The 21st Century Councillor

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Preface by Councillor Alan Dean

Chair of North West Employers, Liverpool City Council

North West Employers is delighted to have been part of the research project with Birmingham University. We admired the work of Catherine Mangan and Catherine Needham in the sister publication *The 21st Century Public Servant*. We particularly valued the team's approach, generously sharing their thinking and offering a perspective to stimulate thinking and action rather than a 'right answer'.

We hope this new report on the roles of the 21st Century Councillor will provoke real debate and dialogue on future roles and how we can all support Councillors to continue to fulfil the vital role they play in working with and supporting communities.

The report paints a picture of the current context and the demands on Councillors. The impact of budget reductions and changing public sector landscape has had a huge impact on Councillors' roles and on them as individuals and it is important they have quality support from political groups, local authorities and other organisations.

The report focuses on roles, skills and support for individual Councillors to assist them to play their crucial front line role in making connections and building strong democratic places where people can thrive. At a time when communities and citizens are redefining their relationship with institutions and the state it is important that there is real clarity on the future role and contribution of Councillors.

North West Employers have always been committed to supporting Councillors. Our work on the North West Member Development Charter was groundbreaking and sixteen years later I still hold on to the core principle, which is as is true today as it was then:

> *'We believe that at the heart of any authority dedicated to meeting the needs of its community will be a commitment to the development of its elected members'.*

The report is a call to action for Councillors and organisations to rethink the role of elected members. North West Employers have started to answer our own 'so what' question. We are developing a framework that focuses on making connections and social learning that we hope will be helpful for local authorities and individual Councillors. If you are interested in getting involved let us know. Further information is available at **https://nwemployers.org.uk**

North West Employers work on behalf of the 41 local authority member organisations and their partners to improve the lives and opportunities of the people who live and work in the North West of England.

Introduction

The 21st Century Councillor research builds on the successful 21st Century Public Servant project (2013) and the University of Birmingham Policy Commission (2011) into the Future of Local Public Services. These projects saw a significant amount of interest from practitioners, identifying the need to pay attention to the changing roles undertaken by people working in public services, and the associated support and development requirements.

During 2016 we undertook a parallel research programme which was focused on the 21st Century Councillor. North West Employers (Employers' Organisation for the 41 local authorities in the North West of England) supported the work by facilitating access to elected councillors and organising regional events to share the findings. We are sharing the findings with councillors in other regions, and with the LGA-SOLACE-PPMA 21st Century Public Servant steering group to ensure that the themes have resonance outside of particular regional contexts.[1]

The broad research questions for the 21st Century Councillor project are below. The research questions mirror those asked in the 21st Century Public Servant project and it is intended that the two projects are seen as interrelated rather than standalone pieces of work. Findings and resources from both parts of the research are available at
http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/

Research questions
- What is the range of roles that the 21st Century Councillor is required to perform?
- What are the competencies and skills that councillors require to undertake these roles?
- What are the support and training requirements of these roles?

In this report we reflect on the roles that councillors are playing, or recognise that they will need to be playing, within their organisations and localities. We then explain why these roles are emerging as the key contributions for councillors. The final two sections explore councillor careers and development, to consider how councillors can be supported to perform these roles effectively.

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[1] The Steering Group is made up of representatives of the Local Government Association, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, and Public Service People Managers' Association, plus ten local authorities who are sharing peer learning of using the 21st Century Public Servant research in their strategic workforce planning.

Research design

The research was undertaken in three phases:

Rapid evidence appraisal

A desk-based review of the academic and grey literatures identified the state of knowledge about councillors, the competencies and capacities that they require and information about current approaches to development. This literature review is available from the 21st Century Public Servant blog.

Primary research

In total data was drawn from 23 local authorities in the North West of England. Data collection drew on a purposive sample. Following pilot work in two local authorities (a city council and a unitary council) – a total of 50 interviews (face-to-face and telephone) and five focus groups (face-to-face) were conducted, accumulating information from 68 councillors and 18 officers. The sample drawn met saturation criteria as defined in the literature (Saunders and Townsend, 2015). Coverage of members was as representative as possible: opinion was sought from people with varying lengths of service and levels of seniority.

Approximately half the sample was drawn from opposition and half from ruling parties. In terms of gender split, interviewees broadly reflected the distribution of male and female councillors across England (68% male; 32% female, see Keen, 2015: 3). Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors were interviewed, along with independents.

Ethical approval for the project was provided by the University of Birmingham's Research Ethics Committee. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and carried out with informed consent; confidentiality was assured. Questions asked in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were based on the overarching research questions set out above. Analysis sought to capture themes and shared opinions.

Disseminating the research

Bringing these different streams together we are now sharing the findings in this report, at events and on our project blog. We are encouraging debate about topics such as the range of different councillor roles, the competencies required in these roles, the options available in developing these skills and competencies, plus a range of more general themes around accountability, risk and knowledge sharing as indicated by the research process. We are particularly interested in the interplay between the roles we identified for the 21st Century Public Servants and those of the Councillor, recognising the need for roles to develop in ways which support and complement each other. We are not presenting this report as an end to the work, but rather as an ongoing discussion where we invite responses to the work, and in particular encourage people working in public services to reflect on what some of the next steps might be to realise the principles of 21st Century public service.

For updates and discussion about the themes of the research, go to the 21st Century Public Servant blog at **http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress. com/** and contribute to the debate on Twitter **#21Cps**.
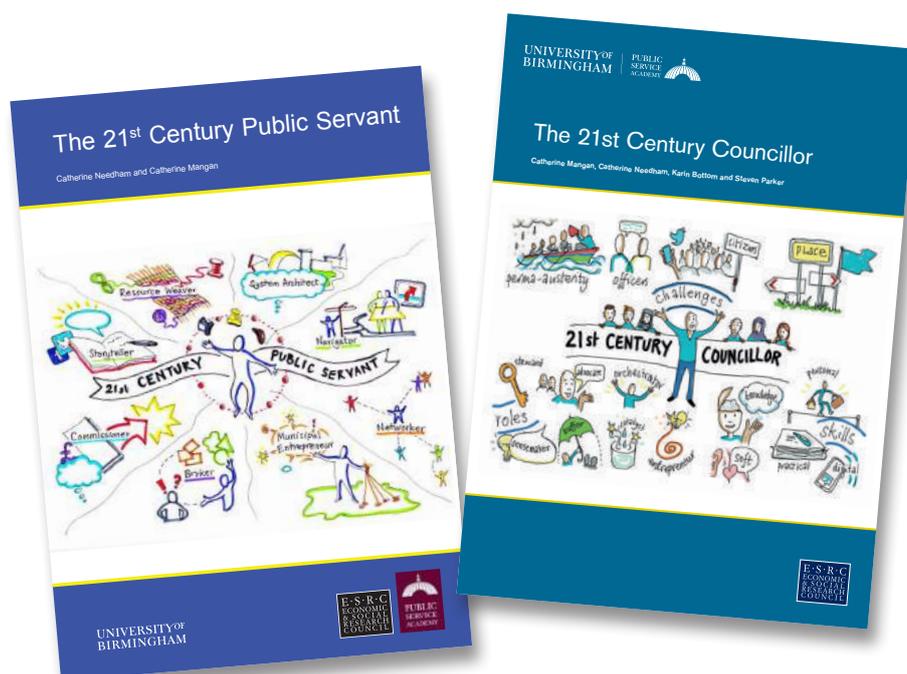
Summary of Findings

1. **What it means to be a councillor is changing in response to the context in which they are operating. There is a range of contextual challenges which are reshaping local government:**
   a. Perma-austerity – this was the most dominant of the contextual themes, with the financial context facing their local authorities shaping all interviewee responses.
   b. Changing citizen expectations – councillors reported a shift in relationships with citizens, brought on by technological change, austerity and other social changes such as the decline in deference within society.
   c. New technologies – councillors recognised that new technologies are introducing opportunities for real-time engagement with a broader range of citizens than currently, but there were reservations about the potential for inappropriate use of social media and about how much of their personal lives should be shared.
   d. Different scales of working, including combined authorities – whilst there was enthusiasm for the idea of powers being devolved from central government many councillors expressed concern at the complexity of the new arrangements and the lack of democratic mandate.
   e. Changing boundaries and organisation of public services at local level – councillors were struggling to reconcile accountability to citizens for decision-making with the increased complexity and diversity of service delivery structures over which they had reduced direct control, for example due to the growing importance of community involvement, the variety of service providers or the growing number of academy schools.

   These challenges create new **roles** for councillors, reshaping councillors' relationships with both **citizens** and **officers**. The challenges foster different forms of engagement with **place**. They raise questions about member **profiles, the potential career path of a councillor**, and suggest a number of **skills** which are likely to be important in the future. These themes are explored in turn in the sections that follow.

2. **Councillor roles are adapting to respond to the contextual challenges. Key roles for the future include:**
   - Steward of place – working across the locality in partnership with others
   - Advocate – acting to represent the interests of all citizens
   - Buffer – seeking to mitigate the impact of austerity on citizens
   - Sensemaker – translating a shift in the role of public services and the relationship between institutions and citizen
   - Catalyst – enabling citizens to do things for themselves, having new conversations about what is now possible
   - Entrepreneur – working with citizens and partners to encourage local vitality and develop new solutions
   - Orchestrator – helping broker relationships, work with partners and develop new connections

3. **Councillors and Citizens**
   The Councillor-citizen relationship remains at the heart of representative democracy, but that relationship is changing as austerity requires communities and citizens to take on more responsibilities for responding to local issues. Some citizens are keen to be self-organising and to make use of new technologies to do so, but these capacities are unevenly distributed and councillors need to continue to provide a voice for those who struggle to represent themselves.

   Councillors also need to enable citizens to work alongside them in coproductive ways to develop new solutions to service design and delivery and to give them the tools and support to self-organise where traditional service delivery is reducing.

4. **Councillors and Officers**
   Whilst local democracy necessitates a clear understanding of the difference in these roles, and this difference is understood by the majority of officers and councillors, in practice boundaries have been more blurred. We found that roles are increasingly overlapping as executive members become more professionalised, the number of officers reduces, and as officers in neighbourhood roles play a greater role as community 'fixers'.

5. **Councillors and Place**
   Councillors are strongly rooted in their wards and localities. However the pressure to integrate services, and to work at a regional level within combined authorities, is changing the scale of pace and challenging local identities. At the same time, the increasing diversity within services – delivered by a much wider range of partners – is challenging their ability to act as stewards of their places.

   To support councillors in these roles and changing contexts, it is important that we understand the complex interaction of geographic, functional and quality of life issues in the councillor role, the different leadership roles they might take on and also that we recognise and support their development needs.

6. **Councillor profiles**
   Few interviewees managed to combine being a councillor with having a paid job, and this was felt to be one reason why the base of councillors did not always reflect the diversity of communities. Diversity, in relation to gender, ethnicity and other protected characteristics was described by one interviewee as 'a Forth bridge' issue, reflecting the need for sustained effort on this (eg, all women shortlists) rather than sporadic initiatives.

7. **Developing skills for the 21st Century Councillor**
   The roles set out in this report – steward, advocate, orchestrator, sensemaker, buffer, catalyst and entrepreneur – require a skill set which is different from that which is offered by existing training and development opportunities. There was a clear recognition among interviewees that the appropriate skill set for councillors was shifting and that councillors needed support to work in new ways. They articulated five types of skills that were required, which we have grouped into two sets: foundational skills **(practical and knowledge based skills)** which are those covered by most existing training and development, and relational skills **(connective, digital and reflective skills)** which are essential to being effective in 21st Century Councillor roles.

1. The challenges facing councillors
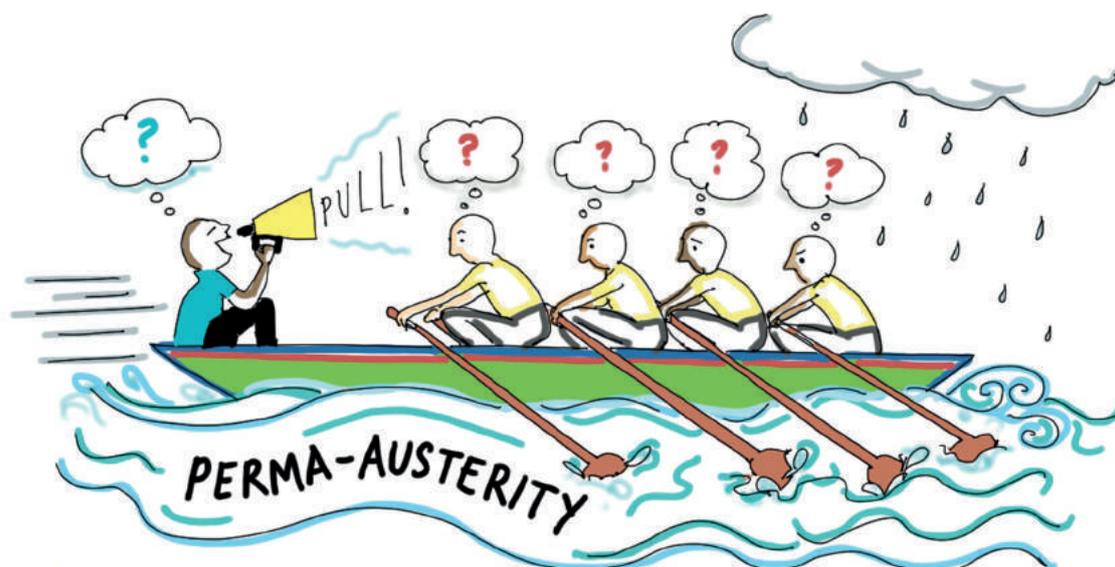
In our interviews, councillors set out a range of contextual **challenges** which are reshaping local government and reshaping what it means to be a councillor. These include:

- Perma-austerity
- Changing citizen expectations
- New technologies
- Integration of services at a regional level, requiring different scales of working
- Changing boundaries and organisation of public services at local level

Perma-austerity, as we called it in the 21st Century Public Servant report, was the most dominant of the contextual themes. The financial context facing their local authorities, whose budgets had shrunk by 40 or 50 per cent, was such a dominant feature that it shaped all of their responses, regardless of the political party affiliation of the interviewees. It was clear from the interviews that most councillors felt they were undergoing a period of transition, as their organisations shrank, services were reduced and the role of the council was changing from a service delivery model to one of commissioning. Most councillors we spoke to were resigned to a future of austerity (indeed some felt it was

beneficial), but several expressed concerns about the impact of the financial situation on the future level of public service for citizens. As one put it:

'We still have issues with childhood obesity and you know we still have huge issues with mental health and falls and acute admissions... And how we're supposed to do that in... an ever growing world of reduced local government... I really worry because I think local government is going to strip back even more.'
(Shadow Executive Member, borough council)

The language some councillors used to describe the context in which they were operating was at times very angry and emotive:

'The cuts are horrific and they're striking at people who really haven't got a voice. I know that they say these are the statistics you know, this is what it is, but there are other people... who don't speak out and suffer in silence and they're not even counted. So yes it's bad. It is appalling.'
(Opposition Overview and Scrutiny member)

Whilst not all interviewees shared this perspective, there was a common sense that citizens needed help to understand the new world of local public services and the limits that austerity was placing on what was possible within local government.

Other contextual aspects which councillors described were shifts in relationships with citizens and their changing **expectations** and ability to represent themselves, linked to **new technologies** such as social media which bring both opportunities and challenges for councillors. There was a paradox between moves towards the forces of **integration** – strongly felt in health and social care and in the coming together of combined authorities – at the same time as councillors felt that local services were becoming a **complex network of providers**. Each of these themes is considered in more detail later in the report.

Challenge 1: How can councillors be supported to operate effectively in the challenging economic context in which they are working?

2. Roles of councillors

In response to the changing context, councillors' roles are shifting. There has been much literature produced on the role of councillors,[2] with recent literature focusing on the impact of the new political management arrangements which created the executive/overview and scrutiny split in 2000. This split changed the specific roles which councillors were expected to play and also – it is argued – introduced new roles, such as lobbyist, policy analyst and challenger.[3] The literature also identified new roles for the backbench councillor, which included community leader, representative, policymaker, performance monitor and party group member.[4]

More recently it has been suggested that the depoliticising and disempowering impact of austerity may make the role of the councillor irrelevant.[5] The councillors we spoke to were clear about the continued relevance of their role, but that there were changes in how they were interacting with citizens, partners and officers. Some roles, such as advocate, are not necessarily new, but their significance has been increased by the different context which they and their residents are experiencing. Others were framed as emerging roles that councillors felt that they needed to develop.

The roles of the 21st century councillor

- **Steward of place** – providing coherent stewardship of scarce public resources, across their locality, and working in partnership with others to make the most of resources available

- **Advocate** – acting on behalf of all citizens. This was expressed in terms of being more than listening to those who shout the loudest, or those who vote for them, but being responsive to those who are vulnerable and those who struggle to make their voices heard:

  'You have to know your community, not just those who shout the loudest'.
  (Backbench member, city council)

- **Buffer** – mitigating the impact of austerity on citizens, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. Although some expressed this as the traditional concept of a protector, others suggested this role involved developing tailored policies and approaches and helping citizens to find alternative support.

- **Sensemaker** – translating a shift in the role of public services and the relationship between institutions and citizen

  'Of course it's difficult for a citizen to understand why, you know, if he's paying 50p more per week... why is [his] local library closing. Well we try our best to explain. It's not always easy.'
  (Leader of council)

- **Catalyst** – enabling citizens to do things for themselves, and having new conversations about what is now possible.

- **Entrepreneur** – working with citizens and partners to develop new solutions:

  'Our skill set has got to be much more around being entrepreneurial, being problem solvers, being people who can develop partnerships, who can remove barriers for people, for residents getting involved.'
  (Leader, metropolitan borough council)

- **Orchestrator** – this was described in a variety of ways including convening groups of people to work together, mediating between different groups, and helping to broker relationships.

These roles are outlined briefly here and developed and illustrated more fully in the following sections.

Challenge 2: If these are the roles that councillors need to play in the future, how do we create a shared understanding of these roles, and develop people to play them?

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[2] eg, Heclo 1969; Jones, 1973; Corina 1974; Newton 1976; Rao, 1993; Rao, 1998; Copus, 2010; Wilson and Game, 2011.
[3] Snape and Dobbs, 2003: 59
[4] Snape, 2004
[5] Barnett, 2015

3. Councillors and Citizens

The Councillor-citizen relationship is clearly at the heart of the councillor role, and its location in representative democracy.[6] The councillors we spoke to were passionate about their representative role and spoke more about their work and relationship with citizens than any other aspect of being a councillor. Overall councillors report a shift in relationships with citizens, brought on by technological change, austerity and other social changes such as the decline in deference within society.

Impact of austerity on councillor-citizen relationships

In conditions of austerity, councillors saw that their role was partly one of acting as a **buffer**, mitigating the impact of austerity for citizens as much as possible, but also encouraging new types of citizen behaviour that were more compatible with the fiscal context.

One councillor set out how he/she felt the role had changed:

'When I became a councillor initially it was a sort of slightly do-gooder role, you know, I wanted to do good for my community. I was involved in various things and it seemed a natural way of progressing them. That role has changed fairly dramatically and now it's about what services can I cut with the least hurt.'
(Focus group, NWE executive board group)

Some interviewees felt that the changes had been positive for citizens, in that they reduced dependency and encouraged those who were able and/or affluent to do more things for themselves:

'So there are lots of people that we supported in 2010 that we no longer support in the same way that we used to do. And, in some ways, that's good because I think that we probably smothered a lot of people that we provided services for in 2010. Lots of people are more independent, more able, are doing more things and different things than they were doing in 2010, that's great'

Some felt that cuts were an opportunity to reduce waste and reshape the council for the better. As one leader put it:

'It's about shifting resources, you know, and I would never say this publically, but actually you know it does local government good every so often to slash its budgets to shake the tree'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

For several interviewees there was a sense that different types of cuts were experienced differently – for example hidden cuts to learning disability services were being undertaken with limited public protest, whilst reductions in bin collections, street cleaning and free parking

met with immediate and sustained public complaint. Some councillors felt that it was their role to **explain and justify** cuts to lower level environment-type services in order to mitigate the impact of the cuts on more crucial services:

'It's our job to actually explain to people that we have to do this because we've got no choice and frankly you paying an extra forty pence for your loss of your free thirty minutes [parking] is not going to make that much difference to you, whereas not being able to fund an old person basically in their home is.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

Some interviewees felt that citizens understood the context in which they were now working, and appreciated that councillors were doing the best that they could:

'So there's an understanding out there I think about the sort of reality of the financial situation, but that we're really trying to find ways of helping people do things for themselves but not abandoning people', as one interviewee put it.
(Chief executive, metropolitan borough council)

In contrast, others felt that citizens continued to make demands on councillors, with little appreciation of the difficulty of satisfying those demands.

'I don't think that citizens are expecting more, but they're expecting the same and unfortunately they're not going to get it.'
(Leader, county council)

'You know, there are still a few people that say, "Oh, you know, you haven't got the flower baskets out." I think people do understand that we've had to make cuts and changes, on the whole, but a lot of people haven't been very personally affected by it.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

In this context, a key role for councillors was to act as a **sensemaker** about the cuts for citizens, helping residents understand the need for a shift in the role of public services and the relationship between institutions and citizen; to expect less from the council:

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[6] Copus, 2004; 2010; Lepine and Sullivan, 2010

'Probably two thirds of my communication with residents are – as I was told to do – managing their expectations!'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

Another gave an example of how the service offered to citizens had worsened, requiring a new response to citizen complaints:

'You have to be very careful that you mustn't promise things which cannot be done any more. I mean a simple thing like a light going out in a street where before the turnaround would be five days, it's now twenty eight days... And there's nothing we can do about it because you know, it's either that or we hit something even worse.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

Some councillors reported that the cuts had meant that they were having to have more **difficult conversations** with citizens, to explain why some services were being protected at the expense of other services.

There was a role for councillors in thinking more **innovatively and creatively** about how services could be retained in order to protect their citizens. This might include services being delivered in a different way or by a different organisation:

'I really do feel that the big challenge for members is how we preserve and keep services and/or redesign those services and deliver them in quite different ways to the way they were delivered even five years ago, and that is a – for me, that's an absolute constant at the moment. You know, the option of not providing the service, to my view, is increasingly not really the answer. I don't think you could really say that now. You've really got to think about different ways of doing this; otherwise, you're just giving up on your residents, I think.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

A lot of interviewees talked about how they needed to help citizens to understand that for services to continue, they needed to be part of the solution rather than expecting the council to solve the problem:

'Those people that make up a particular town or a particular community... how can they then almost move the conversation away from "well what's the council going to do for us" to "what support do we need to be able to create a sustainable outcome in future that we can do ourselves".'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

There was also a recognition of a need to move to a more **entrepreneurial and problem-solving role**, which recognises and develops the skills of citizens rather than one of overseeing delivery:

'Our skill set has got to be much more around being entrepreneurial, being problem solvers, being people who can develop partnerships, who can remove barriers for people, for residents getting involved... To identify what the talents, the skills are within our neighbourhoods that we represent and encourage them to get more involved in delivering services which previously would have been delivered by local government officers. So we're more... entrepreneurs, brokers, problem solvers, connectors... those are the skills increasingly we will need, rather than the old model where we basically spent a lot of time in the town hall, where we did things to people.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

There was scope within this to develop more coproductive ways of working with citizens, (though this term itself was not widely used by councillors we spoke to). This finding resonates with the academic literature which suggests that enthusiasm for engaging the public in coproductive activities has gained significant traction in recent years, particularly with respect to overcoming some of the fiscal pressures that have been imposed by austerity.[7] One of the councillors observed:

'I'm very, very keen on that philosophy which is about changing the nature of the conversations from residents and neighbourhoods as being... passive receivers of services to being much more... in the forefront of defining what their needs are and helping to meet them, their needs themselves. So it's a fundamental change in the relationship between the elected member and the residents that they represent.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

This might relate to volunteering – eg, to keep a library going – or it might be about shared problem-solving. One interviewee gave the example of a bus route which is under threat because of cuts to the subsidy:

'I've had half a dozen phone calls and I start with the conversation... "you do know our budget is being cut by [millions of] pounds a year over the next couple of years" and they say "well, yeah and we're not really expecting the Council to step up, but is there anything else that can be done?"'

Another talked about a taking a coproductive approach to fly-tipping, as residents and councillors worked together at an environmental clean-up day:

'That's good because obviously it makes, it cleans the area up, but actually it's got a social benefit you know for... some of these streets it's the first time that neighbours have met each other. So it has a kind of spin off in terms of building community resilience and community sort of, you know, a feeling of you know being a good neighbour and all of that.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Councillors recognised that not all citizens welcomed the opportunity to work in these coproductive ways, or to take up the opportunities that the council was offering them to be more entrepreneurial within communities. One councillor report a disappointing response from citizens and communities to opportunities for them to have small budgets to spend locally:

'They haven't been very quick to pick up on that opportunity, that money could be used a lot more flexibly. Because they're used to somebody coming and making the suggestion to them.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

As well as reshaping the collective services provided within communities, the context of austerity was also changing the nature of individual case work. Councillors reported taking more of a **triage approach to routine case work**:

'I'm a bit more ruthless... depending on the rest of the detail and I just say "take me a photograph of it with your phone will you and email it through to me, or forward it through" and straight away within two minutes I can see whether [the litter] had just blown in that corner or whether it's serious. And I think that's part of the way we all operate now.'
(Focus group, NWE executive board)

'I'm suddenly having to differentiate, whereas all enquiries I used to really treat every one of them as an issue to be followed through, dealt with, even if I couldn't give them a good outcome I always went back to them.'
(Focus group, NWE executive board)

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[7] Pestoff et al. 2012; see also Bovaird et al. 2015

In conditions of austerity, many councillors expressed their role as protecting citizens from the worst of the cuts. However, some felt that their colleagues did not accept that the role of the council was changing and that they could not continue to solve every problem for their residents:

'Some councillors still think it is the good old days of 10 years ago and they can make demands and expect them to be carried out asap. Councillors can't be as demanding, they need to take more initiative and start to sort things out themselves.'
(Overview and scrutiny member, city council)

Another said,

'If you've been used to being in a position where the town hall delivers everything directly to residents and you kind of just sit there and a gentle hand on the tiller, you know, those days are gone and for some councillors that's a really big change in mind-set. And it's hard for them to adjust to the new world.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Impact of new technologies on the councillor-citizen relationship

Most councillors we spoke to felt that new technologies introduced opportunities for real-time engagement with a broader range of citizens than might access existing routes into councillors, such as surgeries or public meetings. A majority of those interviewed appreciated how such technologies had the potential to facilitate new 'democratic opportunities' at the local level.[8] Councillors' enthusiasm for such mediums also resonated with the recent Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013 which concluded that social media and online tools had the most potential for aiding them in their role.[9]

All councillors acknowledged the potential to use such tools, and some interviewees were active on Facebook and Twitter.

'I get more referrals through Facebook than I do anything else', (Focus group, city council),

Most preferred to use other forms of contact:

'My main communication from them to me is actually as I walk down the street.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

'It's used by some councillors but I would say it's the minority, not the majority. I'm not on Twitter, I'm not on Facebook.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

One council leader said,

'I have got a Twitter account, which somebody set up for me, but I keep forgetting to say anything. Because it's just not in my head to do it.'

It was, though, recognised that traditional forms of contact were not always working well:

'You put on surgeries in the week and... if you get one person then that's probably it's rare to get more than that, sometimes it's none. You just have a cup of coffee with the librarian, bit of a chat and do my emails.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

Several councillors reported that they had abandoned holding traditional surgeries and now took their meetings to where people were, such as the supermarket or bingo hall:

'Well because they often phone us up or contact us by email and we found that very, very few people were using the surgery to contact us actually, in fact we'd be better off going out and knocking on people's doors and actually we do direct appointments basically so if a resident wants to see us, we'll go and see them.'
(Focus group, city council)

The immediacy of social media was appreciated by some as a way to engage quickly with local issues:

'I get lots of information that comes to me as a councillor about road works, proposed road works and problems. The police wrote to me about a van that had been seen around an area and actually how do you cascade that quickly and effectively, you know, there is no time for me to be able to print up a leaflet "be careful about this van" because it'll be three weeks before it's out in everybody's doors.'

Others reported a nervousness around social media, partly in relation to mastering a new technology, but more profoundly about the shifting of boundaries that social media allowed:

'There's too many horror stories.'
(Opposition group leader, district council)

'Twitter is a banana skin'
(Cabinet member, county council)

One interviewee reported how a photo of her in a 'happy mood' on a night out was posted by a friend on Facebook and then seen by friends of friends:

'It's fine for me and friends but not fine for a customer and likewise as a councillor.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

For some there was a recognition that social media came with risks but that those are worth taking:

'I was pleased to see that officers are now allowed to communicate under their own names on social media. I think that's a very good thing, it humanises the council and makes that, sort of, instant communication and connection easier. We have to recognise that sometimes it's going to go wrong, both from communication in from residents who can be unpleasant in the nicest way sometimes and also the wrong message will go out, we've just got to live with that.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

As well as councillors and officers potentially using social media in a way that might create problems, there was also a concern about changes in norms of politeness and immediacy in the ways in which citizens used social media to communicate with them:

'People expect an instant response.'
(Focus group, NWE executive board)

'I think attitudes have changed. I think people are more impatient, they are ruder, they are... unrealistic, they'll think of something in the morning and they'll wonder why they haven't got a reply in the afternoon.'
(Opposition member, overview and scrutiny, metropolitan borough council)

The coping strategies that councillors need to work well in an environment of instant and potentially abusive forms of media are discussed more in section 7 below.

Challenge 3: How can councillors create citizen engagement approaches that foster a culture of working together to co-design solutions to issues?

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[8] See Loader and Mercer, 2011: 760
[9] Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014: 15

4. Councillors and Officers

The constitutional design of local government is based around a clear divide between the roles of councillors and officers with local protocols in place to preserve that boundary. Some councillors were able to articulate a clear distinction:

> '*I think the difference between officers and members is often that members see the place, they see the whole connection, they're place oriented and that officers are often very service oriented or policy oriented and don't sometimes see across.*'
> (Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

> '*I do the vision-y, leadership-y, alchemy stuff to the point at which it becomes viable for the [officers] to get involved with it.*'
> (Committee member, city council)

Others reflected a more ambiguous distinction between the two:

> '*It's simple in academic terms. Councillors set the political direction and the officers deliver it. In reality it is muddy and murky.*'
> (Deputy leader of opposition, city council)

Councillors we spoke to recognised that there are inherent tensions in the relationship which

is built on the concept of a 'lay' councillor working with a 'professional' officer. As one councillor put it,

> '*If you work in a political environment you don't choose your politician and they come in all shapes and sizes. You have to understand democratic legitimacy. It is different from most other work environments where your boss will usually be more experienced than you.*'
> (Cabinet member, city council)

Existing research has highlighted the extent to which there has always been some blurring at the borders of this relationship;[10] indeed, it has been suggested that a number of models can be employed to understand the various manifestations of the councillor-officer relationship.[11] Our research found that the boundaries between the roles of councillors and officers were becoming **more blurred**.

The increasingly complex issues that local government engages with require working relationships that are likely to extend beyond traditional role descriptions and working practices.[12] Structural changes within local authorities, compounded by austerity, are shrinking the officer base, weakening well-

established one-to-one relationships between councillors and officers, and leading to a greater overlap of roles.

In the case of executive members, the overlap was particularly to do with greater involvement of councillors in operational decision-making.

> '*In terms of the officer/member relationship... we're having to get a lot more involved now in some of the operational stuff of the way the councils works, where in the past there was a pretty sort of strict sort of delineation between officer, you know, members develop policy and officers execute the policy, deliver the policy... We are getting much more involved now in some of the kind of nitty gritty of delivering you know good quality libraries or good quality one stop shop services or housing etc, than we previously done as elected members.*'
> (Leader, metropolitan borough council)

One interviewee suggested that it was younger councillors who were more likely to cross over into operational roles:

> '*I see very much the older generation being more traditional old school elected member role which is, you know, there to solve problems through traditional means... people come and complain to them about something, they know who in the council will fix it for them so they'll give them a call and, you know, that's it, happy resident kind of thing. I think what I'm seeing is that there's a blurring of the officer/member relationship with the younger ones so actually... there's some tensions created where sometimes I think they think they're the officers. So, you know, they want to roll their sleeves up, they want to actually get involved in the operational side of it.*'
> (Senior officer, city council)

In relation to backbench councillors, the blurring of roles was more to do with officers taking on more neighbourhood roles and more generic case work type approaches to supporting citizens. As one councillor put it:

[10] Alford et. al. 2016
[11] Stocker and Thompson-Fawcett, 2014
[12] see,Alford et. al. 2016: 14; see also Hartley et al. 2015; Needham and Mangan, 2016

'One of the most difficult area for an officer I think in the present system is the neighbourhood manager because it's like sometimes they take over a semi councillor role... And they're sat dealing direct with members of the public, which is their job... It makes it very difficult, what are we supposed to do, what are they supposed to do?'
(Focus group, city council)

'The boundaries between the two roles have got confused. Officers are increasingly seen as more of the public face than the elected members. That is because of lack of clarity over the years because of a lack of an induction programme for new officers. We expect them to muddle along, work things out for themselves'
(Senior officer, city council)

For some councillors this additional community capacity was welcome. Others expressed reservations that these roles were potentially side-lining councillors and duplicating work:

'There is scope for duplication with the community officer... she could be sorting things out that I've already done... Relationships need to be carefully constructed, with a clear understanding of roles. It's fine so long as you're both happy with it.'
(Focus group, unitary council)

Who speaks on behalf of the council is a question which is increasingly relevant as senior officers develop their own profiles on social media, and officers increasingly have direct channels of dialogue with citizens. Although for some there is a sense that this direct communication between officers and citizens might sideline councillors, this issue may also illustrate that the traditional officer/member role distinctions are now out of step with council activities and increasingly consumerist expectations in the public.[13]

As well as blurring roles, interviewees reported that relationships were shifting in other ways. To some extent austerity was limiting the demands that could be placed upon officers:

'What we as members have to learn, and this is one of the very difficult things, is it's no good me jumping up and down, saying,

"Well, I want it clean. Why can't I have it clean?" because that puts the emphasis then on the officers, who say, "Well, you can't because there's—".'
(Opposition group leader, metropolitan borough council)

However, for some, there were limits to this:

'Officers have to also understand we know our community, we breathe and we live there and we know if something is urgent, please move.' (Focus group, city council)

There were clear differences between interviewees in the level of formality that councillors expected in their dealings with officers. Some felt that an informal approach had enabled closer working relationships in testing times, whereas others were keen to maintain boundaries:

'Now I do encourage people to call me by my first name rather than anything else, so it's a much more informal relationship. My relationship with my officers, my management team is very informal... I don't think we could have done the things we've had to do over the past six years if we hadn't worked as a team.'
(Cabinet member, city council)

'I always address [officers] as Mr [Smith] or Mr [Jones] or whatever, you know, in emails, very formal... I only address people by their first name if they're relatives or friends – you're not my relative and you're not my friend... '
(Leader, city council)

For some councillors, the financial context meant that interpersonal relationships with officers were getting closer, whereas for others personal relationships had been broken down because of staff changes:

'I think now most offices have got very very limited resources so very much part of your skills has to be developing a relationship because if they've only got tuppence to go round and you want a tiny bit of that tuppence, you've got to relate to them and try and make your case fit in with policy'.
(NWE executive board focus group)

'Where departments have restructured, then, as part of that restructuring, the lines of communication between the departments and councillors have, on some occasions, been changed, so that there isn't the one-to-one relationships that existed in the past, and now any councillor requests or conversations are done centrally.'
(Opposition group leader, metropolitan borough council)

Whilst austerity was a key driver of changes in relationship, there was also a reflection that the shift to the Cabinet and backbench model had made it harder for backbenchers to develop relationships with officers:

'I'm pretty convinced now most people wouldn't know what various officers look like because they only ever deal with them at the end of an email.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

Austerity was also leading to a reduction in the number of officers available to support councillors which resulted in fewer officers to talk to and councillors having to become more self-reliant:

'Certainly, you know, before the budget reductions, which have hit us quite badly... it was easy or easier to ask for a particular report or... ask particular questions of particular officers. And now, obviously... as the number of officers was reduced, that level of communication and that level of information sharing has also reduced.'
(Opposition group leader, metropolitan borough council)

With greater partnership working, and the development of place based approaches, councillors are also required to work with a wider range of officers than those in the council, such as police, GP practice managers, service providers. For some this reflects the way in which they have always worked, whereas for others it requires new approaches in order to negotiate with and influence officers over whom they have no organisational agency.

Challenge 4: Are councillors and officers having conversations about how they can best work together?

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[13] Alford et. al. 2016; see also Loader and Mercea 2011.

5. Councillors and Place
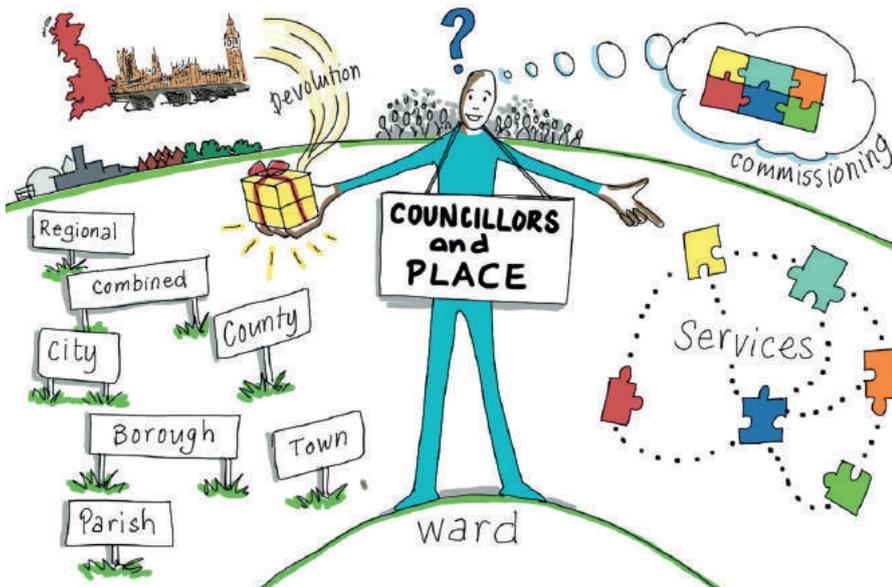
Councillors, elected on a ward-base, have a very explicit commitment to place. More often than not they live in close proximity to those they serve and, as existing research shows, tend to exhibit particularly strong connections with their local environment and those that live within it.[14] Affinity to place came out strongly in the interviews, articulated in relation to wards or to the broader local authority setting. In the context of austerity, there was a focus on a more holistic understanding of place including the contribution of other agencies operating in that area.

> *'The challenge for us going forward is not how [the] council can best spend the 200 million we'll have by 2020, but it's how [the area] PLC can spend the 2 billion that comes in to the borough for, not just for local authority, but for health, for police, for fire, you know, for the colleges etc, etc. My role as leader is much more building these alliances, building these partnerships and getting people out of a silo kind of mentality.'*
> (Leader, metropolitan borough council)

For some interviewees, the importance of place was fundamental to the debate about the nature of democratic representation and the future purpose of local government.

> *'Well, actually what's the purpose of a Local Authority? So if it is just to deliver statutory services then we'd question why we did have all the democratic infrastructure in a way I think. But if it is genuinely about stewardship of place and ensuring a positive future for a place there's a whole different skill set needed around that.'*
> (Chief executive, metropolitan borough council)

This notion of **stewardship of place** linked to an emphasis on the local council and councillors as strategic leaders rather than the deliverers of services:

> *'We don't deliver services anymore. We commission and procure things and we have this strategic leadership role within the borough to bring people together, you know, which is very opaque, you can't put your finger on it. What does this really mean, but that's what we're supposed to be doing? Whereas twenty five years ago we were landlords, we were caring for people and all the rest of it. So it is a much different role as a councillor and... what is lacking is ability and skills to operate at that level.'*
> (Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Within this role as steward of place, councillors were struggling to reconcile accountability to citizens for decision-making with the increased complexity and fragmentation of service delivery structures over which they had reduced control. This might be in relation to a contractor of services which remained under local authority oversight, such as waste management. It might also be in relation to education, over which local authorities had shrinking control as academies grew in number in their area. This perspective echoes findings set out in APSE's 'Two Tribes' report which highlighted the need for elected members to be institutionally reconnected to the decision-making processes that extend across local governance.[15] As one of our interviewees said:

> *'Schools, you know, if there was a real problem I could get hold of the director of education and... he'd got the powers to say what is going on at the school or has this been done or whatever. Not anymore – I'd have to go to the school and I've got no powers over the school because... they're now their own masters and mistresses. Even health... three or four years ago, I got hold of the chief executive of the PCT and... he looked into [the issue]. Not anymore, we've got a CCG and I can't even begin to understand how the health service is held together because we've got CCGs, groups of CCGs, an overall grouping of the CCGs, an overall grouping of the doctors and I just can't follow it at all.'*
> (Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

Whilst for Cabinet members the focus might be on making sense of this complexity at the level of the whole borough, county or city, for some backbenchers there were opportunities to work at a holistic level in their wards, as one leader explained:

> *'We're giving members a skill set, we're giving them [a ward-level budget], we've put staffing resources into that to work with members alongside that whole community... and to work with them on commissioning that spend at the area level. Now that for me has completely reinvented our backbench*

members and given them a real purpose going forward. It's challenging because it's usually demanding time-wise, but it's not sat in the Town Hall, it's out in the community, trying to build up volunteering hours, the number of community groups... And it's that whole area in my view is where the future of most councillors lie... '
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

This role could involve closer working with partners, as the leader went on to say,

'Those members [need] to engage with partners at those local levels so they've got a relationship with the local police, they've got a relationship with local GPs, they've got a relationship with local schools. So they're building up a sense of community and identity around a whole set of agencies.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

It was clear that many backbench councillors were already undertaking these sorts of connector roles. Councillors talked about how their case work had become about mediating and influencing the wider system, for example when residents had an issue which was not directly related to the council:

'Ward councillors, yeah, quite a bit of that is about mediating... It's also about influence. So I would say in my ward work, half the things I do are nothing to do with the council... I'm on letterbox thefts, would you believe, I am currently doing battle with Royal Mail.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

The interviews were taking place during the move to **combined authorities** on a regional base and this was proving challenging for many councillors. Our findings echo other research highlighting concerns felt by elected members in regions affected by the combined authorities agenda.[16] Different local authorities in our research were at different stages on the journey to combined authorities, with some still at the pre-deal stage, and others having transitional arrangements in place.

Whilst there was enthusiasm for the idea of powers being devolved from central government, many of the councillors we spoke to, including those in leadership positions, were struggling with the complexity of the new arrangements and the lack of democratic mandate. Key issues were:

■ A loss of power from individual councils to the combined authority:

'What are we doing with local members then, what are we doing with double devolution? It's a dirty word these days isn't it?' (Leader, metropolitan borough council)

'And I suppose the other danger is this needs to suck powers out of London and Westminster and not suck powers up from the districts.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

■ Concerns about leadership, particularly on an elected mayor model

'I'd welcome devolution, I welcome our ability to actually manage our cities. The irony is we're all forced to have an elected mayor even though people didn't want one and so that's not devolution is it?'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

Another interviewee described elected mayors as *'The bride price of devolution'*.

Whilst there was scepticism about adding in an additional layer of leadership, many councillors also had concerns about the capacity of existing leaders to make the combined authority approach work:

'If I was an executive member having to make these decisions I would be very concerned about time restrictions and sheer volume of how it's happening really. I don't think there's enough scrutiny about devolution.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

'The level of pressure on the leader is absolutely massive because in the process of actually establishing devolution there's been no capacity set aside to actually help support it, so there's been this illusion that we have the existing capacity and everyone can do all their jobs and another one besides.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

Some councillors expressed concern that the combined authority agenda had been led by officers, with only marginal involvement of most members except the leaders:

'Really big, strategic issues, very complex, rattling along at a huge pace and basically it's expert officer professional led. There's no political input in to that, because we're not geared up process-wise how to deal with it. How do we get a greater level of political councillor input into that from the districts? Nobody's thought about that. A lot of it rests on the shoulders of the [council] leaders, that's hugely flawed, you know.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

One leader reflected:

'I have enough hassle and a bloody big enough job running [my council] without trying to run [the city region] as well.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

■ Tensions between different areas of the combined authority, in relation to identity and resources:

'We're taking a view, a spatial strategy on where we want to build things and we're taking a view across [the combined authority] whereas previously we took a view across my own borough. [Some issues] might make sense for the conurbation but it wouldn't make sense for my borough.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

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[16] see Cox and Hunter 2015

'The requirements of [my town]... are so far removed from the other areas within the... city region that it's nonsense.'
(Opposition, group leader, overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

'There's definitely some nervousness around, you know, how we still retain our identity I suppose and that's what's really important for members, you know, that we don't just all merge into one, sort of, blob.'
(Senior officer, city council)

- A lack of public awareness of combined authorities. One interviewee reflected on the lack of engagement of the public, but also of some councillors:

'And I've had members of the public saying to me "I don't even know what devolution is. What is it?" you know, it does feel very much like a bit of an entity on its own and yeah, I would say that not all of my colleagues have the passion and the kind of wanting to understand what it is and means and that worries me 'cause it's a huge thing.'
(Shadow cabinet member, scrutiny chair, metropolitan borough council)

Another interviewee felt that the mayoral approach made it more difficult for the public to understand, particularly in areas which already had an elected mayor, given the existing of longstanding ceremonial mayoral roles:

'So it's a very confusing terminology, the use of the word 'mayor'... the word 'mayor' covers at least four different roles.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

There was also concern from councillors that the combined authorities agenda was making channels of accountability even more complex, as citizens held them accountable at election time for decisions made at a city region level.[17]

One councillor reflected on the sense of being in flux:

'It's difficult at the moment to know what the finished article might look like. And I think we will as part of how the, you know, we're on a... devolution journey here.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Those areas that had not yet progressed as far with devolution were concerned that their deals were not as good as some of the earlier agreements. Some felt that they may never progress far down the devolution route because enthusiasm for the approach was already starting to wane.

Challenge 5: How can councillors be supported to understand and engage with the combined authorities agenda – both their own contribution to it, and citizens' engagement with it?

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[17] see Lempriere, 2015

6. Councillor Profiles

During the interviewees we discussed the motivations that people had for becoming a councillor, their attitudes to leadership and backbench roles, and their career profiles (recognising that being a councillor is not a career in a traditional sense). We also focused on issues of diversity among the councillor cohort.

Motivations

In line with research that has investigated why individuals choose to become councillors,[18] we found that a range of motivations explained interviewees' decisions to stand for local office. Many had a sense of having 'fallen into it', through engagement in a single issue campaign or joining a local party. Some had become involved through involvement in a trade union role. An example of how a very local issue can inspire someone to stand for election is given here:

'I kept having an issue with a particular piece of pavement, and it sounds so silly – there's a particular route through the park which I used to use an awful lot with my children, and there wasn't a drop kerb where there should have been, so my son was forever falling off his bicycle. And so then I started, you know, sort of asking,

'Well who's making this decision? Why isn't that corrected? You know, why is this signed off? Why hasn't the developer done what he should do?' And sort of got drawn into, if you like, how decisions are made within the council on very, very local issues, and suddenly sort of reached a point where I thought, "Well, do you know, actually, I can do that? And I think I can do that better than the people who are currently doing that job".'
(Opposition group leader, metropolitan borough council)

One interviewee felt that motivations for becoming a councillor were changing in the current financial climate:

'I think the operating environment that councils are in at the moment doesn't particularly encourage community sort of champion type people to come forward because there's a sense that... it's not a case of well I'll get elected and they'll try and do this for you, it's a case of we'll get elected and we'll try and stop this happening to you.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Others suggested that becoming a councillor was a more instrumental career choice for some, for example as part of the career path to other political roles. As one said,

'Some I think started off as councillors to become MPs so there's a whole career thing there.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

Generally councillors commented that there was a lack of support and guidance for them in terms of developing their political and democratic careers as an elected member. The ability to thrive in the role was seen as a combination of being an effective ward member and being a loyal participant in the party group (with the obvious exception of independents). Some interviewees felt that the ward role remained paramount, even whilst taking on a leadership role within the Cabinet:

'If I get re-elected in May, it won't be because I'm a good leader of the council. It'll be because – if people in [my] ward feel that, if they had a problem, they'd... want me in their corner rather than anybody else that's standing. I have no illusions about that. You don't get elected because of what you do in the town hall.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Others felt that their career as a councillor was more strongly shaped by the national political climate than by their effectiveness as a ward representative.

'We live in one of the most centralised governments in the world in some respects and what happens in Westminster has quite a profound impact about what happens here on the doorstep.'
(Focus group, city council)

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[18] Evans and Aston, 2011; Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014; Copus, 2016

Leadership roles

Several interviewees reflected on the move to executive-backbench structures and the ways in which this had divided up their membership, with different implications for roles and skills. Reported perspectives resonated with a number of findings set out in the APSE 'Two Tribes' report which examined how the introduction of formal cabinet and overview and scrutiny structures had impacted on member practices, particularly with respect to local leadership.[19]

In our research those involved in leadership roles reflected on the difficulties of also being an effective ward representative:

'One of the frustrations I have as being leader I actually can't do the nuts and bolts as much as I like, because I do like getting into the community. I do like helping people with individual problems. I do like you know sorting out bigger problems... So there's a, there is a balance... I can't do as much and I'm trying to get my ward colleagues to take on more of a dog muck and dustbins side of it. But there are benefits because I can open doors and I can get benefits for my ward by virtue of I'm leader.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Some areas had an elected mayor, which created a different kind of dynamic within the council leadership:

'The mayor gets elected by the whole electorate, not through a ward... so he doesn't have to worry about a leadership challenge now, he knows he's four years in that office so whereas a leader of a council has to worry about keeping the members sweet because at any time there could be a leadership challenge, an elected mayor... can be much more confident in terms of what they want to deliver in their term of office. And... an elected mayor [can] really kind of be a convener for the area so in a different way than I think a council leader does... he's got the mandate from the people of the city, which means that he can pull together, you know, your acute trust, your CCG, your housing and property to
kind of convene those, as I say, around more of a city plan than perhaps council leaders traditionally might struggle with.'
(Senior officer, city council)

Working in a mayoral model brought some tensions with the Cabinet members, as mayoral interests (and staff) could overlap with portfolio roles. One interviewee reflected,

'As a council I don't think we prepared ourselves enough for actually what working in a mayoral model was going to mean for us, I think we thought well it's just a leader by another name isn't it. And actually it really isn't.'
(Senior officer, city council)

Backbench roles

Some of the backbenchers and opposition members reported feeling distant from decision making, and 'kept in the dark' by officers, although there was little nostalgia for the old committee system. The extent to which backbenchers felt involved depended in part on whether or not they belonged to the ruling group, but also whether the culture of the organisation reflected a balance of power between the parties or a strong single dominant party. These perspectives reflect some of the reservations that were articulated about the introduction of the cabinet model,[20] and highlight the divide that others have identified between executive and non-executive councillors.[21]

For backbenchers, there was concern about how scrutiny could be improved:

'I think a scrutineer should be, really, the eyes and ears of the residents between elections... in holding the executive to account', said one chair of scrutiny
(Opposition scrutiny chair, district council)

There was a feeling that scrutiny committee meetings – particularly in the era of live screening – were performances that offered 'theatre' rather than effective scrutiny.

'I struggle to find scrutiny working anywhere properly', claimed one interviewee.

Career profiles

In relation to career profiles, a number of interviewees identified two generations of councillors: a retired group and a working-age group, which exhibited different skills and undertook the role of councillor in different ways. As one interviewee said,

'Age profile-wise is I guess actually it's starting to kind of emerge into more of two halves now. So traditionally for many years, it was an older age profile so, you know, 60+ wouldn't have been unusual really as the typical age range. That has changed over the last probably 5 years or so, so we are seeing a much younger cohort actually coming forward now, which I think is creating two cultures really with elected members.'
(Senor officer, city council)

Some areas had attempted to make their meetings more accessible to people of working age by having them in the evenings, although other areas (rural settings in particular) held meetings during the day. In relation to meeting times, one interviewee acknowledged:

'There is no ideal for that, I think. We do at least have a carers' allowance, which reflects that somebody may have, caring for children or caring for a dependent relative, additional costs in attending meetings.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Several interviewees reported how difficult it was to combine being a councillor with having a job, given the ad hoc demands that were made on time. Indeed, the number of councillors in paid work has remained intransigently stagnant for over a decade – though a substantial reduction has been seen in those in full time work – while the number of retired councillors has increased year on year.[22] The allowance was not felt to be generous enough for working age people to compensate them for reducing their formal working hours, and employers were felt to be less likely than in the past to give councillors time off to undertake their member duties.

[19] Griggs et. al. 2014
[20] Leach and Wilson, 2008
[21] Griggs et. al. 2014
[22] The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors 2014, p. 22

'I think it would be extremely hard for me as a cabinet member in the role that I do to work as well, to work full time or to work even part time and I think that was a commitment that the then leader, now mayor, expected of me but he said, when we took control, if you do this job you're not going to be able to work as well and I understood that.'
(Executive member, city council)

The lack of job security was felt to be a further barrier for people without other means of income:

'Every four years you can lose your job. With no, you know no redundancy, no pay off. One day I mean I'm in the position you know Cabinet Member of the County Council where my allowances I can live off them, you know but when I lost my seat... up until the day of the election I'm getting allowances that I can live on and they stopped that day.'
(Executive member, county council)

Being a councillor was also felt by some to be hard to combine with family life. The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors reported that just over 27% of councillors balance their role against caring responsibilities. Furthermore the Census also reported women and ethnic minority councillors are the two groups mostly likely to hold caring roles.[23] In our research one councillor commented:

'It's not easy sometimes you know so a lot of it, the meetings run in the evenings. If you've done a full day at work and I've got a young daughter and there are child care issues too. Maybe if it was looked upon and recognised more as a job and there were expectations and performance issues and you know, so it wasn't just something a retired person could do because it's just a little bit of a hobby, do you know what I mean? Sometimes that irritates me a little bit. It's a bit like you know, it does require a great deal of commitment to do this properly.'

(Shadow cabinet member, scrutiny chair, metropolitan borough council)

The attraction of becoming a councillor was also felt to be undermined by being seen as part of a broader political class, tarnished by the expenses scandal:

'I think we have a job to do, to sell elected members to the public, I think that's still the case and I think it's all wrapped up in the general perception that people have of politicians and all that stuff that happened over expenses scandals and people have a very keen perception of how – they have an idea that somehow you are milking the system and you receive a lot of money for doing that when, in actual fact, when you actually tell them how much you're getting and how many hours you put in, I think they change that view a little bit.'
(Executive member, city council)

Diversity
The diversity of councillors, in relation to gender, ethnicity, disability and sexuality, was limited (one interviewee described it as a *'Forth Bridge issue'* which required constant attention and would never be finished) (Executive member, metropolitan borough council).

A typical comment was,

'I think we struggle a little bit... around female representation but I think that's true of the council just in general and we do struggle with some of our sort of BME type diversity as well.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough)

The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors reported very little change in terms of gender profile, ethnic origin and disability status of councillors between 2001 and 2013.[24] Notwithstanding this, interviewees felt that there had been more progress in relation to

women's representation than they did on other forms of diversity:

'All women shortlists have actually done an awful lot to bring gender balance up and I think that's probably been a good thing and it's quite sad really in some ways that you have to do that but sometimes you have to do things to make them equal because you don't know what you don't know do you really.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

'Typically elected members are white, very typically, and I think most areas are struggling to engage with some of those new communities and actually, you know, help them to understand what it is to be a councillor or why you would want to spend time to do it. I suppose the question is do you feel able though to represent those communities in your role?'
(Focus group, city council)

Not all councillors accepted that there was a need to diversify the profiles of elected members, since representation did not require membership of a particular demographic community. Many councillors felt strongly that connection to place and commitment to their communities was more important:

'That's a kind of argument that's been, you know, that's rolled through hasn't it, you know, are councillors too male, too middle aged, etc. etc. etc. But I find that 99.9 per cent of councillors belong to where they represent and it's that sense of place and belonging and the passion that they feel for shaping their communities that, to me, overrides the issue.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

In the interviewees we found little awareness of other forms of diversity, eg, in relation to disability or sexual orientation.

Challenge 6: How can local government create a culture/narrative which encourages people from a diverse range of backgrounds to consider standing for election?

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[23] Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014: 29
[24] Kettlewell and Phillips, 2014: 10

7. Developing councillors' skills
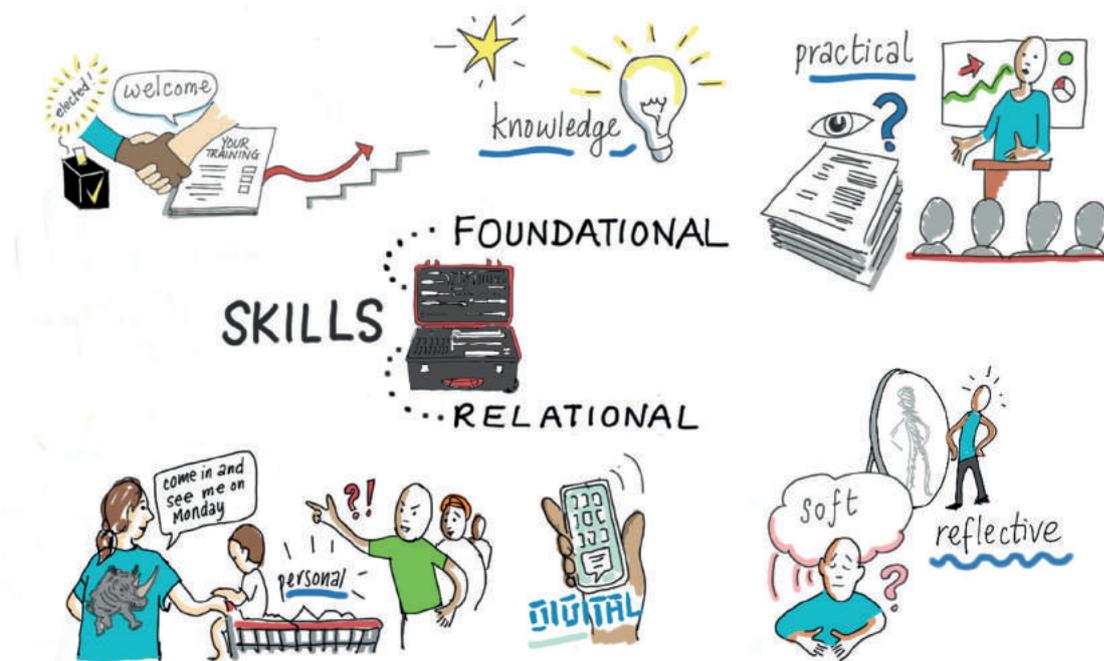
The roles set out in this report – steward, advocate, orchestrator, sensemaker, buffer, catalyst and entrepreneur – require a skill set which is not necessarily well covered by existing training and development opportunities. There was a clear recognition among interviewees that the appropriate skill set for councillors was shifting and that they needed support to work in new ways. From the interviews we identified five types of skills that were required: practical; knowledge-based; connective; digital and reflective.

Not all of these are new: however, in the context of changing organisations, they did need to be deployed in different ways. Below we have grouped the skills into two sets: foundational skills (practical and knowledge based) which are those covered by most existing training and development, and relational skills (connective, digital and reflective skills) which are essential to being effective as 21st Century Councillors.

Skill set 1: Foundational skills
Practical and knowledge-based skills were the most well established, and arguably constitute foundational skills within local government. In relation to **knowledge-based skills**, there was general acceptance of the importance of understanding specific policy and portfolio areas and committee roles, in particular around safeguarding, planning and licensing. Some councils had introduced mandatory training before councillors could take on committee roles (such as planning); others offered it as optional, and noted that attendance was often poor.

New forms of knowledge-based development related to understanding combined authorities and the devolution agenda, and overseeing more complex contractual relationships with partners and service providers.

During the interviews there were a number of **practical skills** that councillors said they would appreciate more training on. For some it was training to help them undertake their councillor role, eg, speed-reading, chairing a meeting, public speaking, media training. These are not new skills, but some interviewees felt that getting these basics right was essential before moving onto more complex aspects of the role. For others there was articulation of new practical skills linked to the vast growth in available evidence, via online channels, and the complexity of data analysis and synthesis of evidence:

'I think that's a real skill in itself is this skill of synthesis so we can take all that information, synthesise it and make it actually accessible, you know, to the general public, now that's a tremendous skill that we need.'
(Focus group, city council)

Some interviewees were scathing about the extent to which councillor colleagues had appropriate analytical skills. One leader said:

'So how do we get more people with the ability to... think about these complex issues in local government?... The kind of people you need to do that are successful businessmen or people with professional managerial jobs, people who've got a good level of education, who've been successful in different kind of things. They're the people who've got the least time and the least interest in actually serving their local council. And that's what's missing.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Others were less convinced of the need to bring more formal, professional skills into local government:

'If you start saying you can't be an elected member unless you've got this skill or that skill then you're taking elections out of the hands of ordinary people. Ordinary people want help so it's understanding, empathy and someone with the time to help them. That's why we have the officers who have the skills to be helpful. Officers have the financial skills to go through the budgets.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, city council)

'You don't want to make it too professional so that it's not accessible for people. We come back into that argument then about having working class people representing communities you know, you've got to have that balance haven't you?'
(Shadow cabinet member, scrutiny chair, metropolitan borough council)

In recognition that these kinds of skills are unevenly distributed among councillors, much existing training and development relates to supporting members to acquire and deepen these foundational skills. However, we found two ways in which this focus was problematic: first, many members did not take up training opportunities; and, second, many of the roles we have identified here cannot be done effectively without a second category of skills, which here we call relational skills – encompassing communicative, digital and reflective capabilities (discussed overleaf).

Councillor attitudes to existing training and development

It was clear that councillors did not always engage well with existing training and development opportunities in relation to these foundational skills. Most recognised that this has been a longstanding issue, which chimes with research carried out in 2007 by the Councillors Commission.[25] Few of the councillors we spoke to felt that their organisations invested much in skills training and member development. Where there had previously been support for development within councils often that had been cut as part of broader cost savings:

'So we used to have an annual personal development plan – that's gone.'
(Shadow cabinet member, scrutiny chair, metropolitan borough council)

Indeed, the amount of training available to councillors had reduced since 2008.[26] Where member training was offered within councils it tended to focus on key responsibilities and subject knowledge such as safeguarding and planning, and policy briefings on particular issues were also offered. The importance of 'getting in early' to support newly elected councillors was highlighted by many interviewees. As one said:

'All my best training came early when I was newly elected, keen and enthusiastic. It was in the first few weeks before the meetings ramp up. If you support people early, it helps avoid the high turnover of councillors.'
(Focus group, unitary council)

Some had an induction programme for new members, although many didn't:

'You don't have an induction to it, you more or less, you hit the ground running'.
(Shadow cabinet member, scrutiny chair, metropolitan borough council)

A few areas had buddying and mentoring arrangements for members, or were in the process of introducing such approaches:

'I think mentoring is the key because courses are wonderful and then they're gone today, but I think mentoring is long term and long-lasting.'
(Focus group, city council)

'What I hope to do is, if I'm still a cabinet member, is after about three months of people actually being in the role of councillor I want to take some sort of survey with them to find out what they want, how we can actually help them and we'll do that every year... Like you're supposed to do with your employees, well you should do it with your councillors too.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

It was also clear that not all councillors wanted to take up opportunities for development, where they existed. Reflecting on low turnout at training and development activities in their authority, one interviewee cautioned:

'There's an assumption that we're making here and that is everyone wants to be performance appraised and everyone wants to get on and everyone wants to be trained and developed... And they don't.'
(Focus group, city council)

Another interviewee supported the idea of more member development but challenged the usefulness of much training that was on offer:

'The question I always ask is you go along to what I've described as a members training session and I can walk out of the room with more knowledge, the question is does it help me do my job better, quicker or whatever?... Too much training, in my experience... is about briefing and information giving, it's not about skills and things to make your job easier.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member metropolitan borough council)

Where training did go on, it was often only offered within the party group. Councillors suggested that colleagues did not want to look ignorant in front of members from other parties:

'There is some reluctance by some members to do anything that is labelled "training" outside of their own group. They don't seem to like to do that in front of other people, or where it might be a bit of a debate. They want to know what they think as a group before they would have that discussion in front of me, if it's not my [group]... So basically, the officers went round and did all three groups in one evening.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

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25 Councillors Commission 2007, p. 102
26 The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors 2014 p. 9

A minority of councils had offered councillors the opportunity to take up formal qualifications, such as leadership courses. Other research has highlighted that offering councillors formal higher education type of training embeds a positive attitude to training and development more generally.[27] Where this had been on offer to our respondents, they saw it as helpful in framing the work that they did in terms of transferable skills that they could use in future careers. As one said:

'Here some members have been supported to get a professional qualification. It gives you a formal qualification which validates the life experience you get as a councillor. It's helpful if you are going back into the world of work.'
(Focus group, unitary council)

Some had been on residential training offered by the LGA and found those very useful, both in terms of the substantive content of the sessions, but also in terms of building up national peer networks that they continued to draw on informally after the event. Regional events were also felt to be useful by those who had engaged in them, again both for the content and for the peer learning and networking that went on.

Skill set 2: Relational skills

Without underestimating the importance of practical and knowledge-based skills to being an effective councillor, the new challenges we identified in the research pointed to an increased emphasis on relational skills, which we have here separated into three categories.

Connective skills

Drawing on the need to bring together resources in a more creative way across a range of agencies, it was felt that councillors need support to develop the softer skills such as influencing, negotiating, listening, connecting and story-telling:

'[We went on] a little training course on changed conversations... about the difficult conversations you need to have with people... it's really important how you have those conversations.'
(Focus group, NWE executive board)

To be an effective steward of place, councillors need to be able to negotiate with organisations that seem more powerful or have more resources than local government:

'If we go into this all embracing locality working where we seem to be wanting to talk to the health service and the police and the ambulance service, because I've had problems with them in the past, and you want to talk to these other people, you're not talking there from a position of power, you're not talking, you've got no power at all with police or the health service, but if you want them to do something you have to try and negotiate and get them to do something and you have no power at all to negotiate from a position of weakness.'
(Focus group, metropolitan borough council)

As well as being about so-called 'soft' skills, this was also recognised to be about passion, raising questions about how far this can necessarily be taught as part of a development programme:

'Do you have the passion and the drive to actually say you know "this is something I want to keep, I realise I can't have the money from the Council so do you know what I'm going to go out there, I'm going to find it somewhere else"... whether those skill sets can be trained into people I'm not sure.'
(Executive member, county council)

Digital skills

All of the interviewees recognised that it was essential for councillors to have skills which enabled them to engage with new digital technologies. Whilst this could have been classed as a knowledge-based skill – linked to IT or media training – the essential skill requirement we identified related to the need to use new digital technologies as communicative resources. Increasingly councillors will undertake their representative role through digital media, and there are clear opportunities to use online capabilities to engage people in new types of conversation about the future of their neighbourhood or different ways to use community resources.

In relation to social media, and the nervousness of many interviewees, discussed earlier in the report, some councils were trying to provide guidelines for councillors:

'We did sort of try and produce a sort of little bit of a guidance for members about, you know, when they were speaking personally or if they were speaking on behalf of the council and what we could help them if we got into trouble with and what we couldn't.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

For others, these connective skills needed to be undertaken in a balanced way within the councillor cohort. As one said:

'We've got some members that have no idea whatsoever what a Tweet is or, you know, Facebook and all the rest of it. And then we've got those who are never off it... We seem to have the two extremes without any people sort of in the middle who just get the balance right. It'd be good to actually pitch it about trying to get that balance. To, you know... sensible use of it and in a way that is attractive to your – you know, to the followers you're trying to attract but without, you know, just prolifically sort of Twittering every move you make.'
(Executive member, metropolitan borough council)

[27] Hale, 2013

Reflective skills

A final skill set related to the reflective capacities councillors required to cope with the demands of their position, and the difficulties of setting boundaries in a 24–7 role. The emotional toll of being a councillor, on self and on families was recognised to be high. Emotional labour – in other words 'one's capacity to manage personal emotions, sense others' emotions, and to respond appropriately, based on one's job'[28] – was a key aspect of what the role entailed. Much of the role was seen as being engaging in different forms of conflict resolution:

'Councillors need training in conflict management, caring, member officer relationships. The councillor role is always dealing with conflicts to some way or another.'
(Overview and scrutiny member, city council)

'It would be very easy to burn out if you're totally committed to doing this. I've found at times I think goodness me, I can barely breathe and manage.'
(Shadow cabinet member, scrutiny chair, metropolitan borough council)

Most interviewees talked of the relentlessness of a job that did not offer any ready-made boundaries, as the examples in the Box below highlight, drawn from a range of interview respondents:

Interviewees also noted the need for resilience in relation to the exposure and sometimes abuse that came with the role. One described needing the thick skin of a rhinoceros to cope with the constant demands from residents. Another explained the efforts he takes to keep his public and private life separate in an era of social media in which lines become blurred.

'I don't Tweet and telling you what I'm having for my breakfast. Particularly with Twitter I'll tend to use it to give people information or whatever because I think that's what they want, they don't want –, and I have to say I think there's some bits that, you know, are private so yeah OK go to a council function, take an example yesterday, went to something, opening of a cafe in a park, something on after, they tweeted something from it, I did, that's quite legitimate. Going for a walk in the park with my kids this weekend or doing something, that's mine, that's private and I think it's quite important to separate both and I've had some bad experiences because I volunteered to do this job, my partner and the rest of my family didn't, they are supportive, wouldn't do it if they weren't, but they didn't volunteer to do it, so they don't deserve to have that attention.'
(Opposition overview and scrutiny member, metropolitan borough council)

This sense of an emotional toll of the work and the need to develop personal resilience was mentioned by a large number of our interviewees yet there did not appear to be support and development for councillors to help address these issues. The emergence of buddying and mentoring schemes in some councils may help councillors to develop the skills to deal with the emotional aspects of the job, but our sense is that current training and development offers focus on the knowledge based and practical skills, and insufficient attention is being paid to the support that councillors need to develop the connective skills of a 21st Century Councillor.

'You know I can get called at any time of the day or night, it's not like you can switch off.'

'You've got to remember that you are elected by the public in your area and you will be on call seven days a week, twenty four hours a day sometimes or could be. I mean I think my record is midnight for a phone call.'

'Time management is difficult. Your involvement in things is difficult, knowing where to stop. I think getting some balance in your life is extremely difficult.'

'It's an erratic lifestyle actually as well... whereas my wife works 9 till 5 and she's eternally frustrated with never knowing whether I'm going to be here or not.'

'I suppose it's about how you cope with all that, it isn't 24/7, you are allowed to switch off, put it away, you know, so it doesn't all consume you and I think anything you can do to give councillors or potential councillors the tools to do that sort of thing or not to feel guilty about it I think would be helpful.'

Challenge 7: What different approaches to development and support can be created to enable councillors to develop the skills of a 21st century councillor?

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28 Mastracci, SH, Newman, MA, Guy, ME. (2010)

Conclusion and Next Steps

We have shared here findings from the interviews we conducted with councillors, highlighting how roles, skills and relationships are shifting in response to a range of contextual challenges. Not all of the themes that we have identified are new but the turbulence of austerity, combined authorities, technological changes and shifts in citizen expectations are intensifying the pressures on councillors and requiring new kinds of responses. As well as taking stock of where councillors are now, the research highlights emerging roles and skills which can be supported and developed.

We hope that local authorities and other organisations that support elected members will use the themes of this research to contribute to the development of councillors, and to continue with efforts to recruit councillors who reflect and represent their communities effectively.

There is a challenge for elected members too to think about how best they want to be supported so that they can actively engage in shaping the future rather than letting austerity wash over them. One interviewee said:

'We can be the master of our destiny and it's up to us whether we have these things done to us or whether we outwardly go and advocate for what our priorities are and what we want to do and how we want to deliver it and so on.'
(Leader, metropolitan borough council)

Together with the 21st Century Public Servant research, we have aimed to produce findings that stimulate conversations within organisations, across partner bodies, and in national stakeholder institutions about how to recruit, train and support the staff and elected representatives that will allow communities and public services to thrive.

Our research and images are produced on an open source basis, and we encourage people to use them as the basis for those local and national conversations. We ask that you credit us, and let us know what you are doing, so we can learn more about how the research is linking into policy and practice. You can also join in the broader conversation on Twitter **(#21cPS)** or via our blog **http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/blog/**

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