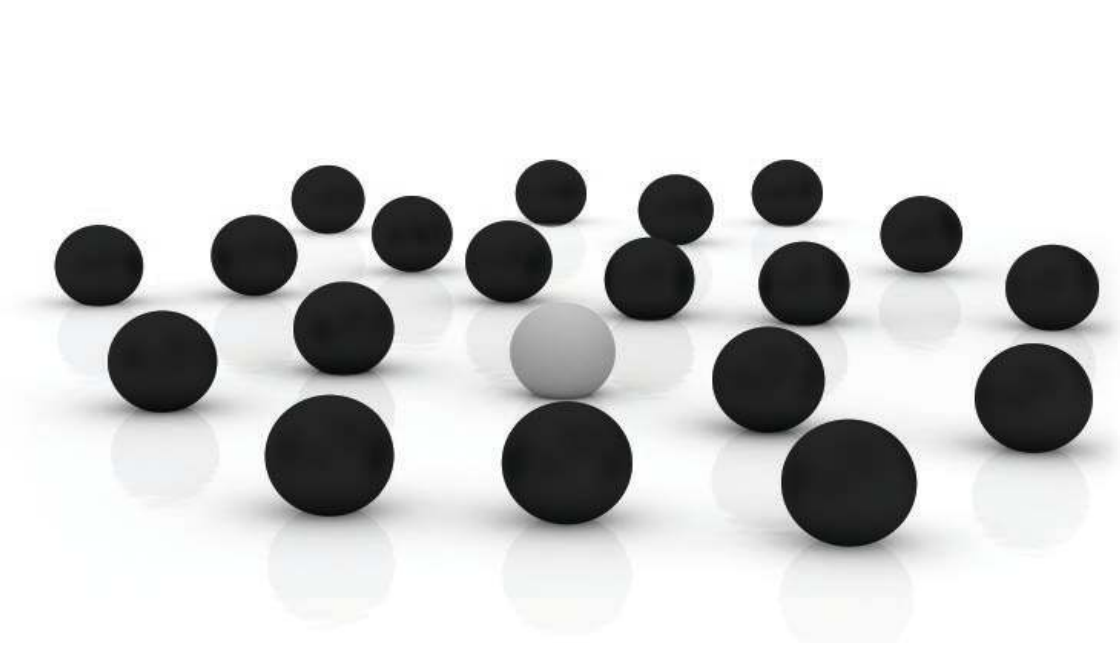


JOINING THE DOTS

Strand 3 Supporting local social enterprise development

The role of elected Councillors as Community Leaders

Report prepared by Nicky Stevenson, The Guild



May 2010

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The Local Government White Paper published in 2006 identified growing opportunities for elected local Councillors to act as 'Community Leaders'. As committee structures in many councils has changed since the 2000 Local Government Act, focusing on the role of a team of portfolio holders, the question arose: what is the role of the rest of the Councillors? The Community Leader role helps clarify how Councillors can act as important agents to empower and consult with local people and to use the information gained to improve council services.

As part of the Social Impact Measurement contract, EEDA wished to identify what the role of Community Leaders is, or could be, in relation to social enterprise development. The Guild set out to interview individual local Councillors in order to explore this issue. In order to explore the specific issue of elected Councillors supporting social enterprises, it was necessary first of all to scope the role of Community Leaders.

Invitations were sent to all County, Unitary and District Councils in the East of England, inviting Councillors to meet with us. We held interviews with eleven Councillors representing ten local authorities across the region during February and March 2010. This was a small, self-selecting and unrepresentative group of Councillors and cannot be said to show conclusively what the answers are to our questions. However, there was sufficient consensus on some issues to indicate some actions that could be taken by councils to enhance the Community Leaders' role.

The Councillors represented four county councils, four district councils and two unitary authorities. One Councillor represented a district and a county council and there were two interviews held with two Councillors from the same authority. Five of the interviewees were from the Conservative Party, four were from the Labour Party, one was from the Liberal Democrat Party and one was an Independent. Seven interviewees were women and four were men.

Community leadership – background

The Local Government White Paper published in 2006 identified the role of ward Councillors as community leaders who could help identify local issues and use this knowledge to help influence how council services are delivered on behalf of the local community. This was seen as an empowering role for back bench Councillors who

were no longer part of the old committee structures that existed prior to 2000. In 2007 the Young Foundation and the Local Government Information Unit produced a study¹ in which they interviewed local Councillors about the scope of this role.

Amongst the aspirations for change identified by the research were:

- Community engagement: Councillors need to be more actively engaged with all parts of the community if they are to be effective leaders. They need to be empowered and supported to engage with residents and community groups using a range of different tools
- Local action: Councillors and community organisations want elected members to be able to tackle local issues directly, especially persistent problems concerning local public spaces such as fly-tipping, graffiti or unkempt parks and green spaces
- Influence: Councillors must have real opportunities to influence strategic decisions about how mainstream services are allocated spending, and at a point where local priorities and intelligence can be fully reflected in how local services are delivered
- Local intelligence and information: members need more and better quality intelligence about local issues in order to make informed decisions and more effectively influence strategic decision making

Defining the Councillors' role - the research identified a number of functions including:

- Community leader: exercise community development skills – support local projects and initiatives
- Service transformer: be able to work in partnership with a range of agencies and interests - ability to understand local problems and use this knowledge locally and strategically in local action planning

What we found

What skills and knowledge about social enterprises do Councillors have?

Most of the interviewees pointed out that the knowledge and approaches that they use as Councillors is not universal and others may not do as much as them or have the same approaches.

Some Councillors said they knew what social enterprises are and some said that they did not. Others thought that they knew but the examples they gave were more likely to be voluntary and community organisations, which is a common misunderstanding. Some asked the interviewer for a definition and some examples of social enterprises.

¹ Ward Councillors and community leadership: a future perspective, Saffron James and Ed Cox, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007

The examples of social enterprises given were mostly local groups, some of which they had direct experience. These included:

- A furniture re-cycling project
- A community radio station
- Community cafes
- Business support organisations
- Community transport
- Community centres
- Housing Associations
- Leisure Services
- Credit Unions

The kinds of help that they were able to offer social enterprises were:

- To offer advice on where to get funding
- To provide funding
- To refer people to appropriate council officers
- To facilitate links between organisations
- To resolve premises issues – specifically relating to council owned property
- To promote the social enterprise to others
- To identify ways to transfer assets and services to social enterprises
- Creating opportunities for social enterprises to trade with the council

In most instances the interviewees saw their main role as being to refer people to the right officer within the council or, where appropriate, to an external agency. They did not see their role as being to provide business advice to existing or potential social enterprises.

Some interviewees came to the council with skills and expertise from their previous work experience that they were able to utilise as elected members. These included:

- Community development
- Strategic knowledge
- Good community links

Where and how do Councillors acquire these skills?

Some induction training is given to all new Councillors although it varies from authority to authority. There appears to be more training given in top tier (County and Unitary) authorities than at district level. Interviewees had been trained in the following issues:

- Community engagement
- Equality and diversity

- Safeguarding adults
- Codes of conduct
- Legal issues
- Finance
- Dealing with the media
- IT
- Planning and licensing
- What all the departments do

They had also been formally introduced to senior officers as part of the induction process and learned about the council's strategic priorities. One member from a district council said that all the training was optional.

Some learned more by formal and informal mentoring by more experienced members and by building relationships with officers. One cited the Local Government Information Unit's handbook for elected members. Some issues were identified where training would be useful, things the interviewees would like to have had when they joined the council. These included:

- How to manage a case load
- How to engage with groups of people
- How to manage following up on queries made by constituents
- People skills
- Speed reading
- Communication
- Short overview with detailed training spread over a longer period

Other actions that the interviewees thought helped them to be effective as Councillors included:

- Knowing what groups and networks exist in the community and actively taking part in them
- Working as much as possible with other agencies
- Building good relationships with officers
- Having a politically appointed researcher to find things out – such as examples of good practice elsewhere
- A weekly members' bulletin – or access to staff bulletin
- Writing articles for the local paper

What capacity have Councillors got?

Three Councillors were in full time employment, one worked part time, three were self-employed and four did no regular paid work outside their Councillor role. One of the Councillors who worked full time was a Local Government Officer for another authority and one was employed by an external agency to work on a project for the

same authority for which they were an elected Councillor. One had previously been employed by the authority that they currently represent. One worked in academia.

The main issue raised was that of time. It was clearly stated by the majority of interviewees that it would be an extremely heavy commitment to have a full time job and to be a cabinet member with a major portfolio. None of the interviewees had full time employment in the private sector. Those who currently worked in local government, or had previously done so, thought that this was an easier proposition because the knowledge they had from their paid work could inform their role as a Councillor. It was recognised that:

If you worked at Anglian Water in a full time job then you couldn't do it.

If there was also an expectation that Councillors should be spending time actively involved with the community, this was certainly not seen as realistic. Some interviewees gave examples of spreading the load between fellow Councillors representing the same division or ward, where one had a strategic role in cabinet and the other engaged with the community with both informing the other. However in other cases it was specifically noted that this did not happen and the Councillors worked in isolation. The community engagement role was seen as a function of back benchers:

It's a useful role for back benchers, to have an interest in people and get out and talk to them during the day.

Several interviewees said that they had gone into local politics when their families were older. Two had become active through their roles as school governors. Only two interviewees mentioned having current family responsibilities.

Another issue mentioned was that of the demands made on elected members by the people that they represent. There is an expectation in many cases that Councillors will be available round the clock. One person said that their first call this year had been at 1.00am on New Year's Day. Another reported that they had received three calls on Christmas Day:

People want competence but they expect [the job] to be done out of the goodness of your heart. They want 24/7 availability.

This was seen as an increasingly difficult balance to strike after the issue of MPs' expenses. People have extended their scepticism about national politicians into the local framework where there is an entirely different system. One interviewee reported having people make comments in the local pub about whether the drinks were going on expenses. The remark was thought to be a joke but the Councillor had been annoyed by it. Another reported that:

People have been ferocious on the doorstep.

People seemed to think that Councillors should have full time jobs to support themselves so that they wouldn't claim expenses but also to be available to them whenever they wanted to make contact.

Why do people become Councillors?

As mentioned above, this was a small, self-selecting and unrepresentative group of elected Councillors. We identified which political parties the respondents represented to ensure that there was a cross section, but other than that, party politics were largely avoided. Broadly speaking, the two categories of respondents were: those with an existing interest in social enterprise who responded to the invitation directly and those who were identified by council officers as being appropriate to interview.

The main reason most respondents gave for becoming a Councillor was to make a difference or a contribution to the community. Some had been asked to stand for election by a local party because they were active in some other area of community life, such as being a school governor, whether or not they were a member of that party. Some had specifically joined a party in order to be able to stand for election.

Several interviewees said that they were not particularly interested in party politics. One had a pre-existing interest in a particular community and was only prepared to stand as a Councillor to represent that ward:

I'm not very interested in party politics.

Another said:

I'm not a political person, my agenda is mostly about doing your best for the community.

Another described their role as:

A community champion rather than a politician I'm not interested in debating and scoring points the role in the community is more important. I'd rather be a do-er.

One interviewee had joined the council as a party member but had since left the party and now stands as an independent:

I've always had an interest in doing things for the community.

Two respondents described themselves as having a lifelong interest in and commitment to party politics and both saw their role on the council as more strategic rather than being about hands on community engagement. One of these respondents worked closely with a colleague who represents the same area and is more community focused. The other's interest was:

In representing all the people in the [council area] not just the ward.

It would appear that amongst this group of Councillors, some are highly motivated by a party political agenda but more of them with this particular area of interest see themselves as primarily interested in their role as a community leader. It was made clear by many of the interviewees that elected Councillors operate at different levels and they were unhappy that some Councillors appear to do very little. They commented that there is no minimum standard for a Councillor and that there are few, if any, sanctions if a Councillor is not working effectively. Accountability in this case is with political parties not the council.

Summary – current and future roles

People become Councillors for a range of different reasons. Amongst the interviewees in this group, making a difference in the community and improving the council's performance to improve peoples' lives were important factors. However, as these respondents were quick to point out, not everyone works in the same way or is active to the same degree. Those that found the time and were motivated to take part in this study are most likely to be amongst the most active Councillors.

The potential for local Councillors as community leaders to contribute towards the support of social enterprises is present, but there are a number of significant limiting factors.

At present Councillors are helping social enterprises in a number of important ways, as described above. Some of them have a very clear view of what social enterprises are and are keen to support them. In some cases the knowledge was more hazy and there was confusion with the voluntary and community sector. Some Councillors had responded to the entrepreneurial approach of individual social entrepreneurs and were keen to assist them.

Local Councillors are extremely well placed to identify and support social enterprises. Their future role could encompass:

- Identifying issues and gaps in services that could be resolved by new or existing social enterprises
- Identifying communities in which a social entrepreneurial approach is present and could be developed
- Supporting and promoting local social enterprises to others and particularly helping to create opportunities for social enterprises to trade with the council
- Ensuring that officers are aware of the needs of social enterprises and are able to broker social enterprises towards appropriate sources of support

In order for this to happen in any systematic way, Councillors would need to have more and better information about social enterprises and the support that is available to them. However this supposes that there is a consistent approach to the

role of a Councillor in different authorities and at different levels. There appears to be a very wide range of levels of support for members in different authorities. Top tier authorities, especially well established county councils, appear to offer more support than district councils. Some new unitary authorities are in the process of putting these systems in place.

Clearly the primary focus of support to Councillors is with regard to the council's legal and statutory responsibilities. However, if there is an expectation that Councillors will be able to perform as community leaders and offer support in specific areas such as social enterprise development, then they all need more support to do so than they receive at present. Some of our cohort of interviewees have professional experience of working in communities and were able to give an informed view of the kind of support that is needed. In order to develop an effective role as a community leader, Councillors need to know:

- How to engage with people in the community who would not normally approach them
- Where the community meets and how to have a presence
- How to deal with conflict
- What resources are available across the council to support community members

In order to provide support for social enterprises, Councillors need to know:

- How to distinguish between a traditional voluntary or community organisation and a social enterprise or potential social enterprise
- What support exists in the council for social enterprises
- What other specialist support exists for social enterprises in the area
- What social enterprises are already operating in the area and what issues they face

This would require a combination of additional training, briefing papers and planned visits to social enterprises.

The findings from this exercise suggest that at least one elected member per electoral area should have some knowledge of these issues and that the other representative(s) of the area are aware that this knowledge is held by their colleague.

This approach would be realistic if all the elected members for an area represent one political party. If that is not the case then it is difficult to anticipate that a cross party approach could be adopted.

Key factors to be taken into consideration

As described above, there is potential for elected members to have a role in identifying and supporting social enterprises in their role as community leaders.

Realistically though, there are a number of key factors that must be understood in order to assess whether this is a realistic expectation to have of Councillors.

Will/intention

Many Councillors enter politics and local government with a specific area of interest, such as young people, transport or employment and will put their available time and energy into those issues. Other than these interests, Councillors have their own motivations, whether these be gaining influence through membership of the cabinet or providing hands on support for those in need in the community or gaining a local profile. There is a huge agenda of issues for people to know about and spend their time on (see below) and supporting social enterprises may just not be a high priority in terms of individuals' view of their role on the council.

Role on the council

As identified above, there are many reasons why individuals become Councillors and different interpretations of how the job should be done. The factors that influence whether or not individuals are able to take on the community leadership role are:

- Whether they hold a cabinet portfolio
- Whether their party is in power or in opposition
- Whether they have a full time job
- Whether they have a full time or part time job that is in a similar field to their role on the council
- Whether they have demanding family responsibilities

The view was expressed by some respondents that the ability to engage with communities is a vital part of the job regardless of other commitments but this may not be shared by other Councillors.

Political allegiance

The majority of elected Councillors are representatives of a political party even if, as we have identified, some do not see themselves as being political. Nevertheless, local politics is a party political business and the way Councillors are able to take on a community leadership or social enterprise supporter role is governed by:

- Whether there is a personal (political) belief in this approach
- Whether the approach is part of an existing political manifesto
- Whether the issue or role is perceived as providing an electoral advantage
- Whether the issue is perceived to be the province of another party (such as a different national government agenda)
- Whether their party is in power or in opposition

The independent Councillor we interviewed commented that:

Now I don't have a political manifesto to follow I'm able to represent people much better now. Local politics should be free of party politics.

There was also some admission by interviewees that it is not effective to offer training across political parties for anything other than generic and legal issues as people don't want other parties to know where their skills gaps or perceived weaknesses are.

Competing priorities and agendas

Local government is responsible for a wide range of statutory services that have a major impact on people's lives. Some of these are highly contentious and councils are particularly vulnerable to criticism if things go wrong, such as in child protection. Councils are subject to scrutiny from national government and audit organisations as well as local residents and the media. The role of a portfolio holder in cabinet is evidently regarded by many Councillors as the equivalent of a full time job. For back benchers, although the role of supporting individuals in the community is a variable one, clearly many Councillors take their responsibilities very seriously. It is a subject of internal debate; one interviewee said that there was a current tussle over this issue:

Is the role to be a mini social worker?

If the Councillor represents a ward where there is a high level of disadvantage, there is likely to be a commensurate level of demands on their time to provide help to individuals in crisis. This is not the same as the more pro-active role of community leader, but one in which some Councillors are heavily involved.

Summary and conclusions

The role of many Councillors has become more complex in recent years. Those committed to take on the role of portfolio holder have a heavy work load and are required to develop high levels of technical and strategic knowledge. Some back benchers are extremely committed to working within the communities they are elected to serve. It is not clear from this brief study, the extent to which these two roles are linked together but we have shown at least one instance where this role sharing approach is working well.

Councillors make a heavy time commitment to the job but there are limits to what can be expected of them in relation to the role of community leaders. There is little compulsory training and other support to enable Councillors to perform this role effectively.

Good and open relationships between officers and members are helpful, so that both can work effectively. Members mostly refer queries to officers in the council but are often part of local networks and can refer people to other relevant agencies.

A surprising number of our sample claimed not to be motivated by party politics, but not being constrained by a party perspective seemed to enable them to represent the electorate effectively. One Independent Councillor working outside the party system reinforced this view.

Amongst this group of Councillors there was quite a good knowledge of social enterprises but some understandable confusion with the voluntary and community sector.

In conclusion, the findings from interviewing this small group suggest that:

- Expectations about how much additional work Councillors can do must be realistic
- It is hard to motivate Councillors to learn about new areas such as social enterprise as they already have a complex and demanding work load with many pressures on their time
- Whilst recognising that different people become Councillors for different reasons, there are ways in which Councillors can be given short and easy to digest information about social enterprises that will help them to do their job better
- Building good relationships between officers and members is essential for the community leader role to be effective
- Dissemination of the findings of this report will help to promote the issue amongst other Councillors.