

Your school, your community

Elected councillors' role in school improvement



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The Centre for Public Scrutiny

The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), an independent charity, is the leading national organisation for ideas, thinking and the application and development of policy and practice to promote transparent, inclusive and accountable public services. We support individuals, organisations and communities to put our principles into practice in the design, delivery and monitoring of public services in ways that build knowledge, skills and trust so that effective solutions are identified together by decision-makers, practitioners and service users.

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Local Government Association

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We work with councils to support, promote and improve local government.

We are a politically-led, cross party organisation which works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

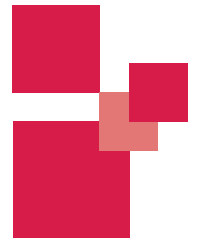
www.local.gov.uk

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The recent changes to national education policy and the move to create more academies bring challenges and opportunities for local councils in how they maintain oversight of education standards in their area. Although two-thirds of pupils still attend council-maintained schools, more than 60% of secondary schools are now academies ¹.

These changes mean that councils have fewer 'formal' levers with some schools to help them to fulfil their statutory duties which include: promoting academic excellence, protecting vulnerable children and making sure there are enough school places locally, school place planning etc.

However, these changes also present significant opportunities for local councillors to enhance their community leadership role and develop the role in new ways - by being a link between the council and schools.

In our first publication '**Back to School**', we explored the role that Overview and Scrutiny could play in supporting schools and holding the education sector to account. The case for a continued but changing role for councils and their scrutiny function was compelling in relation to all schools, whatever their governance. One area that emerged from this work was the need to explore further the role of individual councillors in school improvement.

This second publication explores how a councillor might use their community leadership role to develop new relationships with the schools in their ward.

It uses the insight and experience from councillors, governors and a head teacher from across the country. Participants shared their experience of councillors and schools working together: what worked well and the benefits to them. This insight is used to inform the rest of this publication – and the case for strengthening links between local councillors and schools.

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/433680/SFR16_2015_Main_Text.pdf



The case for strengthening links between Benefits for councillors schools councils

The most compelling case for strengthening the links between councillors and schools in their patch is to ensure that the children attending the school have the best possible educational outcomes. Better understanding and working between the council, councillors, and their local schools can make a significant contribution to creating the right environment to improve outcomes.

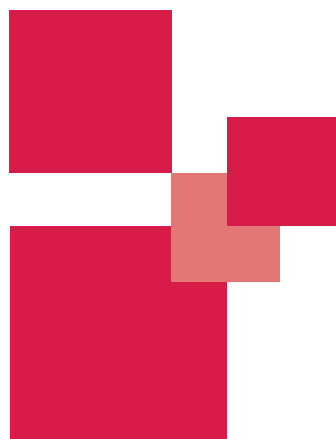
There are many reasons why it is advantageous for schools and councillors to work more effectively together, these include:

- Local councillors have a unique role. They are elected to serve the community and have a community leadership role that enables them to improve outcomes for their area and also council wide.
- To do their job effectively, councillors need to develop relationships with public service organisations and key contacts in their ward, including those affecting children given their role as 'corporate parents' and their responsibility for safeguarding. Therefore developing better and more productive relationships with schools is a fundamental *'must do'* for any ward councillor – whether they are a governor or not.
- Whilst individual councillors may not have a direct role in decision-making in relation to local schools, they have the broad duty to provide community leadership in their area. This means being aware of all the different organisations, resources and facilities that impact on residents of all ages, and working with other providers to promote the wellbeing of their place. This can involve identifying opportunities to influence local education, support school leaders and help improve school results.
- As a representative of their constituents, councillors are often called upon to resolve problems or complaints. By establishing positive ongoing working relations with the school(s) in their area this can help to resolve issues quickly and as they arise.
- As the picture of education providers changes, councils need to find other ways of providing oversight of education within their area – to ensure that they continue to fulfil their statutory duties.

The value of strengthening links and more effective working not only realises benefits for the council and councillors, it also would add value to schools and school leaders. The next two sections look at these potential benefits:

- The councillor and the council
- The school and its leaders and governors

The final section explores some values and tips to help you to begin to strengthen links with your schools.



The case for strengthening links between Benefits for councillors schools councils

The role of the local council may well have changed, but the range of council services that work to support schools and pupils are now far wider than the old Local Education Authority roles. A councillor has the benefit of being central to this and has the opportunity to be a conduit for a more cohesive community – building on the overriding need to support all learners to fulfil their potential.

Councillors need to be aware of all the public services provided in their locality although the council may only have a responsibility for delivery of some of these. Councillors have a role in identifying local needs and recognising local issues without necessarily being overly concerned about any specific service. Their interest is in the wider social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of their area and the residents within it, including the quality of school buildings, the culture and ethos of their school communities and the excellence of school attainment.

Schools and other educational services need to closely reflect the needs of localities, but it is very often the case that links with communities and deep understanding of the issues affecting the school community have not always been understood or explored.

Building better relationships with school governors and leaders could benefit councillors by:

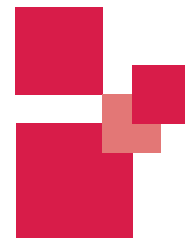
- Making sure councillors are one of the key contacts that the school leadership and staff have in the local community.
- Generating better understanding of the current education landscape and safeguarding systems, the different types of school and their respective governance models, and helping to understand how the council supports them.
- Helping to better understand the ‘whole’ school – this isn’t just about understanding the data and how well it is performing (although this is important); it will provide better understanding of the ethos and values of the school, its staff and how they work, the relationship that it has with pupils, parents and the community. But it will be equally important for the school to understand the role of a councillor too.
- Accessing and using insight from local schools to develop a deeper understanding of local issues, inform regeneration plans, school travel plans, and council improvement strategies; making local problem solving easier.
- Providing insight into the variations in outcomes between schools and the potential reasons for this, especially those working with many of our most deprived children.
- Using the relationship with schools to engage with parents (the electorate).
- Raising the profile of local democracy and civic engagement.
- Engaging school leaders and pupils in your work as a councillor, for example they could become co-optees, attend council area fora, become partners or witnesses in council activity.
- Engaging in school life could be a catalyst for change in other areas.

Benefits for schools

- Creating opportunities for direct conversations with parents, pupils, head teachers, governors and leaders of federations or Academy chains - and facilitate regular meetings with representatives from their local schools.
- Getting to understand school governors and the similarities that these roles have with that of a councillor - Consider joint training for and sharing of skills between councillors and governors.
- Sharing local authority good practice on governance, transparency, and support might be helped by comparing schools' approaches as well.
- Understanding where councillors can help school governors and where school governors can help councillors in their local community will help build support for partnership working.
- Encouraging local schools to consider delivering a wider service, to make a greater impact in the community such as hosting after school activities, advice surgeries, sports facilities and community facilities. These may contribute to boosting aspirations and attainment, and in promoting community cohesion.



Benefits for schools



Schools have a central place in their community, and what happens in school has a massive impact on its community for generations to come – yet schools can sometimes be insular and isolated from the outside community.

There are significant pressures upon school leaders to succeed. Head teachers and governors, whether new to post or established, will have a 'to do' list when it comes to understanding their community. Local councillors have access to information and contacts across the community with parents and families, the police, NHS, community groups, the voluntary sector, the business community and other partners, and could facilitate new partnerships for school leaders.

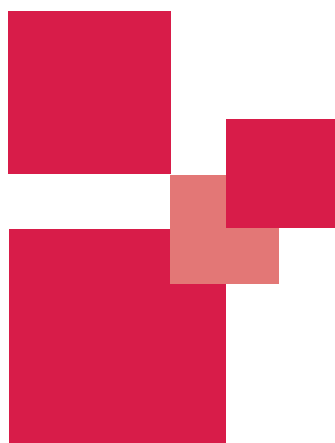
Councillors can be very influential and everyday will use their powers of influence to work with others in an attempt to create better communities. They will also have the ability to influence services outside the direct remit of the local authorities.

One of the benefits of locally elected councillors is their community leadership role. They represent a specific area and can work to support the facilities and communities within it, being their voice, someone who will listen to their needs with a mandate to be their advocate and the champion of their needs.

Building better relationships with councillors could benefit schools and school leaders by:

- Enabling a more outward focus - your local councillor can provide a link into the wider community and key stakeholders – generating productive partnerships and new connections.
- Sharing information between your school and your councillor could lead to better mutual understanding of the community. For example the school using a councillors' insight and knowledge from constituency work.
- Creating better relationships could help schools to access different resources to get things done.
- Enhancing relationships can help to raise the profile of the school and provide better connections.
- Using their role as an advocate for the school in relation to budgets, buildings, development etc; and could support schools in their liaison with the council's school support services as appropriate
- Establishing links with local businesses. This might include sourcing a motivational speaker for the sixth form, the provision of work experience and support for skills and vocational activity or in primary schools – showcasing local trades and skills.
- Building better partnerships between agencies that affect children's wellbeing including schools, health services, police, voluntary organisations eg in relation to FGM, domestic violence or radicalisation; it could influence children's educational attainment.
- Helping to put in to practice the Government's ambition to *"create and enforce a clear and rigorous expectation on all schools to promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs"* - councillors have knowledge and community understanding that can help.

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- Mediating local support - councillors have links to local community groups and partnerships that can positively affect the wellbeing of a community. Changes in schools such as class sizes, school re-organisation, expanding schools to meet increasing demand or changes in leadership can create strong reactions, and councillors' roles as mediators and leaders can be essential.
 - Helping to improve links between the home and school, engage disengaged communities with their schools, and build bridges between home, school and community using their community leadership role.



Values and tips for the steps to take to build better relationships between councillors and school

Values

As with all public offices held, councillors are expected to follow the 7 Nolan Principles of Public Life:

Selflessness

Integrity

Objectivity

Accountability

Openness

Honesty

Leadership

However when establishing effective working relationships with schools; additional values or ways of working will come in to play. These include being:

Supportive – taking the time to understand the aspirations of the school and how you can support these.

Sensitive – not just to the information that you may come in touch with, but also to the work pressures of teachers and governors. Different approaches for different schools.

Understanding – that sometimes the school has other priorities and may not be able to meet with you.

Encouraging and influential – helping the school and governors to look beyond what they think is possible.

Reliable and on hand!
One of the main attributes when building a relationship – knowing that you are there to support and that you make time for the school will be important.

Checklist

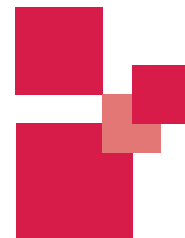
Local councillors already build relationships with people in their community on a daily basis and this publication hasn't been produced to show how to build effective relationships. Instead the focus of this publication is to attempt to show councillors, councils and school leaders the value of striking up effective working.

However, there are steps that are needed to ensure that you are fully aware of the education system, the support that your council gives to schools and the school in the wider context of a community before councillors begin to develop an effective working relationship. The following few tips serve as a checklist in knowing what 'homework' you need to do!

Get to know schools in your ward

- ☐ Plot the schools in your ward or division on a map; find out about their governance and the key stages they cover.
- ☐ Build a database of head teachers and chairs of governors in your ward or division and establish regular contact.
- ☐ Understand the demographic make-up of each school.
- ☐ Read the most recent Ofsted reports for the schools in your ward or division. What have you learnt? What action is to be taken if any? How is it progressing? Is there further information you need to find out from meeting with the head teacher and chair of governors or the lead member for children and schools?
- ☐ Visit the 'Watchsted' website, a good way of getting to know about the Ofsted results across an area
- ☐ Look up any planning applications for schools in your ward or division and consider if you need to take any action on this in support of the school.
- ☐ Consider the location of each school in the community and the impact of other facilities such as road safety, sweeping, and planning policies on take-aways etc.
- ☐ Plot the provision for Early Years, special needs and pupil referral units within the council area.
- ☐ ... and for further and higher education.
- ☐ Build a database of all stakeholders and those who influence early years through to lifelong learning.

<http://www.watchsted.com/>



2 Familiarise yourself with education policy, inspections and other issues affecting children such as safeguarding

- ☐ Research information to improve your understanding of the complexity of the education system, and the changes affecting it.
- ☐ Look up Government policies, plans, requirements, priorities and local funding allocations.
- ☐ Understand the Ofsted framework and its cycle of inspections and reports.
- ☐ Understand what it means to be a corporate parent and be responsible for looked after children.
- ☐ Understand safeguarding issues and child protection.
- ☐ Find out what governors do and the different forms of governance of schools that now exists.

3 Find out about the role of your council

- ☐ Find out about your council's support for schools - the statutory requirements and how it is resourced eg is there a school improvement team?
- ☐ Find out about procedures for place planning by the local authority.
- ☐ Find out about school admissions and appeals, and look at recent data and parent/school feedback.
- ☐ Find out about school exclusions procedures that have to be followed and the incidence in your ward or division.
- ☐ Ask for information about home to school transport and the take-up in your ward or division.
- ☐ Look at safeguarding policies and issues such as school security.
- ☐ Find out about the work of your local Schools Forum which makes decisions about school funding allocations.
- ☐ Find good practice examples from within the local authority and beyond it.
- ☐ Look at the council's scrutiny work programme and recent reports to find out if they have covered or plan to cover anything to do with schools.

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