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ELECTED MEMBER INDUCTION NOTEBOOK 2

Being a Community Leader

About this notebook

A key role you have as an elected member is to be an effective community leader, representing your ward and the people who live there, ensuring adequate service provision for them and helping local people actively participate in democratic processes to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

While there is no set way in which to carry out your community leadership role, doing it effectively is likely to include most of the following:

- ▶ Ensuring the council has effective community engagement and participation processes that empower local people to get involved in shaping decisions that affect them;
- ▶ Leading the community and others in developing a vision for the area and the steps to achieve it;
- ▶ Engaging with different groups and helping negotiate solutions to meet local needs;
- ▶ Representing the community within the council and to other agencies, such as the police and health services;
- ▶ Communicating the work of the council and other public agencies to constituents;
- ▶ Undertaking casework on behalf of individual constituents;
- ▶ Speaking up for those who aren't as engaged with public services;
- ▶ Campaigning on local issues;
- ▶ Meeting with other elected members, MSPs, MPs; and
- ▶ Supporting local partnerships and organisations.



“Recognise that your role as a community leader is about building community bridges. Building relationships between the different parts of the community.”

Elected Member

You have a duty to be accessible to all the people in your ward and to represent their interests conscientiously, while acting in the interests of the council as a whole and all the communities served by it. This of course creates a natural tension when faced with a decision that you feel is in the best interests of the council area but at odds with what

you feel is best for your ward and the people that directly elect you. You will learn to navigate such tensions as you gain experience. You will also learn to navigate working with other members in your ward, which will be covered in this notebook.

Your roles and responsibilities in your ward are likely to be known to you if you've been active in politics or your community for some time. Your responsibilities will change when elected and the duties you owe to the council and the council as a whole will make a difference to your earlier activities. Having said that, it takes great skill, care and expertise to carry out these roles and responsibilities effectively and with balance in respect to your other roles.

As outlined in the **Getting Started with your Roles and Responsibilities notebook**, you will also make choices as to how you carry out these roles and responsibilities based on things like your skillset, interests and the political composition of your ward.

This notebook will help you begin to learn about how you will carry out your roles and responsibilities as a community leader.



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Community engagement and participation

It is widely accepted that public services that involve their users are likely to be of higher quality and more relevant to the communities they serve, so engaging constructively with communities is important. As a community leader, not only is it your role to represent communities, it is also your role to ensure communities and the individuals in them are involved in the decisions of public service providers that affect their lives.

Indeed, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 is clear in that community consultation is no longer enough. Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs), of which the council is a partner, must be able to demonstrate active participation and engagement across key areas. The Act commits government and public services to engage with, listen to and respond to communities in order for those communities to have greater influence or control over things that matter to them.

Elected members are critical to successful community engagement and participation. As a community leader, you have a key role to play because:

- ▶ You understand your ward in terms of the demographics, the key challenges facing local people and communities and the services delivered by the council and other partners;
- ▶ You can encourage and support local people to take part in processes, and encourage dialogue amongst local people and groups on issues that affect them;
- ▶ You represent the views and voices of local people and communities, by ensuring that they are taken into account by the council and its partners when making decisions
- ▶ You safeguard and enhance the interests and wellbeing of local people as the central part of your role and your accountability;
- ▶ You are in a strong position to facilitate and negotiate solutions to community problems, that will empower communities and make governance more effective, and;
- ▶ You can influence council policies to make sure they are based on effective engagement and participation with communities.

You may, however, face challenges as you attempt to engage with local communities.

Every community is made up of different individuals and groups, whose particular views, interests and expectations may often be at odds and in some cases, not reconcilable. The challenge you will face is ensuring that you seek the views of as wide a representation as possible.

Your role is to support, encourage and work alongside local people, community organisations and local interest groups to get people more actively involved in decision-making and the achievement of local outcomes and to work collaboratively with other leaders (e.g. of local organisations, networks etc.) to help establish a shared vision for the future of the community and how best to work towards it.

You may want to develop skills in facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution to enable you to carry out this responsibility effectively.


The Improvement Service (IS) Thought Leadership piece on [Participatory Democracy and the Role of Elected Members](#) is a useful starting point to understand this aspect of your community leadership role.

National Standards for Community Engagement

The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#), set seven Standards, reflecting the main elements of good community engagement - Inclusion, Support, Planning, Working Together, Methods, Communication and Impact.



You can use these National Standards when scrutinising the quality of community engagement and participation processes the council and other public services have. You can do this by using them as a reference point for assessing yourself whether the processes meet the standards, or, by asking officers where they believe the standards are being met and what more could be done. This could also include taking an active part in aspects of the process and using your influence as a community leader to overcome barriers to effective participation.



Working with other elected members in your ward

With the exception of a very small number of wards in Island Councils, all wards in Scotland have three or four members elected to represent the ward. Wards can cover large geographical and rural areas, more densely populated urban areas and some can have a mix of both. What is certain is wards will have a diverse range of broader communities and it will be the responsibility of you and your fellow ward members to represent those communities effectively.

A simple principle applies to you and all your colleagues in multi-member wards: **if your right to be there and to represent the community is based on the election, then the other members of your ward have exactly the same right as you.** If you want to be treated with respect because you are an elected member, you have to treat your colleagues in the ward with respect as well. When members of a multi-member ward work together and collaboration occurs, caseload can be better managed, representation is more forceful and it's easier to understand what all the issues in the ward are and what can be done about it.

Based on the experience of elected members operating in multi-member wards, there are a number of choices you can consider for working with fellow ward members. These are just some of the examples of how members in different wards across Scotland agree to work together:

- ▶ Share caseload, knowledge and information to support constituents and to coordinate surgeries and holidays;
- ▶ Establish a ward meeting (virtual or in person) where constituents can tell you about the issues and challenges they are facing, and the experiences they have had of local services. You could also consider inviting local service managers to hear the issues constituents are concerned with and to respond to them;
- ▶ Sharing of workload with other ward members on an area basis with elected members taking greater responsibility for 'patches' within the ward. This can be useful for large geographic wards. One example of how this could operate is the dividing Community Council meetings between ward members so at least one member is always in attendance and can feedback on issues to the council and other members; and
- ▶ Ward members passing on (with permission) constituent cases to another ward member with a particular specialist knowledge of the constituents issue (i.e. social care). Members who have operated in this way have stated the motivation of doing so is to help the constituent achieve a better outcome, particularly if the

case is complex and requires a high level of knowledge of a particular service area.

You have been elected as an individual and it is ultimately your choice as to how you carry out your role within a multi-member ward. Feedback from elected members who cooperate with ward colleagues suggests there are some substantial gains to be had through collaboration and team working and often it is issues with personal relationships that prevent that. You should think carefully in such circumstances of your duty to represent all constituents in your ward, and of your responsibility to represent their interests for the greater good of the ward's population.

You should also recognise that it can be complicated for officers in working with three or four ward members from different political parties or none. You should respect their role in supporting all ward members and consider how working with your ward colleagues and officers together may be beneficial for your ward and your constituents. A number of councils have established formal protocols for multi-member ward working and you should ask your officers about any protocols your council has.



Getting to know your ward

You may have lived in your ward for years, nevertheless you are unlikely to know all the communities and their strengths, issues, history and geography.

Find out whether the council has any community development or community regeneration workers in your ward. If there are, arrange to meet up with them and ask them what they think the key issues are. They can be very useful in helping you to contact and meet local people.

Even if you have lived in your ward for years, it would be a good idea to go for a walk, cycle or drive around your ward, looking at roads, pavements, parks and open spaces, play areas, council housing, leisure facilities, libraries, community centres and other community facilities. You should report issues of concern, e.g. potholes, graffiti, faulty streetlights, vandalised swing parks, broken fences, fly tipping etc. to the appropriate council service and keep a record of the action taken. This will be useful to demonstrate what you are achieving for your ward.

You will need to build up your own network of contacts for key people from a range of local organisations, such as community and residents' associations, schools and playgroups, neighbourhood watch, leisure and sports groups. The council may also provide you with a directory of useful contacts such as council officers, Community Councils, the Police, the Fire and Rescue Service, health bodies, local MSPs and MPs.

It is also worth knowing the main employers in your ward and whether a particular type of business or industry is a major employer of local people.

One of the things you will find as an elected member is that there is a very large number of community groups, many of whom will expect you to engage with them. As suggested earlier, a division of labour between all the members in a multi-member ward may make that workload more manageable and may also make elected members more efficient and effective in learning from these meetings and advancing ward interests.

In all these respects, a good caseload management system that allows elected members to keep up with whom they are visiting, what came out of those meetings, what action they have promised to take, and making sure that those actions are then taken is very important. Simply turning out and having a meeting will not keep community groups happy if nothing then follows from the meeting.

A key point to remember, your community leadership role is as much, if not more about seeing the strengths of communities and facilitating local people to build on community assets to improve the lives of local people, than it is to undertake casework. That being said, casework is an important responsibility within your community leadership role.



Casework

Casework usually involves requests to solve specific problems for individual constituents. It comes through emails, social media, phone calls, in person surgeries, virtual surgeries, letters, responses to leaflets and door knocking. You will also meet your constituents on the street, in pubs and restaurants and in other areas where they will bring issues to your attention.

If you find that you do not get much casework, you should explore whether it is because you represent a very self-sufficient community or because your profile within the community is too low. In areas with high levels of deprivation, members of the public may be less aware of the role of elected members and more work may be needed to engage with them. Most constituents are likely to be unaware of the many issues you can help them to resolve, and it will be up to you, with appropriate support from officers, to let them know how you can help them and when you can't.

Constituents may seek your help in relation to something of a quasi-judicial or regulatory nature, such as planning application, taxi, betting and gaming, liquor, and street trader licences and a range of other similar applications. Apart from sign-posting to relevant officers, you should not pursue any casework that may come before a quasi-judicial or regulatory committee that you sit on, as it could preclude you from taking part in that decision. You may choose to advocate for or against a regulatory matter or take part in the decision-making, you cannot do both. You will receive training for any quasi-judicial or regulatory committee you sit on which will help you understand the reasons for this and the consequences should you not comply.

You should also remember that undertaking casework on behalf of a constituent, you are still a member of the council, and you should exercise care to ensure you comply with the [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#). You also need to be aware of your responsibilities to comply with data protection legislation. For example, you will need to register as a [Data Controller](#) with the [Information Commissioner](#). Your council officers will advise you on how to do this.

Whilst you have to be accessible to your constituents, the Councillors' Code of Conduct does not say that you must take up every case brought to you or that you must pursue it in the way your constituent wants. You will have to manage your own workload as well as managing cases for your constituents.

The Standards Commission have an [Assisting Constituents Card](#) you can give to constituents to manage their expectations of what you can and cannot help them with. Promising a constituent that you can help them, and then not delivering on this, may cause you reputational damage.

Phone and email enquiries

Your council will provide you with dedicated equipment and facilities for you to use for emails and telephone calls. You could be called or emailed at any time during the day or night and you should consider an answering service or automated email response to help you manage constituents' expectations of when you might respond and what they can expect from you. Some councils provide members with an automated email response and you should check whether your council provides this or not.

Social media

You may find it useful to gather casework through social media channels. If this is your intention, you will need to monitor the account or page regularly and ensure you post regularly so your account or page stays relevant. Social media can be a fantastic way to engage and reach a large number of people, but it also allows some of those people the ability to send you direct abuse and threats.

The Improvement Service (IS) has a [social media guide](#) for elected members which has lots of helpful tips, hints and suggestions that will help you to use social media to engage with constituents and local organisations in a productive and useful way.

Your council may provide training on the use of social media as part of a local induction programme, which will include any guidance or policies the council has in place for social media use.

One crucial point to note with regards to the use of social media, that a 'personal' or 'private' account (i.e. one that is personal and where you don't identify yourself as a councillor) does not automatically mean you can say or do what you want without fear of breaching the Councillors' Code of Conduct. The Standards Commission [Advice Note on the Use of Social Media](#) is essential reading if you are using social media in any capacity.

Surgeries

Whilst a very small proportion of the population go to see an elected member, the expectation that 'they will represent me' is very strong amongst the electorate. Holding surgeries, either in person or virtually, offers one way of meeting members of the public, but also benefits you by:

- ▶ Helping constituents with their issues and gaining their support.
- ▶ Giving you a way of checking on the impact of policies on the ground.
- ▶ Enabling you to speak with authority as an advocate for the community and for individual constituents.
- ▶ Giving an opportunity to explain council policy.
- ▶ Raising your profile within the local community.

- ▶ Giving the relevant political party (or Independent Elected Member) visibility.
- ▶ Enabling you to meet a variety of constituents.

If you operate surgeries, your council will help you to organise and advertise these. In person surgeries must be held in line with any public health advice and your council will keep you informed of any changes that may impact your ability to hold surgeries.

Alternative to surgeries

Rather than hold traditional office based surgeries, another option could be to run street surgeries, which would involve you knocking on doors in your ward to gather concerns, opinions and casework from constituents who would not normally attend a surgery. This may enable you to gather more opinions and views than you would otherwise get if you waited for people to visit you at your surgery, as well as target hard-to-reach sections of the population. You should be mindful of the public health advice at the time and make sure you don't inadvertently breach this.

You may offer to meet people at their home or yours if that is more convenient for you. However, you should consider your personal safety and assess whether you want to take that risk. Some councils advise their members not to undertake home visits. You should ask officers what support and guidance they can provide on personal safety.

Managing casework – key issues to consider

Councils operate in different ways and it is important that you understand the procedures for dealing with casework in your council. These may be outlined in your council's Member-Officer Protocol. Whatever the source of your casework you should consider the following advice to ensure you don't over promise and under deliver to your constituents:

1. Identify the issue

Are you the first person the constituent has approached?

Has another elected member from the ward already dealt with the issue?

Have they already talked to council officers?

You are often the last resort and your constituent may well come to you with a problem with a long history. Establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. Who at the council is dealing with the problem and what have they said and written so far?

Be aware that if you are a new elected member, some constituents may seek to get you to raise an issue that they have previously raised with former members but, perhaps, have been unsuccessful in achieving a satisfactory outcome. It is worth speaking to longer serving elected members if you suspect that this is so and take

their advice on how to respond.

Some cases will arise because constituents are not getting what they want. You may discover that a policy decision or system is correct and has found against your constituent correctly (e.g. refusal of a planning application, refusal to award Council Tax benefit) but they refuse to accept it. In such cases you will need to be honest but firm about what you can and cannot do for your constituent.

By all means agree to investigate and get back to the constituent but do not undertake to do something until you know the full story.



“When constituents come to you with problems, one of the most valuable things you can do is capture those problems and take them to the officers, the team at the council who are doing that work day-to-day. We can be most valuable as councillors if we can crisply define what the problem is for officers to come along with their toolkit of solutions and figure out what is right for the resident.”

Elected Member

2. Refer the problem to the appropriate council service

You may want to put your concern in writing to a council officer. It is best to carry out quickly the actions you agreed to take on behalf of your constituent and, where possible, let your constituent have a copy of any letters/emails you write.

Often a phone call will be quicker and will be sufficient. But it is wise to always keep a record of when you phoned, to whom you spoke and what was said. This is important if you need to chase up any action on behalf of the constituent. Your council should provide you with the resources you need to do that, perhaps through a dedicated case management system.

Remember, officers have to work to agreed council strategy, policy and budgets. It may not be possible to resolve constituents' issues (see step 4). You should not ask officers to act or give a preference which is against an established policy or process.

3. Provide feedback

After you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them. Communication is always key to successful relationships with your constituents.

4. Consider the wider issues

Some of your casework queries should prompt you to think about the bigger picture – i.e. why problems have occurred in the first place, whether the issues presented by

your constituents are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of wider community concerns or whether the case is likely to affect other local people.

Reflect on the issues raised by the casework and where relevant and within data protection legislation, let other members know. A number of similar concerns raised with members may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review.

5. Monitor your effectiveness

You may wish to ask your constituents for feedback on what they felt you did well in responding to their queries and anything you could do to improve. You could also monitor a number of key facts and statistics about your casework to ensure that you are targeting the people that need the most help and are being effective in resolving as many queries as you can.

6. Consider your personal safety

You may find that some constituents who attend your surgeries are stressed, angry and frustrated about issues, such as decisions the council has taken or services it has provided, anti-social neighbours, prevalence of under-age drinking in the community etc. If a constituent acts aggressively:

- ▶ You should offer whatever help and advice you can but you should not promise something that you cannot deliver to diffuse the situation; and
- ▶ You should not be afraid to tell them that their behaviour or attitude is unacceptable and if they are offensive in any way, you should bring the interview to a close.

Your council may provide you with advice on personal safety and dealing with difficult constituents. COSLA and Police Scotland also have guidance on personal safety which you may find useful.



Local campaigns

As a community leader, you may become involved in, or lead, local campaigns within your ward.

This could involve anything from campaigning for speed bumps to be installed outside a primary school, to campaigning for more affordable housing in your ward, or political campaigns. You should not feel under any obligation to lead any such campaign and you may find that often your involvement will be as a participant, supporter or facilitator.

If you are approached with an idea for a local campaign that you support, you may wish to:

- ▶ Undertake some consultation within the ward and with other relevant stakeholders to find out how widespread support for the issue is;
- ▶ Help set up a local campaign group that will be responsible for leading the campaign;
- ▶ Talk to council officers and officers in other organisations that may be able to help;
- ▶ Help the local campaign group to deliver presentations or to ask questions of committees;
- ▶ Bring the relevant groups or individuals together to negotiate solutions;
- ▶ Involve the local press, radio and television; and
- ▶ Publicise the campaign on your personal web page or blog.

If you are approached to get involved in a local campaign that you do not support, you can still offer some support to local people in terms of:

- ▶ Advising people how to present a petition to the council, deliver a presentation, speak to a committee or how to ask the right questions;
- ▶ Providing advice on council policy and procedures;
- ▶ Providing contact details for other organisations, groups or individuals that could potentially help;
- ▶ Helping people to access the information that they need.

Of course you may also not be able to support or oppose a local campaign that relates to an application that is to come before a regulatory committee (e.g. Planning,

Licensing) that you sit on as you would have to declare an interest at that committee and not take part in the determination of the application.

Furthermore, if you are part of a campaign but aren't sitting on the regulatory committee that is hearing the forthcoming application, you are not allowed to lobby members on that regulatory committee.

Part 6 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct and the related guidance sets out rules about lobbying and community engagement.



Questions and notes

Which parts of your community leadership role are you most comfortable with?

Which parts of your community leadership role are you least comfortable with?

What actions are you going to take over the next few weeks and months to become more effective as a community leader?

What links do you see between your community leadership role and other roles?

Additional notes

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