

# Community Engagement and Empowerment: A Guide for Councillors



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# Foreword

I was delighted to be asked to write a foreword to this guide, as I have been actively involved in the Network of Empowering Authorities (NEA), looking at the role of members in empowering communities. It is particularly gratifying that it has been such a valuable opportunity to exchange ideas with other Councils, to see the challenges they have faced, and how they have overcome those difficulties.

Community engagement has always been difficult to define - what is it, and what is the 'right' way to do it? Why are local public services being expected to demonstrate how they are doing this, when it is something that councillors do anyway? It's our day job!

When the Network was conceived, there were a number of initiatives throughout the country that sought to engage with residents: neighbourhood panels, patient panels, area forums and other mechanisms established by councils and their partners. While some of these have been very successful, others have faced challenges and some have fallen by the wayside. But there is an enthusiastic desire among all who deliver services to engage with their customers. There is undoubtedly a premium in terms of project ownership and a better shared understanding between service deliverers and residents where robust engagement mechanisms exist.

I hope you will find this guide as useful as I have in pointing the way for councillors to be an integral ingredient in community engagement.



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# 1 Community empowerment – what it means for councillors

Community empowerment is about having the conditions in place that allow local people to make a difference to improve their localities, and that encourage them to believe that it is both possible and worth it.

There are strong democratic reasons for involving local people as much as possible in the decisions that shape their communities. Their input ensures services are better suited to local needs. For councils, community empowerment is important as it demonstrates the result of effective community engagement between service providers and the public. For ward councillors, community empowerment is important as it demonstrates that there is an effective democratic process and that people feel that they can influence local decision-making.

Councillors from all political parties – whether in control or in opposition, on the executive or on the backbenches – are working with people on the important decisions that matter to them. Using this guide will help you to address key questions about how working with individuals, community groups and local organisations can support and enhance your democratically elected role and help you to achieve real results in your patch.

Throughout this guide you'll find quotes from councillors and examples from authorities who are developing their work to help communities to take control and be involved in local decisions.

Community empowerment means different things to different councillors. This section illustrates what it may mean for you. It focuses on knowing who the community groups in your ward are, linking participation to your representative role, balancing community views and managing your workload.

## Knowing your community

As a councillor your local knowledge and understanding means that you often know who to contact and how to get things done. If you are a long-standing councillor you will have had the chance to cultivate your network of contacts over many years. You will know how useful your contacts are in helping you to be well-informed, and how they can help you to influence others in order to get results. If you are a newly-elected councillor, you will have a foundation of knowledge and contacts from your life outside of the council. Once elected, you will quickly begin building up your contacts and relationships with the community, and your knowledge of the organisations, partners and services that can make a difference to the quality of life in your area.

Whether you are a long-standing councillor or a newly-elected one, it will be essential to the success of your term of office that you are able to build strong relationships with community groups, individuals, local organisations, and front-line staff from the council and partner agencies, working with them and your council to get things done.

Many local councillors live or work in their wards, know their wards extremely well and are well-known within them. For newly elected members, and those who do not have such strong links within their area, the council collects a wealth of information of incalculable worth to councillors.

Ward data giving community area profiles – which include information such as population, crime, and ethnicity data – can be illuminating, as can ward-based service data. Many councils are providing good information and knowledge to councillors and many are developing increasingly sophisticated ward profiles.

Some authorities are working to improve the availability of this data to their members, including through intranet and web-based tools, allowing the overlaying of various aspects of the council's information to enable local councillors to build up a well-informed picture of their ward.

Don't assume you know your ward perfectly. It is possible to miss out sections of the community who may be new, or with whom you have little contact. Try to see where the gaps in your own knowledge of your ward are and find ways to develop a new and sustained dialogue with people who come from these groups or areas. Officers should be able to help you with a list of organisations and voluntary groups working in your patch too. Providing evidence-based information can be a tool to allow you to balance what you are hearing first hand from the community against the data the council has collected.

## Staffordshire – Local View

Staffordshire County Council has used geographical information systems to map data for more than a decade. Staffordshire co-ordinates its data, creating a comprehensive computer based information system which maps public service information and makes it available to both officers and councillors, so that they can be well informed in order to improve services and create efficiencies. The system, called Local View, can also make it easier for members of the public, councillors and partner organisations to access all sorts of up-to-date useful information that the council collects.

If your council does not provide you with ward profiles, it is possible to gather research from national sources, such as the Office of National Statistics, the places database, the housing and neighbourhoods monitor, neighbourhood profiles from the police and health services, and other organisations in your area.

### Some sources of further information

Places database  
[www.places.communities.gov.uk](http://www.places.communities.gov.uk)

Office of National Statistics  
[www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk)

Housing and neighbourhood monitor  
[www.hnm.org.uk](http://www.hnm.org.uk)

Officers too benefit from the 'reality check' that the community and you can bring to the analysis of the data. Exchanging and assessing both subjective and objective information can be extremely powerful and illuminating for the council, allowing it to understand and personalise the realities of service provision for key groups.

Drawing on all these sources of information is a key political skill and you will often be able to see and draw out what is really important to the local community. Individual members can mobilise officers and partners to support community aspirations, and to help build a community vision, sometimes where there is none.

### Linking your council and the community

Your council will have a keen interest in making sure that community groups, individuals and local organisations all feel satisfied with the quality of services delivered and with decisions that the council is taking on behalf of local people for the local area.

Community groups often know what needs to be done to make things better in their own area. They may have the confidence and ambition to achieve things for themselves in their local communities. Often community groups simply want better opportunities to be heard by public sector bodies when the latter are planning and delivering services, and as a local councillor you can ensure that the council has both the structures and processes in place to make sure this can happen.

*"We know what needs to be done and the council is listening"*

It is clear that councils that develop a meaningful dialogue with their citizens, in good times and difficult ones, find community engagement and empowerment saves them time and money, and creates better, happier communities. Equally, research shows that where community groups, individuals and local organisations don't feel empowered they are less self-reliant and the local area is less resilient. Close ties between the community and the local authority are both empowering and mutually beneficial.

*"It's about local people working together, making a difference, getting policies that reflect their needs"*

It is in the council's interest that local people are also able to do things for themselves in their local communities with or without the council's input. Councils are placing a greater focus on empowerment because it affords an opportunity to enhance personal responsibility. Your council will therefore want to be able to support you and all councillors to work well locally with your communities and local groups. Your council will want to ensure the locality is the best prepared it can be to withstand the pressures of the modern world.

Given the pressure on public finances, local government will in the future simply not be able to deliver the level of services people have grown accustomed to, and citizens and community groups will have to do more to fill any gaps.

Your role in working with your community and your council is at the centre of this dynamic relationship. How you develop what you do as a councillor to support your community is vital to the success of a strong democratic relationship and in helping local people have the best possible quality of life. For those councillors who have already adopted a style that uses the power of the community, empowerment is simply good politics. All councillors are ward councillors and most elected members say that their role in supporting their community is the one that they regard as their most important and most rewarding. It is also the role most valued by residents in your ward – they want their councillor to get things done in their neighbourhood.

*"The best thing about being a councillor is making a difference, and seeing something that you have campaigned for, that's now there in place"*

Your style and approach to how you work with individuals and groups in your patch will be up to you, and will depend on how much time you can give and your own personal and political style. Your style of working will vary depending on what you are doing, from a representative approach to a participative one, and nearly all members adopt a combination of a representative style and a participative style when working in their wards. You will best be able to judge how to use these styles when you are working. When working in their wards, councillors are increasingly adopting a more participative approach to working with individuals, communities and local organisations to encourage public participation in local matters.

## Representative style

Councillors know their wards back to front; having regular contact with constituents, possibly holding regular surgeries, living or working in the area and taking part in ward committees. A representative style recognises the legitimacy of a councillor's popular vote and councillors represent constituents, making decisions on their behalf.

## Participative style

Councillors look to the community for views on what the key issues are for them and what solutions might be proposed; working with groups to work through problems, reflecting on them, developing judgements and taking a lead based on feedback they give and receive on a regular basis. A participative style actively uses a variety of techniques to engage with and to support the community to be more active and empowered.

## Balancing community views

All your political skills are needed to balance the views of all those in the community. When you are working alongside the community you will have to listen to the groups who are well-organised and can easily be heard and to weigh this alongside the evidence and the issues for those who feel disempowered and who may not come forward.

Community representatives and elected councillors both have legitimate but different roles in the community. These roles can complement each other, although this relationship can sometimes be contested and destructive. Bear in mind that many of the techniques that you or the council may use to test out local opinion may be vulnerable to domination by certain groups and organised interests, and that there can often be tensions between local groups. Disempowered groups may lack the wherewithal to access

councillors directly. You will need a good understanding of the diversity of your ward and between you and the council there should be a range of evidence and activities that can help you both share a complete picture.

Community empowerment should not lead to disproportionate minorities grabbing power, receiving the majority of the funding or perceiving themselves as representing the views of the majority. As a councillor, you will want the council to be able to involve local people in a variety of ways that enable a wide range of people to participate. This should allow you to balance the wider interests against the extreme lobby group or vociferous person. The council should ensure that its involvement structures and processes allow a balanced debate to take place in the community, which should allow you to judge the strength and range of views.

*“When people begin to understand each other and the different opportunities and limitations they each face, community needs are more likely to be successfully met”*

## Balancing your workload

Being a councillor can take up a significant amount of time and working with your constituents is both highly demanding and rewarding. Getting empowerment right takes plenty of preparation. Being clear about your role and ensuring that all those you are working with understand what you are able to do will help you to manage your workload.

*“One problem is that people don't know what councillors are, or that councillors are there to work for the people. People don't have a good enough understanding of local government and how it works.”*

Many councils and councillors are looking at how to improve both the information

they provide and the ways in which they get information to the public. Remember that new groups, or groups that feel disempowered, are less likely to know how to contact you and what you do.

You may also have additional roles, for example, as the chair of an area committee, or by becoming a lead member for community issues on the executive. If this is the case, you will have additional responsibilities in leading the council's work in engaging local people in decision-making.

Wiltshire Council – portfolio holder for communities  
Wiltshire Council has developed a special responsibility role for community empowerment – the portfolio holder for communities. The position has a dual role: to give support to cabinet, and to monitor and have an overview of the work of the local area boards. The portfolio holder chairs regular meetings of the area board chairs to assist and support them and to act as a conduit between the executive, officers and the chairs. This ensures that the work of the local area boards develops alongside the objectives of the authority and that the portfolio holder can give feedback and take up issues with chairs and officers to co-ordinate area-working.

Maximising your time and strengths is essential and you may want to work out locally how to manage this and if necessary how to fill any gaps with your colleagues either at ward or area level, or within your group. In multi-member wards, where colleagues are amenable, councillors may share out their activities. Across larger areas, councillors may work in informal 'teams' with one or more wards working together. Being part of a team can help by recognising that each of you has other roles to perform and that you each bring to your ward and community different strengths and skills.

Working together is usually made easier when all members belong to the same political party, and there are strong



working relationships between colleagues. The effect of party politics can affect community working dynamics locally and where there are significant political tensions it may not be possible to work out an arrangement to share activities and information. The effect of party politics can be an obstacle. Your political skill in establishing co-operation and mutual support with colleagues in other political parties is essential in meeting collective expectations of success. In the extreme, where political tensions prevent you from getting things done and steps cannot be taken to mitigate the effect of these tensions, then negative attitudes and mistrust are likely to diminish the public's desire to participate or to feel empowered.

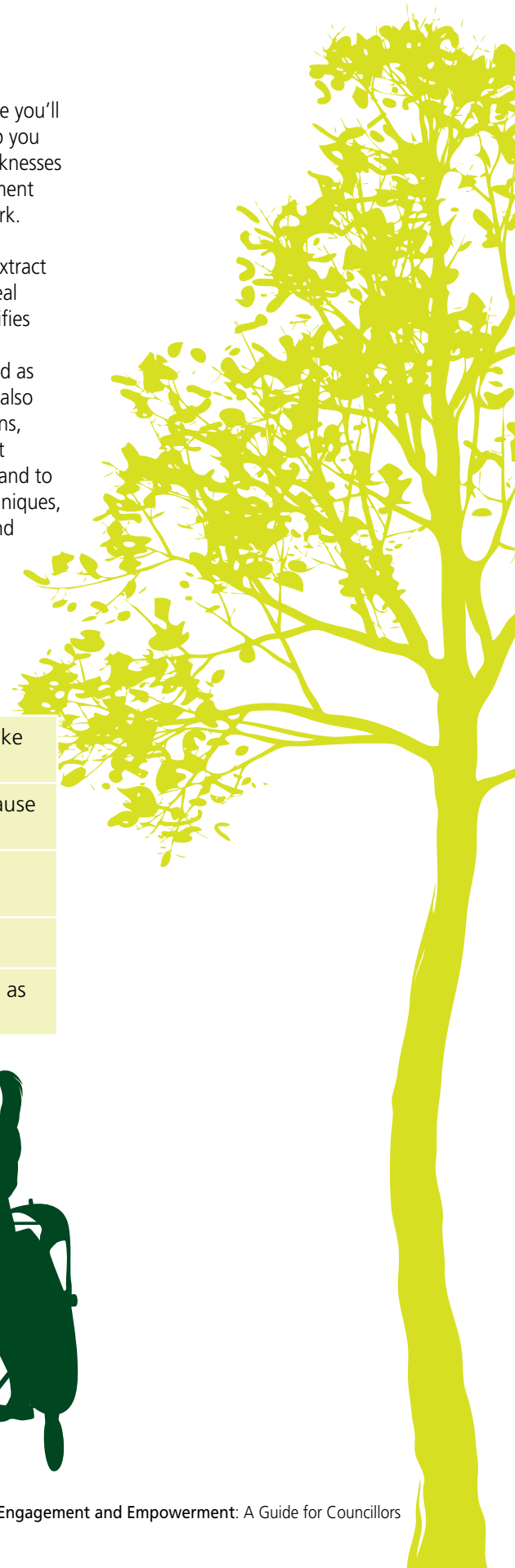
In the resources section of this guide you'll find a set of questions that will help you to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your own community empowerment activities using the CLEAR framework.

Also in the resources section is an extract from the NEA Framework for an ideal empowering authority, which identifies the key factors in members' roles in community empowerment. Intended as a tool for the council as a whole, it also offers a series of diagnostic questions, which can help the council to adopt community empowerment policies and to use community empowerment techniques, which place councillors in a clear and central role.

## Questions to ask

According to new research<sup>1</sup>, people participate:

<b>C</b>	when they <i>can</i> : when they have the resources necessary to make their argument
<b>L</b>	when they feel part of something: they <i>like</i> to participate because it is central to their sense of identity
<b>E</b>	when they are <i>enabled</i> to do so by an infrastructure of civic networks and organisations
<b>A</b>	when they are directly <i>asked</i> for their opinion
<b>R</b>	when they experience the system they are seeking to influence as <i>responsive</i> .



<sup>1</sup> CLEAR: Understanding Citizen Participation in Local Government and How to Make it Work Better, Vivien Lowndes and Lawrence Pratchett 2009

# 2 Some activities that help councillors work with their communities

This section looks at how councils are working with councillors to support communities to be involved and empowered in local decisions. It highlights how some councils have adopted policies and use empowerment techniques which place councillors in a clear and central role.

## Area-working

In your locality, the council will have many activities that involve the community at any one time. If your council has set up some form of area or neighbourhood based working, its activities will be a key forum with which to be involved. There may also be other organisations in your patch who are actively working in area-working in the community. For example you will want to stay in close contact with parish and town councils, the police, housing providers and housing tenant associations, where relevant.

## Southwark – community councils

Southwark's eight community councils encourage involvement from local people in council decision-making and provide project-funding to improve their area. At their meetings, community councils covering two or three wards (approximately 30,000 population) consider anything from how to improve street cleaning or bid for new equipment for a play area, to local planning applications and updates on crime issues. Decisions are made by councillors on a range of issues such as environmental improvements, community safety, traffic planning, and appointment of school governors. They also decide how to allocate community fund grants of up to £1,000 each year per group, from the two community fund rounds of £15,000 each. Members decide how best to involve the community in their decision-making.

## South Somerset – neighbourhood management

South Somerset District Council has a neighbourhood management system that gives councillors support with a dedicated area development officer and admin teams in each of the four area committees that have been set up. Each has devolved authority for grants and support for local projects (such as village halls, small community grants, local business regeneration, play schemes, community development and others).

## Newcastle City Council – ward committees and neighbourhood charters

Newcastle City Council has 26 ward committees across the borough, which have budgets for community grants and ward support projects. Councillors have a key role in these committees and are overseeing the development of neighbourhood charters which will be rolled out across the city by mid-2010. These 145 neighbourhood charters will contain clear locally-determined priorities, with councillors providing leadership to oversee the charter process and delivery.

## Community development

In addition to the council's area-working activities, you will want to focus on opportunities to meet with community groups with whom you can work and from whom you can be best informed about the most significant issues for the local area. Many of these groups and organisations may be easy to contact and may be well-established.

Some groups in the community will not have formalised meetings and they may need advice and support about how to organise themselves so that they can be heard by public sector bodies when the latter are planning and delivering services, or so that they can access funding opportunities. Their knowledge of the

council and partners and of your role as a councillor could be limited and you may want to ensure that these groups have greater involvement with public bodies. Your council may provide information, community development activities, funds and support that they could access. If it does not, you may want to consider working with community groups directly.

## North Tyneside

A ward councillor has used the skills she developed through paid employment to help her create an empowering relationship with people in her ward.

Prior to retirement she was headteacher of a school in a deprived area of a neighbouring council. She worked with the community to change the outcomes for local children and families. It also resulted in her creating a community association that she meets regularly.

Within her ward, she now conducts street visits with fellow ward councillors, where they are able to meet face-to-face with people on their terms. She also works with local community groups to develop and draw out what is important to the area. Her experience in knowing what the council can achieve, understanding who to involve and managing the expectations of residents helps local people to address problems and propose viable solutions.

In every area there are examples of hard-working members who work alongside their community, especially when there is a strong public demand for local councillors to help the community work on a particular issue. Take for example the role ward councillors played in Hertford when local people did not want to see their local post office closed; or similarly the role that local councillors played to save a local childcare nursery from closure in Southwark.

Councillors listened to what local people wanted, lobbied and took action, motivated and supported the community, and helped them with the solutions that they wanted to see. Councillors have helped to save their local post office, and to adopt the nursery as a community-run enterprise, protecting the jobs that could have been lost.

## Devolving budgets

There are a number of ways that councils can organise budgets and if some are devolved to area level they offer a significant opportunity to involve and empower your local community. Allocating resources and involving your local constituents in these decisions can be an exciting, energising experience. The opportunity to spend money locally provides a real interface with the community and helps you understand your communities' needs and priorities. People often want to get involved in deciding how to spend small pots of money locally as they feel that their involvement will make a difference. This could be through voting on grant applications at public meetings, to large-scale participatory budgeting techniques. In Mansfield, over 240 people turned up to discuss how to spend a pot of £60,000 in their local areas. Tower Hamlets enabled residents to allocate £2.4million of funding on mainstream 'top up' services in their local areas. Even small amounts of money can get more people than usual involved, and stay involved, and this is in stark contrast to the difficulties councillors face in getting people interested in more traditional and substantial budget setting decisions.

Locality budgets may be arranged so that you have total discretion (within certain controls which dictate how the money can be spent) over how the money is used in your ward. This is done in a one-stage process where you and/or your local committee has the authority and resources to act immediately on a decision.

On the other hand you may find your local area committee must get involved in a two-stage process where the local committee does not have the initial authority and resources to directly enact a decision. As a result, you will need to use a level of influence on others in the council (or on external bodies) to get the decisions you need.

## Birmingham City Council

Each of Birmingham's ten constituencies has a constituency committee that has a delegated budget of between £10 million and £15 million for delivering services. All wards have a ward committee, chaired by a councillor, with a community chest of £100,000 to spend on local initiatives, or to delegate to any of the 70 or so neighbourhood forums.

## Somerset County Council

Each of Somerset County Council's councillors are entitled to submit a maximum of five funding applications in order to improve the delivery of Somerset's local area agreement (LAA) outcomes and local priorities. Each of the five can be for a minimum of £2,000 and a maximum of £15,000. This flexible resource encourages councillors to work with local communities and partners to address local issues and priorities.

## London Borough of Lewisham

Each ward in Lewisham has its own local assembly with a £10,000 a year locality fund and a £50,000 mayor's fund to distribute. Each assembly appoints a co-ordinating group, which is made up of local residents from all those who are interested in actively contributing to the work of the local assembly, and chaired by elected Members. Councillors chair the meetings of the local assembly and are supported by local officers who co-ordinate the work of the assembly. Assemblies agree their own priorities and aim to influence mainstream delivery of public authorities' service delivery.

## Wiltshire Council

Wiltshire's area boards are able to award funds to groups for projects, as long as they meet the criteria, for example in their local public service award plan. Decisions are taken in public by the area board.

## Nottingham City Council

In Nottingham, each ward member was allocated £10,000 to support their role as 'champion of place'. In addition to this universal allocation, further funds are allocated to ward members calculated on results from the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2007 and population of wards. This budget allows the councillors to allocate funds that support ward initiatives and projects that are often put forward by the community. These have included family fun days, community BBQs, play equipment, park benches etc. The requests can be from individuals or groups. There are no set criteria for what can or cannot be funded. It is down to the members to make the final decision, up to a maximum allocation of £5,000.

Your council may use alternative ways to let the community have more of a say, such as Newcastle's 'U-decide' initiative, or your council may allow local people to influence and shape mainstream services locally.

## Working with organisational partners – area-working

The council has a leading role to play in working with other public service providers and partners in the local area. Through the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), partners such as the health service agencies, the police, housing providers and the community work together with the council for the benefit of the area.

The local issues that crop up in your area will have an impact on the work of all the partners on the LSP. Many of the solutions are likely to be found only by organisations working in partnership.

LSPs need to carefully connect with and fully engage all councillors as active advocates for their community so that community views and community needs can be fed into LSP plans. The local authority will also be judged in its comprehensive area assessment (CAA) process on how well the needs of each community are being met, and whether local people have been able to engage in setting local priorities meaningfully. It is likely that local public services will only be able to meet this judgement if the council and other public bodies are working together at neighbourhood level.

Aside from the council's role in community involvement, organisations such as the police and health bodies also have aims to promote community engagement, and each partner will want to be satisfied that its services are meeting local community objectives. They too will want to communicate with and learn from the views of people in your ward. As a councillor the connections you have with the community will be of value to all the public authorities who deliver services to people in your ward, and vice-versa.

Consequently, your role as a local councillor will help you to contact the relevant officials from the various public organisations who are responsible for providing their services in your local area on behalf of your community. Developing a relationship with the partners working in your patch – so that on the one hand you are able to relay your local community groups' views and on the other hand also learn about the partner organisations and what they can offer – will pay dividends.

In some local authority areas the benefits of closer co-operation between the police, health and the council have been acknowledged.

Some LSPs have been successful in getting partners to shape their neighbourhood level functions so that they are operating on the same boundaries and that their area activities are coterminous with other partners in the LSP.

In some areas the LSP has established area forums in order to take a shared strategic view over working with local communities. Many councils are now considering reviewing and rationalising the network of area-based forums, community groups, and committee structures. This is so that councils can work with their partners to consider how best to link their participation structures to the LSP, and to rationalise the infrastructure which each partner provides and invests. The consequence for local councillors is that they are able to have a greater impact locally than just being limited to decisions that the council can make in isolation. In addition, linking neighbourhood issues into strategic thinking helps partners work together on the patch to deliver their priorities, ensuring that a local councillor's influence is more significant.



## East Riding – area based partnership working

In East Riding, the community leadership role of ward members is key to effective community engagement and empowerment. Issues and priorities vary from area to area – the East Riding is characterised by its diversity and separate communities.

The LSP has established six Local Action Teams (LATs), each chaired by a ward member. Each LAT includes officer representatives from the council and key public sector partners. Also included are representatives of community and voluntary sectors and other local people with special expertise or experience, who can bring 'clout' and can help to ensure that services are shaped more closely to the needs of the community.

The role of the chair of each LAT is pivotal to their success. The role of a LAT is to adopt a proactive multi-agency approach to working and engaging with the public on key issues with the aim to improve the quality of life of individuals and communities in their localities.

Each of the partners contributes to supporting the work of the LATs.

Their role is to bring together partners to engage, consult and involve local people in tackling local issues that improve the quality of life of local communities in East Riding. Locally-agreed action plans are produced, setting out key objectives and priorities for each locality and timescales for their action. The council, police, NHS East Riding and the fire and rescue service have all seconded staff and together with the local third sector have dedicated resources for each of the LATs, to work on delivering the LATs action plans. The partners are working effectively to pool resources.

The LATs are able to work on local neighbourhood issues but also to draw these into the strategic thinking of all partners to work on.

Ward members continue to be the first point of contact for people seeking to solve ward issues, and the LAT supports rather than duplicates or bypasses members.

It is also important for councillors in parished areas to have good relationships with councillors and councils at town and parish level. Strong relationships at the very local level, often through community-led planning, can help develop successful and strong community empowerment.



## Wiltshire Council

The unitary Wiltshire Council has established 18 area boards to serve 20 community areas across Wiltshire. There are 260 town and parish councils and parish groups in Wiltshire. Wiltshire is developing its efforts to improve local engagement by building on existing structures for participation including town and parish councils and community-led community area partnerships. Wiltshire's submission for unitary status was successful particularly due to its promise of support for community-led planning.

There is a commitment from all council services and other key groups such as the neighbourhood policing teams to work closely with the area boards. Intelligence across agencies and council departments is gathered and presented using commonly defined and shared boundaries. This allows an in-depth focus on place and communities living in the area covered by the area board and community area partnership.

The number of councillors on each area board varies across Wiltshire, ranging from 10 in Chippenham to three in Pewsey, and has been designed not to split up electoral divisions between the different areas or to cut off individual parishes. On a rotating basis, members of the council's cabinet will attend area board meetings and make sure that communities can feed in concerns about how the council's policies are working for them. The area boards can identify in their forward plans if they need a member with a specific portfolio to attend an area board during the year. A community area manager (one for each area board), a democratic services officer and a service director from the council are also assigned to each area board.

Wiltshire's new governance arrangements for communities aim to give power and influence from the 'top down' where area boards will identify and consider local issues. A process has been put in place that enables anyone in the area to bring forward an issue to the area board and for the progress and response to the issue to be logged and tracked. Area boards will also influence policymaking from the 'bottom up'.

## Other activities

There are many other activities that your authority could choose to use to involve local people and to support community-based empowerment. Examples include:

**planning for real** – residents make a 3D model of their local area and add suggestions for the way they would like to see their community develop. They then prioritise these in groups and create an action plan for decision-makers to take away

**co-production** – a way of working whereby decision makers and citizens, or service providers and users, work together to create a decision or a service which works for them all. The approach is based on the principle that the people most affected by a service are in the best position to help design it

**neighbourhood appraisal** – a community-based approach that prioritises the views and attitudes of local people, as experts in their own neighbourhood, and enables local people to do their own assessment, analysis, and planning. This makes it very effective in empowering communities. It provides a mechanism for them to establish positive relationships with key service providers. It allows them to remain actively involved in the planning, delivery and monitoring of these solutions.

Officers should design involvement activities that encourage the widest possible participation. The new duty on local authorities to involve local people came into force on 1 April 2009, and means that councils must appropriately **consult and involve** local people about the decisions and services that may affect them or that they may be interested in. Councils must also provide **information and opportunities** for local people to have their say. In order to carry out the duty in full, councils should ensure that the role of councillors is integrated into the mechanisms that the council uses.

# 3 The support you might need to work with your local community

Your council may provide you with a range of support that you would find helpful when working with your local community.

Many authorities that have established neighbourhood working have appointed officers to work closely with local elected members in their patch: this is the most relevant type of support that councils can provide.



## Nottingham City Council

In Nottingham, each area committee is supported by a neighbourhood management team, a small team of council officers who specialise in area-working, developing partnership working, community development and empowerment, and resolving local issues. The neighbourhood management team includes neighbourhood action officers who work alongside councillors to support them as the 'champion of place' within their ward. They attend local community events with councillors to promote the councillors in their 'champions of place' role.

Councillors and council officers also go out on ward walks to talk face-to-face with local residents and listen to matters of concern. Ward walks are seen as a way to reach out to communities and bring key officers together, with members in local neighbourhoods. They are well publicised through the local media and neighbourhoods are leafleted prior to the ward walk to let residents know they are happening. Residents are encouraged to put the flier in their window if they would like the members to call as they pass. It allows members to respond quickly to issues raised.

Neighbourhood action officers aim to have at least one ward walk per quarter. This also allows the council, Nottingham City Homes and the police to put out the same message and be seen to be working together. Staff are also encouraged to use fluorescent jackets and branded umbrellas because this gives the public a clear indication that the council is taking an active interest in the neighbourhood'.

The neighbourhood management team also delivers work on the community empowerment plans which have been developed with councillors across the city to coordinate multi-agency work in partnership working. The implementation of these plans is reviewed quarterly by neighbourhood management team officers, with reports back to area committee on progress.

## Wolverhampton City Council

Wolverhampton has developed Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNP) made up of residents, service providers and elected members across fifteen neighbourhood areas. Staff resources include a neighbourhood manager, neighbourhood partnership officer and administrator in each of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the city while in the less deprived neighbourhoods each has a single community development worker. Elected members work with the LNP to develop the visions and priorities within neighbourhoods and also to ensure that council services respond effectively to the needs identified within the plans.

The LNP, supported by their staff team, has responsibility for developing the neighbourhood action plan, outlining the key community priorities and any issues highlighted by data for the area and issues from local service providers. These priorities, where appropriate, are also linked to LAA targets to ensure that the contribution of neighbourhood working to the LAA can be demonstrated.

All members may have access to a range of support through their council, including casework assistance for following up on local issues, support for research, dedicated political assistants, and administrative support.

Members also say they want to be able to have direct channels of communication with their residents and that they would find it helpful to have support to develop publicity materials, displays, leaflets, materials, radio, web and new media information, as well as other ways to help them feedback to the community.

The community will expect that you are in touch with them and understand what their concerns are. They will also expect you to be able to give regular feedback and updates on what is being done to address their concerns.

It is important that the community understands that these concerns are being listened to and acted upon. Your constant feedback will give active participants the reassurance that their input is valued and is contributing to outcomes for all. Your council may be able to support this through council newsletters, or neighbourhood newsletters that go out to every resident.

Not all councillors have sufficient support to reach out to the sections of the community with whom they do not have well-established links. You may want more help to secure meetings with partners, develop links with key contacts, and help to maintain ongoing good relationships. It is no longer the case that the role of the councillor is to sit in council meetings and spend most of their time in the town hall. Yet most support continues to be provided at the town hall. What most councillors want is the possibility to have support in the locality, from an officer who understands and knows the patch.

Aside from what the council may offer, many councillors are now using social media to try to reach those constituents they don't see face to face. Blogging, on-line reports, local online forums, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter all offer you other opportunities to inform and involve constituents in your work.

For councillors the challenge is to ensure that all residents and community groups feel that they have a councillor that they can access and that can support them to be empowered.

For officers there is a tricky line to tread to support you without stepping into your shoes. Their challenge is to support you professionally and effectively, without undermining your position and not acting on your behalf in a local leadership capacity. Equally for councillors, without proper support, you can get drawn into doing roles that really should be filled by officers, for instance undertaking community development work.

## Working with your council officers

The member-officer working relationship will be a key element of your council's support to you. Often people will argue that politics can get in the way of community interests and it may be tempting for officers to want to work directly with the community rather than working to support you. Community interests and solutions are about finding local political solutions. Your skills as a local politician will be important in brokering opportunities to deliver what the community wants and needs.

You will need to work with both community representatives and your own council officers to agree how to take issues forward and maintain a good dialogue with all concerned. Respecting each others' roles and having an understanding of what each other can do is important. You may need to work through any misunderstandings and it will be essential that officers too have a degree of political awareness as well as a good understanding of your role as a local politician. Having political awareness is an important skill that senior officers and directors acquire through a long career of working for the council. It is an important skill too for lower tier officers, many of whom are working to deliver local services and who are representing the council at community meetings.

The relationship between officers and councillors working together is a significant shift from the past. Many officers will not have a great deal of understanding about what it is to be a councillor or how to support you at a local level. You can help by encouraging your organisation to invest in training and development for all officers. This will ensure there is an organisational culture of support for involving the community in decision-making and for understanding and valuing the information and input councillors give.

## Kirklees Council

Kirklees Council has developed its officer/councillor knowledge programme, working with its members and officers to develop excellent working relationships between the two. Kirklees has developed practical solutions to:

- provide every councillor with an online 'ward portal/profile'. This details performance information and provides bespoke analysis of the ward information to portray the 'ward story', in a format that is accessible and relevant for individual councillors
- pioneer innovative approaches to public engagement using new social media tools
- develop an intranet site to be used as a vehicle for ensuring that officers have the knowledge, skills and practical tools to work effectively with Kirklees' councillors
- develop and publish agreed competencies in political awareness for officers.



# 4 Developing your skills to support community empowerment

This section looks at the skills that help you succeed in working effectively with individuals and communities.

Communities have high expectations of councillors and there is a general expectation that all their councillors will have the skills, availability and abilities to get things done and deliver results. In many cases you have these skills and have been confidently using them. But there may be some new techniques which require new skills, or you may be taking on additional responsibilities, such as the chair of an area forum, and you may want to develop your skills further.

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) Political Skills framework sets out five skills areas for community empowerment. These are:

- local leadership
- communication skills
- political understanding
- partnership working
- regulating and monitoring

## Local leadership

Your local leadership skills can help you develop a vision for your local community and bring people from different groups in the community together. This will require much energy and enthusiasm to motivate others to work together. You will need to be able to draw out issues of concern to local people and help them to establish their priorities.

Skills in leadership, communicating that vision and bringing about change are all qualities strong local leaders need to develop.

There are a number of skills that the community will expect you to have. They will want you to be accountable, monitor progress on initiatives within the community, and stand up for them when you have to. They will also expect you to be fair and ensure that all groups within the community have the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns.

Your local leadership skills will require you to have facilitation skills, and conflict resolution and mediation skills when you are working with a mix of groups who may have very different aspirations for their area.

## North Tyneside Council – Community Leadership

North Tyneside, recognising the skills required for all members, is developing a role description for members, in which community engagement, including encouraging community participation in decision-making, is a key responsibility. As part of their member development programme, initiated by a cross-party group of members, the council has established a module on community leadership to support members in their continuous learning and development.

## Communication skills

Communication skills are fundamental to your role and particularly important when involving the community in discussions about what they want for their area. Communication skills involve listening to the concerns of your communities, and appropriately voicing your own views, including being able to clearly articulate what actions won't be possible to do.

Having an inclusive style, with the ability to listen with sensitivity, speak clearly and confidently, and use appropriate language in a way that people understand, will encourage members of the community to speak up for what is important to them.

## Political understanding

The community want to know that they have elected someone who can deliver, and someone who holds political clout. Having political understanding will involve skills which help you to read people and situations to interpret people's motives, agendas and interests in different situations.

Having the skills to influence and to build alliances with others to get results will be important. This may also mean that you sometimes have to work effectively in a cross-party context and cultivate relationships with a variety of stakeholders in order to get the job done.

The community also want councillors who are honest, trustworthy and sincere.

## Partnership working

Working across the public sector with partners is essential in today's increasingly complex and inter-dependent world. Your skills in brokering partnerships and understanding the relationships at play will enable you to make things happen locally.

Your interpersonal skills will be the foundation of building trust and understanding of the needs and interests of other people and organisations. Your skills of alliance-building across different perspectives and interests and being able to sense or interpret changes which may have an impact on the plans and objectives of the community will be tested when working with a range of partners.

## Regulating and monitoring

Having skills in regulating, monitoring and effective scrutiny will help you to balance and see things that others may not. Having the ability to balance strategic decisions and representing your patch, you will also need skills to monitor progress and intervene when necessary to ensure that things are moving forward.



You will want to have determination and persistence, because sometimes it will take time and a lot of effort for you to get things moving in the right direction.

### London Borough of Lewisham – training and development and role sharing

Lewisham Council has an accredited learning and development programme which members access via the dedicated member development manager. The programme is tailored to individual needs through the use of personal development plans and a learning needs analysis which ensures that the programme responds to the needs of all members and their various roles.

### Planning training and development opportunities

When setting up member development and training programmes, councils should not make assumptions about what skills, understanding and experience you already have and should encourage you to bring your own unique skills and qualities to the role. Many newly-elected members may have skills that they can bring to community empowerment activities, and likewise, longstanding members may feel that they want support in order to take on a new role or try a new technique.

### North Tyneside Council – member skills framework

North Tyneside has developed a four year (to 2012) member learning and development strategy, and implementation is underway. This is underpinned by a member skills framework, which identifies skills that are personalised to the environment and business of North Tyneside Council. The council is consulting members on a revised skills framework, which includes relevant community empowerment skills.

Councillors want to have personalised development plans and these are being used in many local authorities to arrange appropriate support and development for councillors individually. In devising development plans it is essential that officers understand the work that you do, and that the training you are offered is appropriate to your individual needs.

### Wiltshire Council – personal development plans

Wiltshire is planning to have personal development plans for all of their members. This will ensure that training and development is more structured for members so that they can access their own training needs with greater ease. Wiltshire also wants to ensure that any councillor training and development sits alongside the vision and aims of the council.

It is clear that members do not want to take on the role of community development workers, or for their role to be professionalised.

Some councils offer their councillors a learning needs analysis and personal development plans, as well as a broad and sustained programme of development opportunities which begin as soon as they become a councillor and incorporate development on community leadership and community empowerment skills. There are a range of organisations which offer support and skills development to councillors, such as the IDeA, the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) and others who have a mixture of opportunities to suit councillors, from on-line modules and courses, to seminars and events.

Mentors are high on members' wish lists for support and development. Mentoring is a well-established development technique that benefits individuals and groups. It is particularly useful in times of change such as when people are starting with an organisation or taking on new roles.

Mentoring involves an exploration of needs, motivations, desires, skills and thought processes and encourages mentees to address the challenges they face. The IDeA has for many years run a mentoring programme for councillors in England.

Project management, fundraising, speaking in public and communications are also key skills that members rate highly.

### London Borough of Lewisham – 360 degree feedback

Lewisham council are to hold pilots using 360 degree feedback to appraise members individually. It is anticipated that members will be able to invite partners, senior officers, the community and other members to contribute to this confidential assessment and that the results will be used to inform personal development plans and the broader member development programme.

Finally, having the skills you need is only part of the story; you will want to ensure that you have opportunities to use these, to get results and then show your communities the results that have been achieved.



# 5 Responding to community empowerment

Councillors who are skilled at working alongside the community are able to handle relationships with the community and activists with care and sensitivity, drawing upon a wide range of community empowerment practices and techniques. These skills not only take time to develop but are time-consuming in practice.

Your 'can do' attitude, commitment and enthusiasm can demonstrate and energise the community to develop a clear belief that they are able to effect change in their communities.

In a survey of people's perceptions of local government<sup>2</sup> it was felt that councillors should be down-to-earth, approachable, available and good listeners. They should be local people who know the area well, are able to weigh up evidence and make decisions, and above all, who are able to get things done. Many believed that councillors should be in a position to provide real leadership to their communities.

People want councillors to engage with the community and listen to local people's views and ideas. People generally want councillors to be more visible, proactive and accessible. People want to have their views acted on by councillors with real power to effect change. A very widely held view is that councillors only seek out residents' views at election time (if at all).

The perceptions of the community matter. Your work on community empowerment, your respect for your community and the individuals within it, your sincerity and your transparency will help the public's confidence. Your ability to work with all the individuals, community groups and local organisations in your patch will help you to achieve real results as a councillor, to help the communities in your local area to take control and be involved in local decisions.

This guide provides some examples from different types of authorities. What they have in common is that they all recognise the unique role of councillors in the mediatory role they play in the interaction between individuals, communities and the political process. It is clear that the councillor's role is a vital component in supporting community involvement and empowerment.

Although the role remains largely undefined and can allow individual members to adapt and evolve the role to suit their own skills and priorities for their local area, it is important for all councils to adopt community empowerment policies and to use community empowerment techniques which place councillors in a clear and central role. This also helps councillors to address their concerns about empowerment and also identifies the role that they are expected to play.

It is clear that the public has high expectations of each elected councillor being able to support them in meeting collective challenges. Councils therefore need to invest in the support, structures and activities that enable participation to take place and make it worthwhile. Councils need to offer appropriate structures for local decision making, along with officer support to councillors and skills development for both members and officers to work on empowerment.

Councillors can assist in making empowerment happen and this guide provides resources and examples from councils who are developing their work to help communities to take responsibility and be involved in local decisions.

To help you consider how you and your council are responding to community empowerment, two sets of resources are appended to this guide:

A set of questions that will help you to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your own activities using the CLEAR framework.

A series of questions taken from the Framework for an Ideal Empowering Authority, developed by the IDeA with the NEA, to consider how the council can focus its community empowerment policies and place councillors in a clear and central role.

The Framework for an Ideal Empowering Authority is just one of the variety of resources published on the IDeA Knowledge website at [www.idea.gov.uk/empowerment](http://www.idea.gov.uk/empowerment). Other resources include:

- case studies of good practice on aspects of engagement and empowerment
- articles to help councils mainstream empowerment practice across their authority and LSP
- tools to help councils and their partners develop a suitable business case justifying the impact of empowerment activity
- mapping tools that help you and your communities assess the level of empowerment activity within your area
- resources that help you link your engagement and empowerment activity with work to promote equality and cohesion within your communities

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Sally and Williams, Bridget (2006) Perceptions of Local Government in England, Department for Communities and Local Government

# Resources 1: The 'CLEAR tool

## CLEAR – Questions to reflect on how you support community empowerment

The CLEAR tool is more generally proposed for assessing a council's understanding of the context in which participation and empowerment are to be encouraged. With some adaptation, the framework can also be used to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your own engagement activities. It also allows you to examine your local decision-making structures and assess whether they have the qualities that allow you to listen to, and take account of, messages from citizen participation.

C

### Can do

Do people have the resources and knowledge to participate?

How do I give people information about what I am doing and how I can work with them?

How do I tell people about the issues I am working on and how they can influence the council's activities?

How accessible am I?

Do I make contact with community groups in my patch, including new groups, and individuals and groups who may feel disempowered?

L

### Like to

Do people have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation?

Do I tell people just how important it is for them to get involved in local decisions and what is in it for them?

Do people identify with the patch I represent? Do they identify with the locality that my area forum covers? How do I encourage community groups to participate that don't identify with the area? How do I communicate with community groups that don't identify with the area?

Do I tell people why their participation is needed and how it makes a difference to the whole community?

Do I help to tell people which person or organisation is leading on issues that they are concerned about?

Do I encourage people by telling them how outcomes can be changed if they get involved?

E

### Enabled to

are people provided with the opportunity for participation?

Do people know about local budgets that people and groups can access?

Do officers, other councillors, the public and partners listen to each other and do something about the views expressed in my area?

Is there a good understanding about what we can achieve together?

Do people from different communities have a chance to meet together to discuss issues that affect others in the same neighbourhood?

Do I go out of my way to meet people where they most feel comfortable and like to be rather than at set times in municipal buildings?

How do I encourage interest among people who might not have been asked to be involved before?

Do I have up-to-date knowledge of all the groups and organisations which exist and are active in my patch?

What are my skills in working with community groups and local organisations? Do I know how can I improve them?

What knowledge do I need to help me understand the issues for my local area and how can I get access to information that I need?

**A** **Asked to**  
are people mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups?

Who do I ask to get involved in local issues?

How do I make sure they are not only the 'usual suspects'?

How do I ask them?

How do I know what the issues are for local people?

Where do I meet people who are not the 'usual suspects'?

**R** **Responded to**  
Do people see evidence that their views have been considered?

Do I use social media and other opportunities to help me to make contact with people?

Do I put information online, use local discussion forums, blogging, and text messages?

How do I tell people what progress has been made on the issues I am working on?

How do I tell the public how their views have made a difference?

Do I explain how the council has reached decisions, balanced views and taken different views into account?

Adapted from CLEAR: an auditing tool for citizen participation at the local level, Council of Europe 2009

# Resources 2: IDeA diagnostic questions

## The role of members in community empowerment

Members as community leaders, helping communities and agencies to work together, strengthening democratic accountability

Key factors	Diagnostic questions
<p><b>Clear Leadership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members are involved in developing and implementing the community empowerment vision</li> <li>• There is cross-party support for community empowerment, ensuring sustainability</li> <li>• Members are actively involved in scrutinising community engagement and empowerment initiatives and governance arrangements, with input from communities, to drive improvement</li> <li>• Members work with other councillors across local government tiers to engage with communities in districts and parishes (where relevant).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effectively are elected members leading and supporting the delivery of the empowerment agenda? Do all Members get involved?</li> <li>• How are members scrutinising community engagement and empowerment strategies and delivery and what is the impact? Are they involving the community in scrutiny?</li> <li>• How well are members working together across local government tiers (where relevant).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strong Democracy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frontline members' community empowerment role is clearly defined and understood. There is clear understanding that participative democracy can strengthen representative democracy</li> <li>• Ward members are actively involved in local engagement structures and activities, facilitate dialogue between residents, the council and partners, and make use of the 'call for action'</li> <li>• There is some devolution of decisions and budgets to enable members to play an active role in local decisions, with strong accountability to local residents</li> <li>• There is a more vibrant local democracy with communities keen to discuss issues with members and others. Community involvement encourages more people to take on governance roles and stand for office. members and officers proactively promote democracy, raising understanding and awareness amongst citizens and young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How well is the members' community empowerment role defined and understood, by members themselves, by officers, by partners and by communities?</li> <li>• Has there been any devolution of decisions or budgets to localities, and if so, what role do members play? Do they facilitate communities to influence decisions? Is there accountability to communities?</li> <li>• How are the council and members actively promoting democracy?</li> <li>• Does the profile of your members reflect that of your local population?</li> </ul>

### Strong relationships

- Councillors work with the community sector to build strong working relationships. Citizens know who their local councillors are
- Members are adequately resourced to undertake their community empowerment role and have time to engage with their communities, because the balance of council work is manageable. Officers help broker relationships between elected members and communities.
- What is the profile and relationship of members with community organisations? Do they value each other?
- Has the council balanced the workload of members, recognising the importance of their role as community champions?
- What support and resources do members have for their role as community leaders?

### Fully integrated

- A large proportion of members have a high level of community engagement skills
- Members carry into the council the views of the public and explain the decisions of the council to the public. Their knowledge of their ward is positively valued by the council, partners and communities
- Member induction and ongoing development programmes have a strong community empowerment theme and are accredited.
- How do councillors feed community issues back to the council and strategic partners and how are these issues addressed?
- What member development programmes do you have specifically targeted to skills in community empowerment and what is the take-up?
- Do individual members have skills development plans which include community empowerment?
- How do members share community engagement skills with colleagues?

Extract from NEA framework for an ideal empowering authority, IDeA, 2009

The IDeA Knowledge website contains the NEA framework for an ideal empowering authority and other resources and case studies relating to empowerment at:

[www.idea.gov.uk/empowerment](http://www.idea.gov.uk/empowerment)

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*Local Government Association*

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

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