



Parliamentary Inquiry into the Role of Councillors

Evidence from the Young Foundation

March 30, 2007

I. Introduction

The Young Foundation is a unique organisation that undertakes research to identify and understand social needs and then develops practical initiatives and institutions to address them.

The Young Foundation's Transforming Neighbourhoods Programme explored the role of elected members in neighbourhood working and considered how the role of elected members is likely to change as neighbourhood working becomes more embedded in Local Authority working practices and many local authorities look to strengthen community governance to better achieve improved quality of life for all residents.

The recommendations in this submission arise from the Young Foundation's on-going work on neighbourhoods and a specific research project for Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

i. **The Transforming Neighbourhoods Programme 2005-2007**

Transforming Neighbourhoods is a two-year programme of research, innovation and practical action bringing together 15 local authority partners, central government and a range of national umbrella organisations.

Learning from what is happening on the ground in communities is an important element of the programme. Since September 2005 the Young Foundation has been working with its local authority partners on a series of projects exploring the challenges, opportunities and obstacles to effective neighbourhood working in different places. Work in 2006/7 has focused on three main themes: developing a role for frontline councillors; the local authority offer to neighbourhoods; and embedding community engagement.

The Young Foundation has worked intensively with a number of local authorities on the role of frontline councillors including County Councils, London Boroughs, Core City Authorities and Unitaries. Case studies and examples from this local work will be used to illustrate our findings.

ii. **Joseph Rowntree Foundation Research on the Future Role of 'Frontline' Councillors**

The Young Foundation has undertaken joint research with the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) on the future role of frontline councillors. This research was undertaken in Salford, Suffolk, Newham and Newcastle. The outcomes of this research will be published in the summer of 2007.

2. The role of ward councillors

The Young Foundation's research has provided a detailed picture of how councillors are currently working and their future roles. This work found significant differences in the way that councillors are currently supported in their ward work and how they could be supported to undertake their future role. A summary of our key findings and detailed responses to the questions identified by the inquiry are provided below.

Summary of key findings

- i. There is confusion over the current role councillors undertake in their wards with local people and councillors often having different understandings of what a local councillor should be doing.

- ii. Many members feel it is difficult to be more active and effective local leaders, today, because they are marginalised in decision-making, lacking the information they need to shape and influence broader plans, and unable to act directly on many very local concerns.
- iii. The quality and type of support provided to councillors will have a significant impact on how satisfied with ward working a local member is. The more support a councillor has to undertake ward level work the more likely they are to feel that the work they are undertaking is benefiting the communities they represent.
- iv. Councillors have a unique role in their wards and often there is a gap in understanding between officers and members on what that role involves. Current council structures often prioritise council business and process over the community work undertaken by ward councillors.
- v. The majority of councillors support the idea of a new empowered role for elected members. Many feel this is “unfinished business” from the Local Government Act 2000.
- vi. Members have a clear idea of what an empowered councillor role should involve. Interviewees revealed a high degree of consistency in the way elected members described the “ideal” future ward councillor role across the different types of councillors interviewed and regardless of the individual circumstances of interviewees (e.g. executive or non-executive councillors, majority or opposition party members, and the type of local authority context (Unitary, County, District and London Borough)).
- vii. Councillors are very keen that local and central government recognise the need for realism around the councillor empowerment agenda, in particular, the around timescales for developing and introducing new roles.

3. The Young Foundation's responses to the questions raised by the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Role of Councillors.

3.1 *What are the powers that ward councillors need to be effective and make a difference to the areas they represent? What needs to change to ensure they have these powers?*

The Transforming Neighbourhoods programme included interviews with over ninety councillors working at all levels of local governance. Two aspects of local working were a regular theme of these interviews:

- empowering local councillors by a better use of existing regulations and statutes and;
- a need to reconsider a small number of regulations that local councillors felt impeded their ability to undertake effective ward working.

This section will make recommendations on both these aspects.

3.1.1 **Empowering local councillors – clarifying existing regulations and statute**

The Young Foundation has found enormous variations between authorities in the activities that councillors are supported to undertake in their local wards or divisions. In particular, there are two areas where differences in the freedoms offered to local councillors were most visible:

i. Support for independent ward working.

The type and range of support provided to members to assist them in their ward role varied between local authorities. Most, but not all, authorities support members to undertake ward surgeries but the types of support offered to members to undertake other aspects of local working (for example booking venues, producing publicity or following-up on case work) were very different. Further examination of the differences between councils found that in some authorities there are concerns that supporting individual members to undertake ward working would constitute direct support for a political party and infringe the regulations laid out the Local Government Act (1972) on

political bias. However, legal services in other local authorities felt that this was not an issue of concern.

ii. The work of local or area committees.

The Local Government Act 2000 provided for local area committees to have some functions delegated by the Council. However, research has found that this provision is not widely understood or used by local authorities. Subsequently, opportunities to delegate some of the most pressing local environmental issues to ward or area decision makers have not been utilised.

The reasons for this are mixed but include officers' concerns that local delegation could result in the 'capture' of local committees by opposition members, whilst others felt uncertain of the extent of this power and how it could be used. Surprisingly, in few areas it was evident that there was a belief that delegation to ward councillors could not happen in any form.

A more consistent approach to interpreting local government regulations alongside a more considered approach to using existing powers could result in local councillors being better supported and able to resolve local issues through local arrangements.

3.1.2 New powers to enhance neighbourhood working.

There are a number of areas where councillors felt that new freedoms or powers would enhance their role in local communities. Areas where greater freedoms were requested included the freedom to speak on local planning issues, to talk out on local issues without the risk of the party whip being withdrawn, and the freedom to have and spend a delegated local budget. New powers identified by members include the power to call partners to account for service failings in the local area and an obligation for local scrutiny to be acted on where robust evidence of service failings or potential risk to the wellbeing of the local community is presented.

3.1.3 Freedom to speak on local issues including planning issues.

Young Foundation research has found that some councillors felt that White Paper proposals to loosen the restrictions on members speaking out on local issues represented the “*biggest single improvement*” to their current role – enabling them to be much more effective advocates, which in turn would reduce tensions between members, residents and community groups. In particular the restrictions on talking about local planning issues are of concern to a number of councillors. A number of interviewees felt their inability to speak out on these issues caused residents to question their ability to represent them and the value of local representatives.

3.1.4 Local Party Politics.

Work with councillors across the political spectrum has shown that the organisation of local political parties can sometimes obstruct successful ward working. Examples of this include:

- i. A reselection process for existing councillors where the Whip’s report contains details of work undertaken in the Town Hall (for example, number of committees attended and number of absences from Council) but contained no information on the ward based activities undertaken by councillors and;
- ii. A group whip being extended to a ward issue with the result that the local member can not join in public discussions of the issue.

Whipping is an issue of concern to many members particularly on overview and scrutiny. However, some councillors recognised group conflict or whipping on an issue can be prevented if there is good communication within the political group and members can discuss their concerns about the implications of policy changes for their ward with the relevant executive member, leader or Mayor (where appropriate). Political parties at a national and local level may wish to consider how opportunities to consider future policy development are undertaken within group activities.

3.1.5 Delegated Budgets

A high number of members felt that having some control of a local budget that could be used to respond to local environmental issues would be really beneficial and would significantly enhance their local role. For councillors, the time lag between when a local issue is highlighted to officers, such as a new graffiti hotspot, and something happening to address the problem could undermine local people's faith in their councillors to improve local quality of life. This time delay was often attributed to the need to go through council wide prioritisation exercises to obtain funding, rather than local councillors and middle managers being able to address the problem on the ground, often within existing resources and by drawing down a local budget held by councillors.

However, delegated budgets were felt to be problematic by some officers and executive members working in deprived urban areas. Interviewees expressed concerns that delegated locality budgets would encourage members to focus on tackling short-term public realm issues rather than looking at the big picture, which was about working to shape mainstream services to support local needs and priorities. These concerns will need to be recognised by local authorities by supporting councillors in their strategic and local roles, and securing commitment from mainstream services to a culture of neighbourhood working.

3.1.6 Powers to hold partners to account and ensure a response to scrutiny.

The Young Foundation has found that there is strong support for the introduction of councillor-led community or neighbourhood scrutiny from all stakeholders. This was felt to be a highly effective way to empower members to use local intelligence to shape public services. However, these processes must be properly resourced and supported if members are to remain engaged. It must be recognised that in many authorities councillors' disquiet at the perceived estrangement from executive level decision making is a direct consequence of poorly managed scrutiny processes.

Frustrations with current scrutiny arrangements include a lack of proper resources to support service reviews, lack of response to key findings or recommendations and senior officer indifference to the work of non-executive members. Local scrutiny work must be supported

and acted on if it is to drive improvements to local services. To ensure this work has the status it requires, local authority responses to neighbourhood scrutiny reports should be included in the findings of local inspection regimes (such as Joint Area Reviews) and included as an element of the future Comprehensive Area Assessments.

3.2 What types of support can (and should) Councils provide to enhance the effectiveness of ward councillors?

Our research showed that a significant number of interviewees felt that a “*new breed of councillor*” would be needed in the future - candidates who can operate locally and strategically, understand community dynamics, be comfortable with the complexity of local government, be committed to local politics and yet understand that local issues come first.

In some areas the new intake of councillors in 2004-6 are demonstrating many of these qualities. These ‘new’ councillors provide an opportunity to look at the types of support needed for them to undertake a number of interrelated roles in the strategic centre of the council and as a ward councillor. A new role for member services may be part of this changing support function.

3.2.1 Time management.

For many of these councillors it is important that councils recognise members are trying to balance home life, full time employment, work at the town hall, and neighbourhood work. The type of support members receive needs to reflect this difficult balance. For example whilst a number of councillors praised the training provided to them by local authorities, others were concerned that this was scheduled during the day when time off work would be difficult. There was a similar concern around the provision of administrative support, which was often limited to office hours, with little or no provision for times when members were able to undertake casework or administration.

3.2.2 Practical support to engage with communities.

Interviews revealed that councillors were working in many different ways with local groups and activists. Some councillors had a history of undertaking community development work in their wards and subsequently had an extensive knowledge of local groups and organisations. However, they often struggled to find the time to undertake this work and felt that this aspect of their work was the least recognised. Support for fledging groups was particularly burdensome.

Another group of councillors had little experience of working directly with local groups and felt that greater officer support in setting up and facilitating meetings would greatly benefit their neighbourhood working. Councillors wanted practical support to help them better undertake this type of work including: training in chairing meetings and resolving conflict, publicity, the organisation of venues and the opportunity to draw on officer support when an agenda called for it.

3.2.3 Good quality and accessible local information.

Most members were aware of the large amounts of data and area profiling local authorities produce but most felt that either this was not provided to them or that it was complicated and difficult to use. Members want briefings on local developments, opportunities to liaise with senior managers on key issues and intelligence and forewarning of local consultation events and activities.

Councillors frequently stressed the need to keep paper to a minimum and look at using briefing time and verbal updates to keep members informed. Many councillors emphasised the need to recognise that they are 'lay' people and as such materials designed for professionals are not always suitable. Web-based materials were promoted by officers, though some members are still resistant to the use of IT.

3.2.4 Officer time.

Many non-executive members felt that their access to officers was limited. Some felt that local authorities had become more hierarchical and that it was no-longer possible to directly contact local officers to resolve an issue or test out a resident's concerns. For these members access to senior officers is an important part of responding to local people's concerns and needs. Councils need to consider the profile of non-executive members' ward work in the responsibilities of senior officers and how access to frontline officers is arranged for ward councillors.

3.2.5 Status with external parties and within the Council.

Non-executive members felt it was important that a new role for members should give councillors much greater influence over decisions about how mainstream services are delivered to their communities. However, many members were concerned that service providers operating in their ward had very little contact with them, and some services were very resistant to meeting with local members. In a few local authorities there was also the perception that non-executive members were not taken seriously and council officers felt under no obligation to respond to their queries. A number of councillors also felt that they were not briefed adequately on changes to local services.

Our research has found two reasons for ensuring that ward councillors have a role in local service planning:

- i. As local authorities outsource services or develop new community-led models of delivery councillors have an important role in ensuring that these services are accountable to local residents.
- ii. In some areas councillors have access to, and a dialogue with, communities that are not always visible to service providers. This is very evident in areas with high numbers of new arrivals in the form of refugees or workers from the new Europe. In these communities councillors have a key role in matching service provision to the needs of the new communities.

Work with Councils and other service providers should be undertaken to address working cultures that exclude ward members from local service planning. As a first step Councils should ensure that ward councillors are supported in challenging service failings and are briefed in changes to local services. Service providers need to better understand that councillors will not always agree with the professional findings of officers but will bring an important local view to strategic decisions on service design which, when acknowledged, can result in a more effective better used service. These skills and relationships are challenging to foster, but necessary for effective local working, and will require investment and training in the future.

3.2.6 Support working with diverse communities.

Members who are currently representing diverse communities felt that in future, councillors would need better and more specific skills to help them understand and work with diversity in the form of different cultural values and conceptions of democracy and local political engagement. They also felt that future councillors will need to be skilled advocates to understand different communities of place and communities of interest, and to broker between increasingly divergent interests.

This points towards a need for different types of councillor training in future.

3.2.7 Reimbursement

Significant inconsistencies remain in the way that costs incurred as a councillor are reimbursed. Childcare and carer costs were not paid by a number of authorities. Local authorities need to consider how these issues are reviewed by their Member Allowance Review Panels, and the extent to which allowances and re-imburements can reflect the 'true' cost of attending events for councillors.

A significant number of councillors feel the idea of a ward councillor as a "part-time volunteer" is no longer practical because of the demands of the role combined with time pressures and work commitments. These members felt the ward councillor role should be better supported,

through financial reimbursements that enable them to work part time (say three days a week), greater administrative and IT support and training.

3.2.8 Information technology

A high number of newer councillors are using IT to manage their ward responsibilities and a good number had been introduced to e-mail and the internet through the IT provided to them in their role as a councillor. These members are enthusiastic for greater use of more mobile technology and remote access schemes.

An increasing number of councillors are designing and managing their own web sites. This often relies on the skills of individual councillors. Political parties and local government should consider how greater support can be given to these councillors without infringing regulations on using public resources to support political activity.

It should be recognised that, as with the general population, not all councillors are comfortable with or able to use IT. Those councillors with mobility issues are particularly affected if councils rely on IT to communicate with councillors. To ensure that these representatives are not excluded from the support the Council can offer care must be taken to ensure that a variety of approaches are used.

3.3 How can we address public attitudes to political officeholders and seek to make the role more attractive and encourage active citizens to stand for election or remain as councillors?

3.3.1 New freedoms and local powers

Earlier in our submission we have identified a number of areas where the status of ward members is undermined by the limitations put on their abilities to address local concerns.

In summary we feel greater powers to resolve local concerns (including delegated budgets and the freedom to speak out on local issues) will help address the misconception that there is no value to 'just' being a ward councillor. The more visible councillors are in local communities,

and the more empowered to address local problems they are the more likely it is that a wider range of individuals could consider standing at local elections.

However, this is only part of the picture. Political parties and local authorities need to do more to attract new candidates. This means providing better support and information for potential candidates about what the role is likely to involve and changing the way the work with members.

A change in the way both political parties and councils value the work of ward councillors is necessary. There is a need to rethink the high value placed on the views and opinions of executive members and recognise the value that ward councillors can bring to local policy discussions. It has been clear from our research that local members are sensitive to changes in local perceptions and circumstances but that this local insight is not always given the status it deserves.

3.3.2 Diversity and councillor recruitment

Local political groups are heavily criticised by many councillors for their closed recruitment procedures.

Many councillors recognised the need to attract young and working age candidates, especially more women and minority ethnic representatives, to address the age, gender and social bias that currently favours white, middle class, middle age men. However, it was also recognised that balancing career aspirations and being a councillor are increasingly difficult.

Political parties are taking steps to recruit a broader range of candidates but this is patchy and the issue of retention needs further consideration. For example, a number of the women councillors interviewed by the Young Foundation in Wakefield had gained seats as a result of a decision of the local Labour party to have all women short lists, but retaining these councillors after their first term could be difficult.

A number of councillors feel that they are under enormous pressure to balance work, home, council work and neighbourhood working. The lack of recognition of local work and support to

make this work easier was a constant theme of interviews with councillors serving their first term.

Political parties have a role in ensuring that those standing as councillors are aware of the potential scope of the role and ensuring that support to members is provided by the councils that have representatives on.

3.3.3 Balancing full-time work and councillor duties.

Lack of understanding of councillors' work by employers was frequently cited by members as a source of tension in their current role, and is seen as an obstacle to recruiting working age members. Employers are often reluctant to allow time off during working hours or flexible working for councillors to meet their obligations.

A number of members felt a national campaign to communicate the value of the councillor role to employers and to potential candidates is needed. A new partnership between central government and employers could help undertake this promotion which most councillors felt was beyond the work of individual local authorities.

4. Conclusions

In this submission we have made a number of recommendations about how councillors can be better supported in their current roles including: better use of existing statute and regulations, new freedoms and powers for members, and better support for ward working.

We have also identified a number of issues that local government, political parties and central government may wish to consider further such as the future of 'part time' councillors, the role of ward councillors in the political group, and changing a culture amongst some officers and executive members that marginalises the work of ward councillors.

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