1 Being a councillor

Local government powers

Local authorities are created by acts of Parliament.

They may be abolished by Parliament and their powers are determined by Parliament. The powers of a councillor are very different from those of an individual citizen.

Citizens are free to do anything that is not specifically illegal. Councillors and their authority can only do what they are specifically permitted to do by law. Acts of Parliament lay down specific duties that must be carried out – mandatory acts and things that may be done by choice, permissive and adoptive acts.

Councillors are bound by statutes but statutes will not stop them making important policy decisions and there is often scope for discretion in individual cases.

Some of the decisions councillors reach may be subject to an appeal to a minister or a government department. Since local government power is embodied in statutes and regulations, its decisions can be challenged in the courts.

The Government does control many of the activities of local government but its Localism Bill is intended to give councils and communities more influence and control over the services they provide or receive.

Publishing the bill in December 2010, the Government stated: "Over time central government has become too big, too interfering, too controlling and too bureaucratic. This has undermined local democracy and individual responsibility, and stifled innovation and enterprise within public services.

"We want to see a radical shift in the balance of power and to decentralise power as far as possible. Localism isn't simply about giving power back to local government.

"This Government trusts people to take charge of their lives and we will push power downwards and outwards to the lowest possible level, including individuals, neighbourhoods, professionals and communities as well as local councils and other local institutions."

more information:
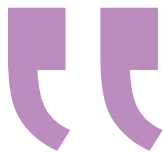Department for Communities and Local Government website at www.communities.gov.uk

Local Government Group website at www.local.gov.uk

Councillor's viewpoint

My Day
Councillor Louise McKinlay, Brentwood Borough Council

As a resident of Brentwood for more than 15 years, I was thrilled to be elected to lead the council last year at the age of 31. I am passionate about our town and all the wonderful things that Brentwood has to offer: beautiful open spaces, great parks, clean streets and a fantastic quality of life.

I start today by taking part in a brilliant initiative that Brentwood is involved with called 'Love where you live'. It's a scheme to engage schools, businesses and residents in tacking the cleanliness of the environment where they live. I'm getting stuck in with various initiatives, like removing graffiti and leading a litter pick in an area of my ward. Seeing how many people are joining me proves that people really do care about their surroundings, and that this new approach to all working together can really deliver.

I am a big fan of Twitter and use it to keep in touch with residents. It allows me to convey messages instantly – something I make full use of by Tweeting regularly from my phone. Today, I'm telling everyone about the litter pick while I'm actually doing it (which also gives me a few minutes break!).

I find Twitter a brilliant tool that allows instant two-way communications, unlike some more traditional ways of contacting people. I can link in with national MPs and I even have a bit of friendly banter with opposition councillors! I think any councillors who aren't embracing new technology like Twitter are really missing a trick.

I'm aware that residents may think: I've taken the time to vote but what exactly does my councillor do for me? Therefore I believe in transparency and allowing residents to see what their elected representatives do. By me updating Twitter regularly, they are able to see what my day consists of. I use it to inform and promote what we are doing and have had local issues raised with me by residents. This allows action to be taken so much more quickly.

After a successful (and mucky!) litter pick, it's back to the town hall, where I make a start on today's council website blog. I update this a few times a week to let residents know what's new, and they often come back to me with concerns or questions they may have.

I then attend a meeting with fellow senior councillors, in which we outline plans for the coming year. We go over residents' priorities and start looking at areas where we can invest more, and those where we can make savings.

We also make plans to hold our first question time session at a local library, giving residents the chance to come and quiz us on decisions that we are looking to take.

After a productive day I'm off home to make the most of the sunny evening, with a barbeque with the family.

I go through the photos that were taken of the rugby sevens at Twickenham a couple of weeks ago, when I went with a group of girlfriends. As we sit down to eat, my husband removes my BlackBerry to stop me Tweeting all evening!

A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.

Local government structures

It is important that councillors understand the structure of their own council and its responsibilities to the community. Councillors will also find it useful to understand the broader local government picture.

Not all local authorities are structured in the same way. They do not provide the same services and do not necessarily even have the same system for elections. The term local authority does not necessarily refer to a council – it can also apply to a number of other authorities such as a police authority.

There are two distinct structures of local government in England:

1 Unitary – a single-tier structure in which an all-purpose authority is responsible for providing most of the services. They are to be found in London, other metropolitan areas and parts of shire England.

2 County and district – comprising at least two levels of local government and found in the remaining counties of England. Often there is a third tier of parish or town councils as well.

England has 54 unitary authorities, 37 metropolitan districts, 27 county councils, 201 shire districts, and 32 London boroughs, plus the City of London Corporation and the Greater London Authority.

Unitary authorities

A unitary authority is responsible for all local government functions within its area.

Typically, unitary authorities cover towns or cities that are large enough to function independently from county or other regional administration.

Each unitary authority sends representatives to a joint board that oversees police, fire and civil defence arrangements across the whole area. These boards are authorities in their own right and set precepts or raise council taxes, but they are not directly elected.

There are also joint arrangements in most areas for waste disposal. Some unitary authorities have parish or town councils in their area.

Metropolitan districts

Metropolitan districts are also unitary authorities, responsible for all services within their boundaries. They are often called borough or city councils. In each metropolitan area there are two joint boards that oversee police, fire and civil defence arrangements. There may also be joint authorities for waste disposal and for transport.

They include metropolitan areas such as: West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire.

The responsibilities of metropolitan district councils are the same as those of unitary authorities. There are very few parish councils in metropolitan areas.

Counties and districts

England's counties often have two and sometimes three levels of local government. Each county has an elected county council providing strategic and more costly services like social services and education.

Each county is divided into several districts, each with its own elected district council providing more local services such as the collection of council taxes and non-domestic rates, housing benefits, health and housing.

Some of these councils are called borough or city councils. These titles are ceremonial and indicate that the authority has a royal charter and a mayor. Many district councils are further divided into elected parish or town councils. A town council is a parish council with a mayor. Most parish or town councils are found in rural areas. Parishes deal with services and problems such as allotments, for which they have a statutory responsibility, footpaths, bus shelters, litter and dog fouling.

London

London has 32 London boroughs and The City of London Corporation, plus the Greater London Authority. The boroughs and City of London Corporation are responsible for local government services in their areas but the mayor and the Greater London Assembly – as the Greater London Authority – act in a strategic way on behalf of the capital to promote its special needs.

Generally, the mayor is responsible for developing strategies to improve London's transport, economy and environment, as well as running the police and fire services. The assembly

holds the mayor to account and makes sure services are being run effectively.

Neither takes responsibilities from the London boroughs.

Council services

Councils provide three types of service to their communities:

- statutory services – such as refuse collection – that councils must provide

- regulatory services – such as pub licensing and trading standards – that councils must also provide

- discretionary services – such as youth services – that councils may choose to provide.

Unitary councils supply all the services listed below. In two-tier areas services are divided between the county council and its associated district councils. A few councils may have different arrangements because of their location or circumstances.

Although services such as highway maintenance are sometimes contracted out to district councils by county councils, they remain the statutory responsibility of the county councils. This is also the case when council services are contracted out to third-party suppliers.

Services provided by county councils
- care and protection of children

- care for elderly people

- care for people with a disability

- community safety

- concessionary travel and public transport support

- conservation/listed buildings

- country parks and countryside management

- cycle routes

- emergency planning

- highway maintenance

- industrial and craft units

- libraries and archives

- local economy support and development

- meals on wheels

- minerals and quarries

- museums and arts

- maintenance of public rights of way

- protecting and enhancing the environment

- public and community transport

- recycling

- registration of births, deaths and marriages

- road clearance e.g. fly tipping

- road safety

- schools, school transport and other education

- strategic planning for the county

- street lighting and furniture

- tourism

- trading standards and consumer protection

- traffic management and transport planning

- tree protection

- village halls and community facilities

- voluntary organisation support

- water courses

- waste disposal

- youth clubs.

Services provided by district councils

- building control
  - regulatory
  - public protection
- car parks
- cemeteries and crematoria
- council tax benefit
- council tax collection
- Crime and Disorder Act
  - community wardens
- economic development
- electoral registration and elections
- emergency planning
  - environmental services
  - environmental health
  - pollution control
  - refuse collection
  - private sector housing standards
  - street sweeping
  - food hygiene and health and safety
  - dog wardens
  - public conveniences
  - streetscene (graffiti, litter and so on)
- grounds maintenance (parks and open spaces)
- housing
  - strategy and development
  - advice and assistance
  - provision
- housing benefit administration
- leisure

- licensing
  - taxis
  - alcohol and public entertainment
  - gambling
- museums and arts
- national non-domestic rate
- planning
  - development control
  - local delivery framework
  - heritage
  - countryside management
- property searches and land charges
- sea defences, watercourses and drainage
- street naming
- tourism.

How the council works

Councils are large organisations employing hundreds of staff and they adhere to set rules and procedures to help them function effectively and legitimately.

New councillors should be given a copy of their council's constitution. This provides the framework within which the council conducts its business and makes decisions. It describes who is responsible for making decisions and how decisions are taken.

The legal nature of constitutions means they are not easy reading but new councillors should familiarise themselves with the constitution and, in the first instance, concentrate on four key topics:

- decision-making and council structures

- procedural matters

- roles of officers

- standards and ethical governance.

Council structures

The full council meeting is the sovereign body of the council. Full council is where all councillors meet to debate and take decisions.

Most councils operate a system that separates the decision-making executive from the monitoring and representative functions of the council.

Full council:

- makes decisions on the constitution

- decides policy framework

- decides the budget

- appoints chief officers.

Political arrangements

The Local Government Act 2000, required councils to adopt one of two political management arrangements, leader and cabinet or directly elected mayor and cabinet, by 2010.

Before that most councils had a leader and cabinet system. Each year the council would appoint a leader and each year the leader would decide on how many and which councillors would make up the cabinet, as well as what roles the cabinet undertook.

The changes concerning what is known as the strong leader model means that:

- once elected by full council, the leader continues in office for four years – until the year they are due for re-election – unless removed by resolution

- the leader is able to choose the cabinet, which must include at least two other councillors

- the budget can only be defeated if at least two-thirds voted it down.

One of the key differences between the two systems is that elected mayors are not councillors – residents elect them directly once every four years. It is also more likely that a directly elected mayor who is not a member of a political party will choose a cross-party cabinet.

This legislation also scrapped the right of smaller councils to retain their committee systems and the option of having a directly elected mayor and council manager.

The executive mayor or strong leader and the cabinet is responsible for:

- agreeing new policy and proposing the budget

- conducting strategic service reviews

- promoting the council's interests in partnership

- implementing decisions of the full council with the council's officers.

There are some areas where the executive does not have responsibility. Quasi-judicial and regulatory functions such as development control, planning applications and licensing decisions are delegated from the council to separate decision-making committees.

Councils must also establish overview and scrutiny arrangements through which non-executive councillors can question and challenge the performance of the executive in a manner that will enable public debate.

Overview and scrutiny committees have to reflect the political balance of the council. Members of the executive are likely to be asked to attend overview and scrutiny committee meetings regularly to answer questions and contribute to debate.

Co-options

Councils can appoint co-opted members to committees – people from the community with specific expertise and knowledge. Some co-options are statutory, such as the parental and religious members of education scrutiny panels.

In other instances councillors will have the opportunity to invite interested members of the community to serve on specific scrutiny inquiries and investigations.

While councillors will always retain the mandate of representation through election it can be useful to include people who may not be strongly represented, such as business people, young people and people from ethnic minorities.

Procedures

Councils have internal procedures that councillors should know about and understand.

They concern:

- standing orders
- agendas and minutes
- defamation and privilege
- roles at meetings.

Standing orders

Full council, overview and scrutiny committee meetings and regulatory committee meetings are governed by procedural standing orders.

The interpretation of standing orders is the chairperson's responsibility. Councillors need to familiarise themselves with them to ensure they comply with them and know when to challenge them if they believe they have been broken.

The standing orders specify the timing of council meetings, the order of business, rules of debate and other matters of procedure. It is important to understand:

- the rules of debate
- declarations of interest
- terms of reference for committees.

Agendas and minutes

The law requires notice of a public meeting, with its date, time, venue and agenda, to be posted publicly five clear working days before the meeting takes place.

Some councils circulate the agendas of all meetings to all councillors in advance. This allows them to check whether there are items coming up that concern their ward. If there are issues of interest to the councillor or their ward, they can ask to attend the meeting as an observer.

A councillor may also ask to speak on behalf of ward constituents but cannot vote unless he or she is a member of the committee concerned.

At all formal meetings of the council, a record is made by council officers of the decisions taken, the background

papers received and the reasons for the decision. The minutes are made available to the public.

Records must be kept and made public when an individual executive member or mayor has taken a decision.

All council meetings and committees are open to members of the public unless there are legal reasons to exclude them.

The executive is required to set out its programme of work, where it is known, in a forward plan. The plan will include all key decisions due to be made by the executive in the following four months. The plan must be made public and made available to the relevant overview and scrutiny committees at least two weeks in advance of the commencement of the period covered.

Defamation and privilege

The law of defamation is potentially a dangerous and expensive one for councillors. Councillors can be sued for defamation by saying or writing anything that will "lower a person in the estimation of right-thinking people".

Councillors have some limited protection and to allow them freedom of speech they are given qualified privilege in council meetings. This can protect them against being sued for defamation for something they say in defending or supporting the interests of their council, or as part of their duty. But it applies only if they honestly believed what they said and were not motivated by malice.

Defamation is a complex matter and councillors should take advice from the council's solicitor if a difficult situation is likely to arise.

Roles at meetings

The chair runs the meeting and is responsible for:

- opening and closing the meeting
- welcoming members to the meeting
- introducing each agenda item, or asking officers to introduce the item
- ensuring that the debate keeps to the point of the agenda
- inviting members to speak when they have indicated they wish to do so
- summarising at the end of each item
- indicating when and if voting should take place
- controlling disorderly members and putting a motion to remove them
- warning and, if necessary, excluding unruly members of the public.

At scrutiny committee meetings the chair welcomes witnesses and asks members to put questions in a courteous manner.

Preparation for meetings is important, and councillors should read the agenda and any attached papers beforehand. They may also decide to consult local ward groups and constituents or their ward party colleagues on non-confidential items.

If they hold a different point of view, councillors should decide what questions they want to ask at the meeting.

They may want to raise a question on a report with an officer beforehand. Some councils hold pre-agenda meetings and councillors should attend them if they can.

Top tips

Getting the councillor–officer relationship right requires that:

- both should aim to develop a relationship based on mutual
- respect
- councillors should define the core values of the organisation
- councillors should identify priorities, assisted by the officers
- officers should provide clear advice and offer alternative courses of action where they exist
- councillors and officers should communicate clearly and openly, avoiding ambiguity and the risk of misunderstanding
- councillors and officers should work in partnership to turn the core values and priorities into practical policies for implementation.

Roles of officers

Officers are employees of the council – the people who put policies into effect and organise the provision of services. Officers may also be delegated by councillors to make policy decisions. They are led by a chief executive and senior managers who are appointed directly by councillors.

Council employees include teachers, refuse collectors, social workers and home helps.

Statutory officers

Local authorities are required by law to designate a senior manager as the head of paid service. This will usually be the chief executive. This person is responsible to councillors for the staffing of the council, ensuring the work of the different departments is co-ordinated, and making sure the organisation runs efficiently.

There must also be a monitoring officer responsible for warning councillors about anything the council does that is likely to lead to legal action or to a finding of maladministration by the ombudsman.

The council must also have a Section 151 officer, usually the director of finance, whose task is to monitor all the financial affairs of the council. This officer has the power to stop the council from spending money if they think it is unwise or unlawful.

All three of these posts are statutorily protected, which means councillors cannot dismiss the post holders without an independent inquiry.

Councillors should expect to be given a chart showing the structure of their authority with the names, titles, responsibilities and, ideally, photographs of senior officers.

Senior managers

The chief executive is the main link between the senior managers of individual departments and between senior managers and councillors. Chief executives advise councillors on procedure, legislation and policy.

Each year the leader or cabinet should conduct a performance appraisal interview with the chief executive.
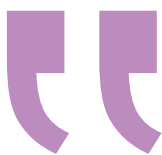
The chief executive leads a management team that meets frequently to discuss the corporate management of the authority and also meets regularly with the executive or cabinet.

Councillor's viewpoint

My Day
Councillor Barry Coppinger, Middlesbrough Council

" Saturday begins with our weekly ward surgery at Berwick Hills library. I meet up with my fellow ward councillor Eddie Dryden. Stacey and Jacqui, the neighbourhood police officers for Berwick Hills, also join us. Surgeries are well attended and the joint working is beneficial, as we can share information and compare notes. This week, residents' concerns include school fencing, damaged grass verges, nuisance trees, a nuisance neighbour, and antisocial behaviour at local garages. All will be followed up in the next few days, as we agree various actions.

Eddie and I also decide to accompany the local police beat patrol the following Friday evening for a bit of youth engagement, and to discuss some local problem solving. We'll visit current hot spots in Berwick Hills, with Stacey, Jacqui and Steve, the council's neighbourhood safety officer for the area, and talk to some of the local young people.

I'm council executive member for community protection and a member of Cleveland police authority, and work with the police at all levels. Neighbourhood policing is one of our main priorities, so it's good to see policies and priorities in action at a local level.

After the surgery, I call home to check with my partner Val that we've got all appropriate ingredients in the house, as we're having some friends round for a meal this evening. I also chat with our sons, Sean and Danny, about their intentions for the day.

Then it's off to Captain Cook's Square in down town Middlesbrough for the Mela Fairtrade festival. It's Fairtrade fortnight, and we've a local programme of events over the two weeks. This includes a public launch event in Radio Tees' reception area as part of their morning show, a tea dance at the town hall, a Fairtrade disco for young people with a DJ and a dance group, fashion shows and markets.

All the events promote Fairtrade products and ask people to give up their usual brand for more ethically produced products.

I'm on the stall for a couple of hours, helping spread the word about Fairtrade and giving out free samples. We've had plenty of visitors during the day and hopefully it will lead to more Fairtrade users in future.

Fairtrade is an international campaign to ensure producers in developing countries receive a reasonable price for their goods, and also supports health

and education projects in their communities. In 2009, Fairtrade UK sales reached £800m nationally.

Our council serves Fairtrade tea and coffee at meetings and encourages all outlets where refreshments are served to use Fairtrade. Is your council on board? There's a lot of useful information about Fairtrade and how you or your organisation can get involved on www.fairtrade.org.uk

Today's Mela also serves as a preview for our annual Middlesbrough Mela in the summer, which brings people from across the region and beyond to Albert Park. Today's event includes live music and dance, a Mad Hatter's Fairtrade tea party, stalls promoting and selling Fairtrade, a freestyle football champ showing off his skills, and a raffle to win five Fairtrade footballs signed by players from Middlesbrough football club.

Then it's back home to tackle the other major challenge of the day … beef in stout with herb dumplings!

Barry Coppinger is chair of Middlesbrough Fairtrade group.

A version of this article first appeared as 'A day in the life', in First magazine, published by the Local Government Association.

Senior managers or directors lead the individual departments of the council. They may also be called chief officers. Senior managers are responsible for advising the cabinet and scrutiny committees on policy and are responsible for implementing councillors' decisions and for service performance.

Usually, a separate group of officers supports the scrutiny committees.

Department structures and titles of senior managers vary. Councillors should learn about the arrangements in their authority and which department is responsible for each service.

Councillor-officer relationships

The relationship between the elected leader of the council and its appointed chief executive is the most important one in local government and has a profound effect on the council's performance.

Officers are employed to manage the council and to help councillors achieve their policy goals. But officers may have to advise councillors from time to time that certain courses of action cannot be carried out.

Officers have a duty to give unbiased professional advice – even if it is not what councillors want to hear.

Officers cannot respond to personal criticism in the same way that politicians can and temper their remarks accordingly.

Top tips

Newly elected members should:

- talk to other councillors

- talk to officers take up training courses offered by the council

- read the council's corporate plan to gain an overview of the council's agenda and priorities

- learn how the council takes decisions and how you can influence these on behalf of the people you represent

- take on new responsibilities with care – don't take on too much too soon

- if you need to make arrangements for public service leave with your employers, speak to them as soon as possible. You are entitled to reasonable time off but your employer is not obliged to pay you for it

- learn to manage the paperwork – learn what you need to read and what you don't, and don't hoard outdated or irrelevant material

- set up a good filing system

- concentrate on matters that interest you and learn them thoroughly

- think about changing to a different policy area at least once during your term

- communicate with fellow councillors, council staff and officers and with constituents

- many council staff will be based at depots and sites – try to visit them informally, but with advance notice, to show support for and interest in their work. Their feedback can often be invaluable and it's a good boost to morale. Be relaxed and make it clear that this is neither an inspection nor a moans session

- set up a schedule for visiting the key groups in your ward over your first year – including faith groups, voluntary groups, major employers, schools, youth centres, tenants' and residents' associations

- tell people in your ward what you are doing.

Mutual respect and good communication is the key to establishing good member–officer relationships. Close personal familiarity should be avoided. It is important to get this right and there are some simple things that can make it easier to establish relationships that work.

There should be clarity about the respective roles of councillors and officers and this can only be achieved through discussion.

The councillor's role

Becoming a councillor is a rewarding form of public service that puts people in a privileged position where they can make a difference to the quality of other people's daily lives.

However, being an effective councillor requires hard work. Every day, councillors have to balance the needs and interests of their residents, voters, political parties and the council. All these groups will make legitimate demands on the councillor's time on top of their personal responsibilities to family, workplace and friends.

It is therefore important that councillors understand their role so they can perform responsibly and effectively for the council and maintain the quality of their personal lives.

The councillor's role takes in:

• representing the ward

• decision-making

• policy and strategy review and development

• overview and scrutiny

• regulatory duties

• community leadership and engagement

Chapters two and three expand on these themes.

Representing the ward

The primary role of a councillor is to represent their ward and the people who live in it. They also have a responsibility to communicate council policy and decisions to people in the ward. Members of political parties may find that their party offers advice and guidance on doing this.

Community leadership and engagement

Community leadership is at the heart of modern local government and councils are taking on new responsibilities for working in partnership with other organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, to improve services and the quality of life of citizens.

Decision-making

Councillors have a central part to play in making decisions that impact on their ward and across the whole area covered by their council. They will be involved in decision-making through:

• full council

• regulatory committees such as planning control or licensing

• local voluntary organisation management

• sitting on boards and as school governors

• membership of partnership boards

• being employers of staff on appointments panels and disciplinary or grievance appeals.

Policy and strategy

Councillors influence and determine the development and review of the council's policy and strategy. They contribute to this through their:

- role in overview and scrutiny

- involvement in advisory groups and partnerships

- interaction with executive members

- role as a representative on local community groups

- role on area forums and committees

- casework

- membership of a political group.

Overview and scrutiny

Councillors have always been required to scrutinise the council and the overview and scrutiny function is a natural extension of representation.

The process has recently become more clearly defined and distinct and the role of councillors now includes:

- providing a check on the activities of the executive through call-in powers

- monitoring and reviewing policy formulation and implementation

- policy development

- quality review

- scrutiny of external bodies and agencies.

Regulatory duties

Local authorities are not just service providers, they also act as regulators. This involves councillors in quasi-judicial roles on special committees appointed directly by the council, such as planning and licensing committees.

Most councils arrange special training for councillors undertaking these quasi-judicial responsibilities. In these roles, councillors are required to act independently and are not subject to the party group whip.

Support for councillors

Councillors make many different types of decisions and recommendations that have far-reaching consequences for the communities they represent and for council staff.

They also have a leadership role that requires them to engage with and advocate on behalf of local people.

In recognition of the increased responsibilities undertaken by councillors today, councils are expected to provide training and development, facilities, access to information and guidance, and other assets that will help them carry out their roles.

To be efficient and effective, councillors need a range of support services. All councils offer some support, and this may include:

- office accommodation, such as members' rooms, interview rooms, rooms for holding surgeries, public meetings and consultations

- secretarial and word-processing services

- communications facilities – phones, PCs or laptops, email, press office support and so on

- information provision for use internally, perhaps to facilitate scrutiny, and externally, perhaps to respond to enquiries from constituents

- help to manage casework

- research facilities

- care facilities

- training and development

- mentoring.

Councils vary tremendously in the degree of support they give councillors. The level of support offered may depend on a councillor's role and time commitment.

Executive members and overview and scrutiny chairs are likely to receive more secretarial and research support than backbenchers. Non-executive councillors may find that they have very little dedicated support. All councillors should have access to some form of communication facility and training and development in new roles and ways of working.

Allowances

Councillors are entitled to an allowance set by their council that reflects their level of responsibility and the amount of time they devote to council affairs.

In addition to a basic allowance, extra payments may cover:

Case study
Keeping in touch

The extent to which councillors can engage citizens through the internet is influenced by restrictions that prevent the use of council services for political purposes.

The code of recommended practice on local authority publicity states that publicity produced by a local authority relating to councillors should not be party political, limiting the type of content that can be displayed on authority sponsored websites.

Many councillors have overcome these restrictions simply by asking their authority to provide links to external sites with more overt political content, such as those of their local and national political parties.

Bob Piper from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, says: "My website enables me to keep people informed and correct or confirm local rumours. I think that it does assist in raising the profile of myself as a councillor and hopefully increases respect for the council."

Publishing a website does, however, present challenges for councillors and their authorities and can have a negative impact, particularly if information is not maintained and kept up to date.

Some councillors have set up their own websites and blogs and linked them to their local authority web pages. These sites allow the councillors to be more expansive about their political views and party involvement and, perhaps, offer greater scope for engagement.

Bob Piper uses his website to consolidate his community work by offering up-to-date information on local issues like planning and invites feedback from residents. He has a 'Ward News' section on the site and includes a link to a separate blog where visitors are able to read his opinions on the issues of the day.

www.councillor.info/sandwell/bpiper

- special responsibilities – payable to the leader of the council, portfolio holders, overview and scrutiny chairs, opposition leaders and so on

- childcare and dependent carers

- travel and subsistence

- co-optee's services

- pension scheme for councillors.

The allowances are all subject to income tax. Some incidental costs – such as use of a home office, telephone and so on – may be deducted before calculating the tax to be paid.

Information technology

Information technology (IT) offers councillors a fast and efficient means of keeping in touch with the local community. It also gives access to the information councillors need to influence or make decisions.

Councillors will find that electronic communications allow them to get much closer to the people they represent. But new councillors will not necessarily arrive with ready-made computer skills.

Every councillor will need to find out about their authority's IT systems and how they can access them and use them effectively. To get this right they will need training and ongoing support.

The best councils give their councillors a 'home office', including a PC or laptop, so that they can access the council's IT

Top tips
How the Local Government Group can help

The LG Group offers a range of support and development opportunities for councillors, including:

- the Charter for Member Development specifying roles and responsibilities for member development in individual authorities

- A range of development materials for all councillors, covering a wide range of topics and provided in the council's own offices

- a range of toolkits and resources to promote and support the role of the councillor and their development is also available on line

- the Leadership Academy for leading members and portfolio holders

- support and advice on specific challenges and issues

- councillor mentoring including ward walks with peers from other councils

- dedicated pages for councillors on the LG Improvement and Development website

- communities of practice offering councillors and council staff a way of sharing ideas, experience, documents and expertise and exploring the latest thinking on particular topics – accessed free via the website. This includes the national member development community of practice www.local.gov.uk/communities

system and the information they need whenever it suits them. They also have technicians who can visit councillors at home to deal with IT problems.

Councils should at least give councillors access to a computer in the town hall. The better the support available to councillors, the more effective they will be.

Good IT systems and skills can help councillors:

- deal with casework more quickly and efficiently

- manage their time better so they don't have to visit the town hall so often

- keep in touch with residents and community groups

- access key documents or other information online rather than waiting for them to be delivered

- access the council's intranet, an internal version of the internet, to find out when meetings are taking place, identify an officer or search for information about specific services

- hold online meetings rather than having to get a group of people to travel to a meeting place

- research information about a particular issue

- access government information

- look beyond the council to see how things are done elsewhere.

Councillors' web pages
A key goal of government's drive to bring public services online was to improve the ability of councillors to use technology. An important part of this initiative required local authorities to provide councillors with the facilities and know-how to publish their own web pages.

See Councillors and Communications in chapter two.

Research and information
Councils vary widely in the level of research assistance and information they make available to councillors. Those whose authority has a comprehensive information system or intranet will be able to take advantage of advanced and sophisticated research tools.

Many councils have set up research budgets for councillors involved in overview and scrutiny. Some have political research assistants.

These officers are appointed by the council to serve each of the political parties. Their activities are strictly controlled but they will be able to carry out research and some administrative work on behalf of councillors.

Training and development
There are no set guidelines on training and development but most councils offer induction courses to introduce newly elected councillors to the workings and responsibilities of the council and to familiarise them with systems, facilities and the decision-making process.

A growing number of councils have officers whose job is to provide or organise development opportunities for councillors. This may be by offering development of particular interests and specialities and could include topics like housing, transport, planning, scrutiny skills, working with the media, presentation skills, enhancing political leadership skills, assertiveness, time-management or speed-reading courses.

Hot topic

Communities of practice for local government

Social networking sites such as Facebook and the growing Twitter community feature heavily in the news with their focus on communicating regularly in a shared online environment.

LG Group's communities of practice collaboration platform offers a similar resource, but with a clear professional perspective and range of additional advantages. It is free and provides a secure environment for its members to share experiences, ideas and solutions. It also acts as a workspace to store and share documents and the means of finding others doing similar work or with similar concerns.

According to Councillor Sally Newton of Hertfordshire County Council: "The content is good and informative and has helped confirm that my council is on a similar track."

The advantages for councillors joining a community of practice include the provision of:

• opportunities to network, share and develop ideas and practice on a daily basis

• a single space to store, share and access documents

• a people finder tool to locate councillors, member services officers, or other staff working across the sector.

There are active members working across a diverse range of communities, from customer service to community cohesion. There has also been a series of online conferences run on the communities of practice platform, including the National Councillor Online Conference – Adult Social Care, specifically for councillors to discuss adult social care issues, and councillors connected: the social media online conference.

These online conferences work as normal conferences, with speakers, discussion, questions, and answers, but operate within the online environment, thus being more convenient, and saving time and money.

Many are run by councils, others by national organisations and a number are specifically aimed at councillors.

The national member development community was set up to enable councillors and others with member development responsibilities to work collaboratively and participate in member development programmes, providing a valuable means of direct communication.

www.local.gov.uk/communities

In some councils, councillors have regular away days or weekends to discuss strategic and other issues. Others have regular joint events for officers and councillors, to formulate strategy and build good working relationships.

The LG Group offers development opportunities through a number of programmes and Local Leadership activities.

Member development and the charter

Given the amount of change facing local government it is more important than ever that councillors have the necessary skills to make the decisions and provide leadership to their communities. The Charter for Member Development and the underpinning good practice guidelines provide a framework to help councils build their councillors' skill and expertise.

A higher-level charter (Level 2 or Charter Plus) provides a further challenge for councils that have already achieved the charter.

Snapshot

The South East Employers Organisation (SEEMP) requires councils signed up to its member development charter to provide an action plan based on:

1. Being fully committed to developing councillors in order to achieve the council's aims and objectives

2. Adopting a councillor-led strategic approach to councillor development.

3. Having a member learning and development plan that clearly identifies the difference development activities will make.

4. Seeing that learning and development is effective in building capacity.

5. Addressing wider development matters to promote work-life balance and citizenship.

Councillor Michael Tunwell, chairman of SEEMP, is very positive about the strategic thrust that is taking place in member development: "We want to do all we can to support councils in their approach to training members. It's very important especially since modernisation and the introduction of cabinet and scrutiny.

"There is a much more professional approach to the job and extra responsibilities. As councillors, we need to be trained as fully as we can."

Councillor Tunwell compares the charter with Investors In People (IiP): "It's about councils demonstrating commitment to investing in members and, like IiP, it focuses on individuals and the parts they play in the organisation's effectiveness."

He also emphasises that councils are likely to become more successful and more efficient by making sure that development relates to corporate priorities.