

Representing Your Ward

Introduction

No one has a more crucial role than the backbench Council Member in ensuring that local democracy works and is believed in by residents. Councillors are the bridge between community and Council.

It has been said that the job of a local Councillor is not to be the Council's advocate in the community, but to be the community's advocate in the Council. While this is true, the role of a good Ward Councillor stretches much further than that of simple advocacy. Representation involves building relationships with individuals and groups in the community in order to inform, consult and empower people, enabling them to have more control over their own lives, and to facilitate effective community involvement in local government.

Your Role as a Councillor

The principal job of a local Councillor is to represent their ward. But the task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals is a complex one. Some groups are very hard to involve. Generally speaking, the wider their range of approaches to community contacts, the more people Councillors will reach.

Councillors need to consider:

- Group and Community Leaders such as Town/Community Councillors; Community Group Leaders; Residents' Association Chairs; Leaders of Leisure Groups and "stalwarts" of the community;
- Highly mobile groups, including students, who pass through a community quickly without ever becoming involved in it. In some areas as much as a third of the residents move between the time of one election and another;
- Groups that are differentiated by age; such as the young and the elderly;

- Hard to reach groups; people with disabilities, members of ethnic minorities and the ‘silent majority’ who do not seek active community involvement.

Representing your Ward

The electorate expect their Councillors to represent them on the Council. But what does this mean? To do an effective job they will need to do more than act as a channel of communication between Council and Ward. They need to develop skills that enable them to communicate, empower and facilitate, support and inform.

Communication: A good Councillor will seek to both inform residents about important local issues or Council policies and to consult people on the issues. They will also want to develop relationships that help to ensure they learn about local issues and problems when they first arise.

Empowerment and Facilitation: People often assume that they are powerless to make any difference in their community. A Local Councillor will often be able to empower individuals or groups through listening to the issues involved and providing relevant contacts in local government or other services, to help develop achievable solutions to problems. This could include facilitating meetings, petitions etc.

Supporting: Councillors should offer support to individuals, organisations and businesses within their area. They should seek to represent their views to the Council and to other strategic partners (the police or health services for example). They should get involved in campaigning on local issues and they should work with the Council and other bodies to bring improvements to their Ward.

Informing: Often, the local Councillor will be the first person to hear about something that affects their Ward. They should not assume that others already know about it, nor should they assume that information should be handed down on a “need to know” only basis. Councillors should be pro-active and make it their job to tell people what’s going on. The exceptions to this rule are the “Part 2” items that Councillors receive in their Council papers. Confidential information of a sensitive or

commercial nature should not be passed on to the public. If Councillors think that certain items have been classified Part 2 without good reason, the place to argue for changes is in the appropriate Council/Committee meeting. It is also the Councillor's role to give accurate information to his or her constituents about the Council's services, or direct the public to the Council's website.

Understanding your Ward

Getting to know the area: Councillors should get to know their Ward. All Councillors are supplied with a copy of the electoral register applicable to their area. Even if a Councillor has lived in the area for years, going for a walk, cycling or driving around the Ward would help familiarise them with the area, for instance, taking in the location and condition of roads, pavements, play areas, open spaces and community facilities and making a note of any action needing to be taken.

Getting to know People: Although Councillors are provided with information on internal Council and other useful contacts, they will need to build up their own directory of key contacts that are relevant to their area. This should include: Town/Community Councils, community and residents' associations; places of worship; schools and playgroups; neighbourhood watch and leisure or sports groups. As they build up their database, they should write to people introducing themselves, and perhaps offer to meet them.

Councillors should keep a diary of Ward events and go to as many as possible, first checking that it is appropriate for them to attend.

Casework

The problems and issues that people raise with their Councillor are known as casework. Casework may sometimes lead on to policy development or issue campaigning but can be distinguished from these by virtue of the fact that casework deals with the resolution of an individual problem.

Casework will come to Councillors through surgeries, letters, phone calls, e-mails, responses to leaflets and door knocking. Some Councillors will find that there is relatively little casework, while others may have mountains of it. It is probably true to say that the higher the level of deprivation in the area, the more casework they will get. If Councillors find that there is not much casework, they should ask themselves whether it is because they represent a very self-sufficient community, or whether it is because their profile is too low.

In dealing with casework;

- Be sure you get the full facts of the case, ask for all the details.
- Councillors should be aware that people won't always tell the whole story. If someone raises an issue that affects a whole locality (for example traffic speeds, vandalism or an environmental concern), they should try to ask other people for their opinions about it. Remember however, that Councillors shouldn't pass on one person's personal comments or details to other members of the public without their permission.
- Give your constituents as much information as you can without giving the impression that you can solve all their problems – i.e. under-promise and over-deliver rather than the other way around.
- Take action on your constituent's behalf if needed. This may require Councillors to contact Officers of their Council or other outside bodies. Councils operate in different ways and it is important for Councillors to understand the procedure that operates in their Council;

OR you can empower people by giving them contact names, setting up meetings with officials and accompany them. Sometimes people contact their Councillor because they are intimidated by the prospect of taking on authority figures themselves, or because they don't know the right contact. Councillors should try to involve people in actions taken. They will both empower them and give them a greater degree of responsibility for the outcome.

- Use a system appropriate to your needs to manage your casework by setting up files, computer records, "bring forward" systems etc

to monitor calls, correspondence, subsequent action and feedback.

Surgeries

Most people expect to be able to contact their local representative. The traditional way for Councillors to meet with their constituents is through the use of surgeries. Surgeries enable Councillors to:

- have face-to-face contact with their constituents
- solve people's problems
- gain support for their work and ideas
- discuss the impact of Council policies on the area
- raise their profile as a local Councillor
- be an effective advocate for the people and communities that they represent

There are two main types of surgery:

- traditional surgeries based in a building (regular time/place)
- street surgeries (knocking on doors to solicit casework)

Councillors should make sure that as many people as possible know about the surgery through posters, leaflets and the local media.

Personal Safety

Councillors shouldn't go to their surgery alone. If they are not sharing the surgery with other Councillors or agencies they should try to take someone who can act as a receptionist. When doing a street surgery, they should take someone to hold their clipboard, or to wait by the car for people who may turn up there.

Please see guidance available to Councillors on Personal Safety. For further information **Include weblink**

Handling Conflict

People who come to see Councillors about a serious or intractable problem are often stressed and may be angry. If someone becomes aggressive Councillors should:

Be polite and assertive, but never be aggressive back, as this will only escalate the situation;

- Offer whatever help and advice they can, but not be tempted to promise more than they can deliver in order to calm people down, as this will only make the situation worse in the long run.

If someone is making unreasonable and aggressive demands, the “broken record” technique can help - Councillors should simply repeat what has been said each time they are invited to respond. (“I understand and I’ll discuss your case with the housing officer. I’ll ring you next week to let you know what’s happening”).

If people are racist, sexist or offensive in other ways, Councillors should not respond. Instead they should bring the interview quickly to a close. If the Councillor is in a building, stand up, walk to the door and lead the way out.

If the Councillor feels it is safe to do so, they should indicate that the remarks made are unacceptable. They should keep a record of all discussion and correspondence. They will need them if someone makes a complaint against them or if they want to take further action. They should make a note of any witnesses.

Issues and Campaigns

- Getting Involved:
As part of their work as a ward Councillor, Councillors may get involved in or lead local campaigns. This could involve anything from campaigning for a zebra crossing or for more affordable housing, to starting a credit union.

- **Planning Matters and Fettered Discretion:**
Public opinion is often at its most vocal over planning. Local Councillors may find themselves approached over contentious planning applications that may be of great concern to the community. Whilst it is important to involve people in the development of their community, it is essential that Councillors are careful how they do this.

Publicity/Newsletters

Communication is a two-way process, as well as listening to their constituents, Councillors will want to let people know what they have been doing. In addition to the methods of communication already discussed, they should consider using newsletters or social media or the local media.

Some Councillors produce and deliver their own newsletter to update people about their work on local issues. Their political party, if they are a member of one, may also produce regular leaflets.

Ward Newsletters/Communications in Neath Port Talbot:

In order to facilitate Members' Constituency roles through their communications with the public, please note that reasonable printing resources can be made available to all Members for the purpose, for example, of any Ward Newsletters or any message/complaint forms. This arrangement of course is strictly on the basis that there are no "political" aspects contained in these publications, which should be confined to factual information in respect of the Member's Electoral Division. Please contact the Democratic Services Section if you wish to make use of this facility.

Corresponding with the Public and Press

In Neath Port Talbot there are some particular points to be aware of when corresponding with the Public/Press:-

Letters to the Press:

Members from time to time write letters to the Press, sometimes in a “political context” While such letters are sent on Members’ headed paper, which includes their home address and “Councillor” title, the Press have a tendency to just put the name of the Member (without reference to Councillor) and Neath Port Talbot Council. There is also no reference to the Political Group the Member represents (as this is not included in the letterheads). Thus the letters in question purport to be from someone representing the **Council**.

To avoid any misunderstandings, you are requested that if you do write to the Press, you close their letters:

“Councillor _____

_____ *Group Neath Port Talbot Council*”

Please also request the editor to use the full description in italics above.

Public Emails to all Members:

The following is the action you should take on receipt of an email from a member of the public, or a protest group, on a particular matter, when it is obvious that the email has been sent to a number of Members. Past examples have included emails sent to all Members on planning issues.

You are advised that, in these cases, an official response from the Authority will be given to the individual/group by the appropriate Officer and there is no requirement for you to answer the email, unless you wish to do so. You are reminded, however, that if you are a Member of the Planning Committee and the email involves a particular planning issue, and you need to be aware of the various requirements of the Planning Code of Conduct.

Conclusion

To be effective as a local representative you must know your ward and the people who live in it. You must take time to keep people in touch with local issues and to involve the community in matters affecting the area. You must make yourself available to people who want to contact you and work to solve the problems they raise.

Properly carried out, ward representation is probably the hardest part of being a local Councillor, but it is also one of the most rewarding. It is difficult to beat the satisfaction of knowing that you have made a real difference in the communities that you represent.

Annual Reports

In accordance with the Local Government Measure 2011, Members have the opportunity to publish an Annual Report, which can include such things as attendance rates at meetings, the work the Councillor has achieved over the past 12 months and so on. For further information

and advice please see the Members' Hub available via the Authority's Intranet.

Social Media (Twitter, Facebook)

In support of the Authority's Digital by Choice Strategy Members will receive training on the use of Social Media in their roles as Councillors. In addition advice/information can be found via the Members' Hub or from the Corporate Communications and Marketing Team..