



# Local Democracy Research Centre

## A manifesto for councillors

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*This paper has been prepared for the Local Democracy Research Centre to stimulate debate about the future role of councillors. It will help to form the basis of future discussion forums among LGIU members as well as experts within in outside of local government in England. We welcome any responses.*

### Introduction

In July 2021 the government announced a new impetus to the faltering devolution agenda by proposing new 'county deals' with the focus on 'strong local leaders' - county elected mayors perhaps? While more detail is promised in the 'Levelling up' white paper, it is clear these deals will have an economic focus but are also intended to bring decision-making closer to the public (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-sets-out-new-county-deals-to-devolve-power-to-local-communities-in-levelling-up-speech>).

What is set out in this paper is a challenge to the government to be genuinely bold and radical and for devolution to mean devolution, not decentralisation. The paper is intended to stimulate debate about how the role of the councillor is changing and what new powers, freedoms and autonomy councillors need to be able to govern and lead their communities in the spirit of this latest devolution announcement. It is for these reasons the paper is entitled: A Manifesto for Councillors.

The Manifesto is presented as the starting point for a debate about how to empower all councillors to be strong local leaders as all councillors have leadership roles, not just those with the official title 'leader'. It draws on a recent report of the Council of Europe (2021) and the De Montfort University Councillor Commission (2017). The recommendations from those reports have been provocatively strengthened and developed to stimulate debate about how serious we are that devolution should



# Local Democracy Research Centre

fundamentally change the governance of England and how much we want to allow councillors to really lead locally.

## A manifesto for councillors

1. A basic package of support available to all councillors as a legal requirement to include:
  - a. Dedicated and focused secretarial and administrative support
  - b. Research and policy development facilities with dedicated officers to provide research on any subject as and when required by individual councillors
  - c. A link officer to navigate complex council organisational structures
  - d. Officers dedicated to supporting councillors in interacting with external networks
  - e. A case work centre to co-ordinate and respond to councillors' ward / divisional work.
  - f. A parliamentary style library research service
2. Equal access provided for all councillors to all council senior officers
3. All councillors to have an unfettered statutory right to access to any or all information held by the council in a form that is useable and understandable
4. A legal 'duty to respond' resting on public, private or third sector organisations from which councillors request information (A councillors' freedom of Information Act).
5. All public sector organisations and public service providers to have a statutory 'Duty of Collaboration' with councillors and be legally obliged to engage councillors in discussions about plans, policies, strategies and priorities as they affect communities.
6. Councillors to have a statutory right to be consulted by Government on proposed legislation affecting the services, powers, functions and responsibilities of local government before legislative proposals are placed before parliament.
7. Local Government to be able to challenge in a special and separate 'court of arbitration' any policy, legislative act, regulation or proposal from central government and the result of that arbitration to be binding.
8. The statutory right for time from work for council duties be extended to ensure councillors are not hindered from attending any councils events
9. Legal protect for councillors against threats, intimidation and harassment with council membership an aggravating condition to such offences
10. As part of the civil service training:

- a. All new civil service entries to undertake a six month secondment in a local authority democratic services office.
- b. Existing senior civil servants who have not undertaken any secondment to local government to undertake a three month secondment in a local authority democratic services office.

The basis on which the manifesto is developed is set out in the rest of the paper.

### **Let the debate commence: the need for the manifesto**

Councillors operate in a rapidly changing political, structural and governmental environment and their office is subject to changes energised by external bodies – particularly central government. None of this is however, unique to any country; rather it is a common experience of councillors across the globe that their office is subject to varying degrees of oversight and control by regional (where they exist) and central governments. Such oversight challenges the very use of the word ‘government’ in local ‘government’.

Not only is the structural and organisational setting in which councillors operate prone to change from external sources, but the existence of an array of public, semi-public, private, third sector organisations and quangos means councillors are spending more time navigating complex and dynamic networks of external agencies and bodies. We see here another challenge to the use of the word ‘government’ in local government as these networks operate independently of, but with, local government and councillor involvement.

Then there is the centre’s tendency to centralise where possible even when devolution is promised. The government’s withdrawal of the long-awaited ‘devolution’ white paper and its replacement by a ‘levelling up’ white paper is an indication of how, in England, devolution is a gift of the British centre which can be withdrawn by policy change or at a whim. Centralisation also comes from the centre’s ability to force or encourage council mergers and through the creation of larger councils with fewer pesky councillors with whom to negotiate. Indeed the size of English councils poses a challenge to any understanding of the word ‘local’ in local government (Denters, 2014, Copus, Leach and Jones, 2020).

Then there is the often negative image of the councillor held by the public, portrayed in much of the media and adhered to by much of Westminster and Whitehall that somehow councillors are: ineffectual, lacking the qualities needed to govern; incompetent amateurish and defective; in it for themselves and corrupt; prone to bickering, squabbling and unnecessary arguments; and, that we are currently experiencing a tsunami of badly behaving, angry, aggressive councillors who should be removed from office; none of these images, as we shall see, are remotely accurate.

The pressures councillors face and their public image, moulded by an anti-local government narrative, means their future is uncertain and tenuous with two directions of travel possible.

First the *'Doomsday'* scenario which sees a continuing diminution and dilution of the office, status, public standing, roles, powers and responsibilities of the councillor caused by a policy of governance fragmentation and the centre's preference, above local government, for unelected appointed public bodies, or other organisations with the ability to make public policy, spend public money and shape the future of communities without a single vote being cast and no democratic mandate. The ever present potential for, and process of, centralisation means councillors become marginalised, irrelevant and ignored by the centre and other organisations.

Second the *'sunlit uplands'* where local government and councillors are the recipients of irreversible powers, freedoms and autonomy devolved from the centre with councillors recognised as responsible for the governance of their localities. As a result councillors receive increased resources and support from their councils to reinforce their roles as local governors and representatives. The public and private bodies councillors interact with recognise the right of councillors to govern their localities and work closely with them. Councillors are accorded the standing appropriate to elected representatives vital to local democracy and local self-government. As a consequence the office of councillor experiences enhanced status, position and public/media recognition.

Using the results of recent research and international comparisons the manifesto now explores how we can ensure councillors inhabit the sunlit uplands and do not face Doomsday and how the office of councillor can be strengthened and enhanced so as to effectively address the increasing complexity of local government.

### Councillors: contextual chaos

Three important contextual settings dominate what councillors can achieve for their localities. These contexts shape the work of the councillor and often result in a set of unrealistic or inaccurate images of the councillor held by the public, the media and the centre and sometimes by councillors themselves.

#### *Size Matters: But Not How Many Think*

First is the sheer size of local government in England, the largest across Europe with the fewest councillors per population and sitting at the bottom of the league table of European local electoral turnout (Rallings et al, 2005, Gendzwill, 2019). The centre's policy obsession, shared by some in local government, with making English local government larger and reducing the number of councillors has recently received a spur with the Secretary of State's announcement of the abolition of 20 councils and their replacement by four new unitary councils in Somerset, North Yorkshire and Cumbria with the loss of up to 600 councillors. The arguments of the bigger is better narrative have been comprehensively and conclusively debunked by over 50 years of independent academic research, which is ignored by those seeking to increase the size of local government (Bish, 2001, Dollery et al, 2018, Erlingsson et al 2020, Copus, Leach and Jones, 2020)

The glee, with which many set out a reduction in councillor numbers in unitary proposals, as though restricting the space for citizens to take part in the governance of their localities is a perverse benefit of unitarisation, ignores the fact that the casework, policy, scrutiny and representative work undertaken by the 'disappeared' councillors does not go away. Reducing the number of councillors means increasing workloads for the remaining councillors, but the support infrastructure needed to undertake that work is already barely adequate.

The size of local government means many councils do not have boundaries reflecting genuine geographical communities, but rather are convenient artificial lines on a map designed to satisfy the size criteria rather than local self-government. England has a plethora of councils with points of the compass in their titles, or with an ampersand casually marking the merger of two previously independent areas, or with completely made up names reflecting some topographical feature or other neutral factor. Councillors are often faced with making these large entities seem like real places to the communities that are distant and remote from these artificial administrative bodies.

Bigger local government and fewer councillors not only reduces the space available for citizens to become involved in local self-government, but also means few local residents will know their councillor, or anyone who is a councillor thus placing even greater distance between local government and local communities. We shall see later however, how councillors are still the elected representatives closest to citizens and communities and how that proximity is a vital part of local democracy.

### ***Relationships with the Centre***

Local government is far from seen by the British centre as an equal partner in the governance of the country. As long ago as the 1980s the Widdicombe committee summed up the constitutional and legal position of local government in what is a stark warning to localists, worth repeating at length as it highlights the difficulties in strengthening councillors as local governors and representatives:

*Although local government has origins pre-dating the sovereignty of Parliament, all current local authorities are the statutory creations of parliament and have no independent status or right to exist. The whole system of local government could lawfully be abolished by Act of Parliament. (HMSO, 1986:45, para 3.3)*

The committee went onto comment:

*The position of local government in our political system is therefore governed by constitutional convention as well as by the simple fact that it derives its existence and powers from Parliament. It would however, be wrong to assume that such constitutional convention amounts to or derives from any natural right for local government to exist. It is a convention based on, and subject to, the contribution which local government can bring to good government.*

*It follows that there is no validity in the assertion that local authorities have a 'local mandate' by which they derive authority from their electorate placing them above the law.*

(Widdicombe committee, 1986:46, paras 3.5 and 3.6)

The centre's view has changed little despite almost 25 years of promises of devolution. If such attitudes continue to determine the relationship between the centre and local government (and there

is plenty of evidence to suggest they will) then the future of the councillor is one of continual limitation of powers and responsibilities; shrinking autonomy; increasing barriers to political room for manoeuvre; restricted ability to shape the activities of their own council let alone the policies and decisions of external bodies; and, a declining resource base from which to meet local needs.

It is a truism to point out that different government departments will approach councillors and local government in different ways depending on their own tasks and departmental ministers will bring their own style and understanding to their interactions with councillors; the centre is not a monolithic entity in its relationships with local government. But it is fair to say that a cultural change is required within Whitehall and Westminster in working relationships with local government and councillors and in the understanding at the centre of the role, functions task and the effectiveness of councillors. That change can only come about by the centre engaging far more closely and regularly with councillors in newly designed deliberative forums created to enhance communication between local and central government in its various parts. The centre needs greater clarity of understanding about what it is to be a councillor and of the realities of the life of the councillor.

The roles of the councillor have developed since Widdicombe's assessment with local leadership now requiring greater external focus. Councillors' pastoral role in relation to local citizens has maintained its welfare focus but today a more assertive community, greater avenues for citizen engagement and participation and a greater propensity to protest council decisions – with reaction against Low Traffic Neighbourhoods being a contemporary example – means councillors have a greater role in explanation and compromise with communities than Widdicombe imagined. The change in the community work of the councillor, when taken alongside councillors' involvement in complex networks of agencies and organisations, means Widdicombe's assessment above cannot be the final say on the relationship between the centre and local government. These issues are addressed in more detail in sections 4 and 5.

### ***Financial Constraints and Restrictions***

A sustained period of austerity and financial constraint has laid bare the difficulties councillors experience in governing increased demand for services with shrinking resources and with a highly restricted set of local taxation and spending powers. The stark features of local government finance overseas, in comparison to the English system, is: the array of different taxation powers resting with

councils; the greater and more complex engagement of councillors in making taxation decisions than in England; councillors making decisions about which taxes to employ; and, national and regional government willingness to tolerate local government access to a range of taxation powers (OECD, 2016). Belgium's municipal finance system provides a good example of local taxation autonomy with around 100 different local taxes possible (De Rynck and Wayenberg, 2010, Dessoy et al, 2014).

Internationally most local tax revenue overseas does come from two or three major taxes, sometimes up to 80% (OECD, 2016); that income is supplemented however, by a range of other taxes which provide valuable resources and financial autonomy.

English local government requires a basket of taxation powers which councillors can choose whether or not to employ, with the following examples being commonplace overseas:

- Leisure and amusement
- pet ownership
- Land transfer
- Vehicle registration tax
- Municipal tax on restaurant meals
- fuel tax
- Local Income tax
- Commercial Tax
- Local VAT or sales
- Inheritance
- Vehicle
- Property purchase
- Alcohol
- vehicle insurance
- a vehicle registration
- surtax on electricity consumption
- Building activities and construction
- Tax on the increased value of urban land
- Tourist tax (sometimes called a city tax)

The income from the above sources is often shared between the centre and localities on a per centage basis. Many will recoil in horror at the thought of such taxes being available to local government, while not blinking at the fact they are all already available to the centre. The above list is not a taxers' charter, rather, it represents the sort of freedoms that exist for local government in many parts of the globe and merely provides local government with the possibility of being used should local

circumstances require. The final tax on the list – the tourist tax - is the ultimate taxation without representation which is widely used and table one provides a few examples of where:

**Table one: Examples of Local Tourist tax**

Austria	Hungary
Belgium	Italy
Bulgaria	Netherlands
Canada	Portugal
Croatia	Romania
Czech Republic	Slovenia
France	Spain
Germany	Switzerland
Greece	The US

Yet the call by Birmingham City councillors to levy a tourist tax during the Commonwealth Games was brushed aside by the centre – despite those doing the brushing having paid such a tax at some point in their travels. Without a fundamental change in the financial and taxation context of local government councillors will face a continuing struggle to meet the service demands made on local government and do so without the freedom of manoeuvre that exists for councillors overseas.

### ***The Contradiction of Devolution Promises with Centralising Tendencies***

Local government has been long promised devolution by governments of all colours (Leach et al, 2017). In reality, and this is not a semantic point, what has been on offer is decentralisation of tasks, functions, responsibilities, services and some budgets; rather, than a fundamental rethinking of the role of local government and its freedom and autonomy. Local government in England will not be the recipient of anything remotely like that devolved to the Scottish and Welsh chambers and in the absence of an English Parliament England will continue to lag behind in the devolution stakes.

The replacement of the promised devolution white paper with proposed ‘levelling up’ white paper indicates that the centre has learnt the wrong lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic and centralising tendencies have come to the fore displaying themselves in two main ways.

First the default position for central government is one of command and control, where the centre issues often very detailed, instructions on every subject, limiting the discretion available to councillors

to use their local and knowledge and intelligence to solve the local manifestation of national issues – for the centre ‘one size does indeed fit all’ (See Copus, et al, 2017).

Secondly, where devolution has been mooted most recently, it is normally via the creation of new structures – such as combined authorities – rather than to local government. The current debate about county deals and county-based combined authorities emphasises how devolution is conditional upon some form of restructuring. Moreover, the centre’s tendency to shift responsibilities away from and back to local government, over time, or to leave responsibility with local government but provision through other agencies, means councillors often have little direct oversight of public services and cannot control them how the public often expect.

Centralising tendencies display a lack of trust in councillors and a disdain for their capacity to deal with complex policy issues. Any lack of capacity on the part of councillors, however, is often a result of policies of the centre rather than an inherent lack of ability among councillors.

There are three ways in which the centre reduces councillors’ room manoeuvre in governing their localities reflective of local priorities and values.

1. Through policies and legislation directly affecting the roles, responsibilities, functions, powers and autonomy of local government and councillors.
2. Through policies and legislation affecting specific services or areas for which local government is responsible.
3. By the creation of new public, semi-public or private bodies which are given powers and responsibility for decisions and services that affect local communities

The ability of councillors to act on behalf of their communities and to represent those communities to other tiers of government and other agencies is shaped by the centre, not by local needs or by the requirements of effective local governance. To achieve the latter we need to explore the main areas of challenge facing councillors.

### Councillors: leading, representing and governing communities

The leadership roles councillors undertake are multi-faceted and see them act in different settings as electorally legitimised community and political leaders, local governors and political representatives (Hansen, 2001, Egner, et al 2013). These roles are not restricted to councillors holding an official leadership position; rather it is something which extends to all councillors. Given that successive governments (from Blair to Johnson) have stressed the importance of local leadership but shied away from giving councillors the freedom and autonomy to lead locally, we need to explore the leadership, governing and representative roles of the councillor.

The proximity councillors have to their communities, being embedded within them, is a unique factor of their *representative* role enabling them to give voice to community concerns, values and opinions. As a representative, councillors act as an advocate for communities (of place and interest), reconcile conflicting local opinions, arbitrate between communities, and channel local views into political decision-making. In this process the councillor represents the community to the council; but party politics often means the councillor represents the council to the public, normally as a member of the ruling group. Just as councillors arbitrate between competing local views, they also have to arbitrate between their party and the voters as part of their complex local representative role.

Councillors, as representatives and leaders, interact with their voters, listen to understand and are called to respond to voters' opinions, and construct coalitions and alliances across and within communities around policy and social issues in ways Members of Parliament do not, and nor are they required to do so within their localities. How well local democracy works, how easy or otherwise it is for the public to participate, depends on councillors' skills and the resources and support available to them as they link the community and council. Given the large size of English local government and the wards and divisions into which it is divided, and given the complexity of the economic, social, environmental and political issues which affect communities, it is vital that councillors have the right support, resources and status with which to act.

The public expect the councillor to solve personal case work issues; address local community problems, from the mundane to the complex; provide access to the council; and, take action to force change in the policies and practices of the council (Egner et al, 2013, Copus, et al 2013, Pedersen,

2014). Part of the expectational problems councillors experience is the ‘magic wand’ many in the public expect them to wave to solve all local ills.

Within the council, councillors’ leadership roles come through developing policy, in formal policy and decision-making forum and through their oversight and scrutiny of a council’s political and managerial leadership. Here councillors have opportunities to develop policy interests into specialisms and expertise and to apply their local knowledge and personal skills to the benefit of the council and community. The councillor as ‘an asset’ to the council is often overlooked, partly because of party politics, which excludes all but the majority group from being seen as leading policy; partly because council leaderships hold the formal title of ‘leader’; and, partly because the policy discretion that exists for local government is constrained by the centre. Yet, all councillors are part of the leadership of a council and undertake that role in different spheres of activity:

- The strategic policy development process
  - Council decision-making
  - Oversight of service delivery and quality
  - Regulatory functions
  - Ensuring the accountability of the council leadership and ruling administration for their policies, decisions and delivery of strategic plans and through scrutiny of existing policy
- (Council of Europe, 2021)

Often overlooked or constrained is the leadership role councillors have in holding the administrative machinery and council officers to account through a process of questioning, investigation, inquisition, oversight and challenge of appointed officials, which operates to varying degrees of effectiveness across local government. If they are to play this role effectively however, councillors must be supported with sufficient resources, information, research facilities and policy advice to facilitate input to strategic policy development and for ensuring the accountability of the managerial and administrative machine. Without such a role and the resources to conduct it, the basis of local government as an elected and politically representative body is called into question.

It is with councillors’ role in, and right to, question and challenge officers where recent calls for a strengthening of the sanctions available to be used against councillors are at their most dangerous

and disingenuous. What may appear as bullying or ‘inappropriate’ interactions with officers by councillors may be to the electorate an example of an assiduous, hardworking and determined councillor. The question is rarely asked why councillors might become angry, lose their temper or raise their voices to officers; instead an assumption of bullying and poor behaviour is made. Rather than reaching for strengthened sanctions against councillors it would be far more valuable to local democracy to address questions such as:

- Why do councillors get angry or lose their temper?
- Why do they get frustrated?
- What delays and obstructions are they experiencing from their councils?
- Are we giving them enough information, advice, support or resources to carry out their work?
- Do we respond quickly and sufficiently enough to their questions and enquiries?
- Why do some councillors see council officers as obfuscating or concealing details, knowledge or intelligence that would be of use to them?
- What is it councillors want or need to carry out their representative responsibilities?
- Why hasn’t what they agreed been done, or done in the way they requested?
- Why haven’t things been explained to councillors?
- Why a councillor would feel misled, denied information and advice, or obstructed and ignored?

It is better in the value-laden, emotive and passionate world of local politics to properly equip and support councillors in their roles, than punish those who express frustration at being unable to generate action.

Councillors experience frustration from feelings of being deprived of information and knowledge about their council and the array of organisations with which they interact. The cry at the beginning of each episode of the 1960s series ‘The Prisoner’ of ‘we want information’ is often heard when discussing with councillors what is needed to enhance their role in governing their localities (DMU, 2017). Nothing demonstrates better the frustration of councillors in seeking information than the not unheard of occurrence of them needing to lodge Freedom of Information requests to the council of which they are an elected member.

Yet, there are examples of weakness by councillors - Liverpool, Croydon, and Northamptonshire being current examples – in carrying out this accountability role in a sufficiently robust and inquisitorial fashion. Those failings occurred, to varying degrees, because of party politics, political culture, ineffectual systems and processes and because of unwillingness among some to challenge political and managerial leadership. The councillor as a vehicle for local accountability requires both a recognition of the political division of labour existing among councillors and that councils no longer can or should speak with one voice. It also requires sufficient and robust research support and information to effectively question, challenge, seek justification from and expose the decisions, policies and actions (or inactions) of those in formal political and managerial leadership positions. T

The next section shows how the councillor's role in public accountability extends beyond their council into the complex and fractured networks of organisations which make up the landscape of English local governance.

### **Councillors: the challenges and opportunities of governing through networks**

An increasing feature of councillors' work and a fundamental change in their focus is the need to navigate complex, dynamic and shifting networks of external agencies and bodies operating, more often than not, beyond the boundaries of a single council (Sorensen and Torfing, 2018). Councillors now interact with a vast array of public and semi-public bodies, third sector and private organisations (Sorensen and Torfing, 2005). Those bodies make decisions, develop public policy, spend public money, provide public services and their decisions and actions shape the future of local communities sometimes for decades to come. Yet, they do this without a single vote being cast, without a democratic mandate or electoral legitimacy and no clear lines of public accountability (see, Bovens et al, 2014). Local democracy has been hollowed-out and is being replaced by an organisational autocracy which largely excludes effective oversight and control by the councillors we elect.

Councillors are now spending more time steering through an intricate labyrinth of organisations so as to influence, shape and guide the activities of those bodies as a way of directing resources to local issues and bringing some democratic oversight to these networks and their participants (Torfing et al,

2009). Governing through chaotic networks can however be a powerful tool for councillors and a mechanism to overcome limitations on their office.

A recent Council of Europe report (CoE, 2021) found that councillors have a four-fold task when interacting in networks and with their participants, over whom they have no direct control:

1. Seek to influence, shape and direct the policies and actions of other organisations and to do so through dialogue, negotiation, compromise and bargaining;
2. Hold other organisations in the public, quasi-governmental, private, and third sectors to account through a process of questioning, seeking justification and explanation and by investigation;
3. Integrate and coordinate the activities and decisions of other organisations into a cohesive whole and provide coherence to unstructured networks operating within the locality;
4. Engage with other bodies to forge a shared vision of the future of the community by using the moral leverage provided by their elected office to influence those bodies.

(Council of Europe, Governance Committee Report 2021: 12; network shaping and influencing as part of councillors' governing toolbox were identified by the Association of Public Sector Excellence (APSE), in a 2018 report).

These four areas of councillor activity have a *strategic* and *operational* dimension. Strategically councillors seek to shape the policies and long-term thinking of a range of organisations and bring them (and networks collectively), into alignment with the elected council. It is not just councillors with formal leadership positions that undertake this activity – rather, all councillors are in a position to use the moral and political leverage their office provides – the only real power it has – and their local knowledge in various informal forum to influence other bodies and shape their decisions (CoE, 2021, APSE 2018).

Councillors also act within networks to bring about operational change at a more immediate level to affect the quality of services or facilities within their wards and divisions provided by, or the responsibility of, other organisations.

As the role of network influencer and shaper is becoming a more prominent part of the work of the councillor (Sorensen, 2006, DMU, 2017, Sorensen and Torfing 2018) and as organisations beyond the elected council have resources and decision-making ability but little democratic oversight or input, councils need to recognise and support councillors' activity in influencing networks and their players.

While leading councillors receive support in this work those outside formal leadership positions often invest their own time and resources in developing more informal communication as a way of shaping and influencing networks and their participants.

Councils need a strategic understanding of the network influencer role of the councillor and of the support councillors require to conduct that role (outlined in the manifesto demands in section two). The centre needs to recognise that as a legitimate part of local democracy and local self-government, councillors should have robust formal and regular channels to all organisations which shape the development and well-being of communities.

As well as a network influencer and shaper, councillors are the vehicle through which networks are held to account. Thus, councillors need effective and robust *formal* mechanisms to question, challenge, seek justification for and explanation of policies and decisions (and how and why they were made) from network participants. The process of ensuring the accountability of networks not only requires formal structures, but also formal powers. In other words, the local government scrutiny process must be reshaped to provide councillors, collectively and individually, with an overview of, input to, and information from those organisations that are part of the landscape of contemporary local governance.

Councillors have been skilful at creating informal links with a vast array of organisations to have strategic and operational influence (Copus, 2016). Such work by councillors depends on their own social and influencing skills, their ability to develop effective working relationships with officers of external organisations and on their determination and diligence. It also depends on the willingness of other agencies and bodies to interact with councillors and on their responsiveness to them. It is often a voluntary relationship built on personal contacts and when personnel change, councillors start from scratch to create working relationships with new staff. The fragility of this process is plain but councillors' role in providing shape, coherence and direction to the discussions, decisions and actions of other organisations while also holding them to account fills an important gap in our local democratic framework which requires an effective institutional setting. It also requires legal recognition of the councillor as a legitimate participant in governance networks with the responsibility for holding to account non-elected bodies and with the statutory power and resources to carry out this vital governing and democratic role.

### Supporting the councillor as governor, representative and leader

A radical rethink is needed in the way councillors are perceived and supported by their councils and the centre. While it may not be popular to propose resourcing councillors, even among councillors, it is a necessary step to strengthen local government and democracy. The manifesto demands in section two suggests the minimum support needed for councillors to undertake their roles as politicians and deliberately makes no distinction between leading councillors –who may already be adequately resourced – and other councillors, who in many cases are not.

If local government in England continues to get bigger, and the signs are it will, and as a result we have fewer councillors, it is not unreasonable to look at the support provided to MPs as a basis for that provided to councillors. Even if local government stays the same size it is not unreasonable to expect councillors to be adequately supported for their various roles and responsibilities.

While democratic services officers, ably supported by the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO), have the firmest understanding, among officers, of what it is to be a councillor, the challenge is for all officers to refocus their work on meeting the needs of all councillors. The first step is for officers to be aware of and understand the work, role, pressures, tensions and experiences of elected members and for parity of esteem given to all councillors whether in the leadership or opposition back-benches.

Next there needs to be a full consideration, in the context of each council, of what makes councillors' working life more effective with the aim of providing as a minimum that set out in section two in terms of administrative, research, policy and officer support to all councillors.

That support would go some way to assisting councillors in meeting the increasing time demands and workloads they are experiencing (LGA, 2018) and their tasks in governing their localities. As the focus of much of what councillors do continues to shift to outside the council, where the real act of governing takes place, a change in the legal and constitutional status of the councillor is also needed. The manifesto is a basis for redefining local government, local politics and the role of the councillor because without such changes much of what continues to happen locally will either be a result of central government convenience, or undertaken by a myriad of far from local unelected, unaccountable agencies and bodies. The manifesto re-localises our local politics.

### Conclusions

The starting point in this councillor manifesto was two possible futures: ‘doomsday’ and ‘sunlit uplands’. While the direction of travel is currently towards Doomsday, the paper has set out some ways that direction might change so councillors can govern their areas in a way recognisable to any institution with the word ‘government’ in its title.

A deliberate challenge is posed to councils and the centre to treat councillors as politicians in the same way as MPs, by providing resources, support, powers and autonomy to councillors as a part of the institution of local government. A second challenge is to re-define the relationship between the centre and local government by emphasising the ‘local’ and the ‘government’ in local government by ensuring devolution is devolution of power and autonomy and not decentralisation of tasks and functions. The manifesto for councillors has been written to stimulate debate about what we can reasonably expect from our councillors and how we should support them in the work they do for our local communities. Let us not shy away from that debate.

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