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The future role of councillors

Purpose of Report

This report presents the recommendations of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee's report into the role of councillors in their communities and proposes options for taking them forward.

Summary

There is an opportunity for the LGA to build on positive messages in the Select Committee's report to refresh our offer to councillors and the 'Be a Councillor' campaign. There is also an opportunity to capitalise on interest from DCLG Ministers in this agenda.

Recommendation

Members to discuss the proposals outlined in the report.

Action

Officers to take forward as directed by members.

Contact officer: Joe Simpson
Position: Principal Strategic Adviser
Phone no: 020 7187 7389
E-mail: joe.simpson@local.gov.uk

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Background

1. In March 2012, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee launch an inquiry into the role councillors play in their communities. They focused particularly on:
 - 1.1. the role of councillors as leaders of communities and neighbourhoods;
 - 1.2. recruitment and diversity of councillors – and the implications for representation and local democracy;
 - 1.3. skills, training and support for councillors;
 - 1.4. the practicalities of being a councillor – including time commitment, time off work, casework and remuneration;
 - 1.5. localising decision making to divisions, wards and neighbourhoods;
 - 1.6. oversight, facilitation and accountability; and
 - 1.7. strategic leadership, governance and responsibilities.
2. The LGA hosted a workshop with Select Committee members and selected backbench councillors in June 2012. Councillor Peter Fleming (Chairman of the Improvement and Innovation Board) also gave formal oral evidence on behalf of the LGA. Committee members also visited Sunderland City Council during the inquiry and were impressed by their model of councillor development.
3. A cross-organisational team from the LGA prepared written evidence for the Committee which highlighted changing nature of the role of the councillor, both at a ward/division level and the whole place, strategic leadership level. We stated the need to ensure our members are bold and ambitious leaders, equipped to tackle the challenges facing their communities: reinvigorating local governance; ensuring strong democratic accountability; supporting local government to make a difference; deliver; and be trusted.

‘Councillors on the frontline’ report

4. The Select Committee published its report, ‘Councillors on the frontline’ in January 2013. The report strongly recommends **further devolution of power and resources** from Government to councils, and from councils to their councillors. The Committee recognised **three key practical barriers** to people becoming and remaining councillors: time commitment; lack of support from employers; and levels of allowances. The report also made a number of recommendations about **recruitment and support**.

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5. While media attention focused on councillor allowances, this formed only a small part of the report. The bulk of the content and recommendations was very positive about local government and councillors.
6. The report particularly praised the **Be a Councillor campaign** and urged the LGA to expand the programme. It also encouraged **the LGA to work with councils to ensure good practice is shared**.

Be a Councillor

7. The Be a Councillor programme began as a pilot run by London Councils in the run-up to the 2010 London elections and was then expanded to be a national campaign coordinated by the Leadership Centre. It was re-launched with a refreshed design and under LGA branding at the LGA's 2012 parliamentary reception.
8. The programme has two separate but complementary elements: the **political work and the public-facing campaign**.
 - 8.1. The political work is divided into party streams. Political advisers alongside the LGA political group offices decide the nature and focus of the work for their respective parties. There has been significant impact made in this area as recognised by many who gave evidence to the committee as well as within the select committee report
 - 8.2. The public-facing campaign consists of a 'toolkit' of materials and information that councils and councillors can use to promote the role of councillor and that emphasise a 'talent spotting' approach.
9. The current Be a Councillor budget is £80,000. This is split four ways; equally between Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and work outside the three main parties (including the generic campaign and work with the Independent Group). It has also been supported by the LGA's communications team.

Future LGA support to councillors

10. The current Be a Councillor campaign is a strong brand with good links to the main political parties and mixed model of delivery that has proven very successful. Officers suggest **future development of the programme should build on existing success**, rather than reinventing it.
11. The political work will be put out to tender in 2013 to allow for greater flexibility within this work. The political groups will be overseeing this process. We also hope to expand the delivery team as part of this process – but this is currently in discussion as we need to ensure we get the most impact within the allocated budgets. The political group offices will be increasingly closely involved in the development and delivery of future programmes.

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12. There are a **number of new areas into which Be a Councillor could expand**, for example:
 - 12.1. Developing the work with councils. To date this has been the least successful element of the programme. Future work might look to engage councils to take up the campaign and share best practice.
 - 12.2. Working with other organisations, for example national organisations supporting young people or employers.
 - 12.3. Linking Be a Councillor to new thinking on induction and support to new councillors.
13. The refreshed **Leadership Academy** programme is intended to include a module on community leadership, the details of which will be confirmed once the current tendering process is complete.
14. The LGA might consider expanding the **Next Generation** programme to run two cohorts per party per year. Last year there were 109 applications for 55 places (this is the largest ever cohort we have run). The average feedback score for the modules run so far for the current cohort is 3.85 out of 4 (96%). So there is demand and capability to expand the programme – the budgetary implications of this are below.
15. The LGA might consider **piloting a programme of support to councils based around councillor induction**. With county elections in 2014 and London and other metropolitan boroughs in 2015, there is a ready-made platform to reach large numbers of councillors and create locally owned visions for the future role of councillors backed up by practical support. There is an appetite to undertake this work: a local programme on the role of the elected member was launched by the Chairman in January 2012, and Suffolk County Council has also approached the LGA about joint work in this area. The work undertaken through the Leadership Centre into developing narratives on localism and the role of the councillor within party political traditions will play a role in shaping this element of support. The Leadership and Localism team are also exploring the possibility of a new programme around new councillors.
16. DCLG officers have approached LGA officers seeking to build a shared message about the importance of ward/division councillors. **Ministers, particularly Don Foster MP are keen to engage with councillors on this agenda** in advance of the Department's response to the Select Committee report in March. There is a possibility of DCLG committing some funding towards a peer learning / good practice sharing programme to support this.
17. It is important that emerging learning from the **whole place and neighbourhood community budgets and public health support programmes** is interwoven with the

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broader support offer to councillors to ensure that the offer is relevant to the sector's current and future challenges.

Financial Implications

18. This is a strategic piece of work for the LGA, which has been led by a cross-organisational team. The financial implications therefore touch on a number of teams.
19. If the **Be a Councillor** programme were to take a higher profile in the LGA's campaigning work, it would require a higher proportion of the Communications teams' resources. A slight expansion of Be a Councillor would necessitate a modest increase in funding from within the Leadership and Localism team's budget for 2013/14.
20. Developing an **induction programme** piloted in a small number of counties (in 2013) and London boroughs (in 2014) would require approximately 30 days of officer time as a one-off cost in 2013/14; this to be sourced either internally or externally.
21. Running a second set of **Next Generation** cohorts would cost an additional £135,000.
22. Leadership and Productivity officers are considering further development programmes and/or events for Leaders as well as some work on managerial leadership. This would be a further budget pressure of £100,000.
23. Additional funding from DCLG may also be available to support other workstreams in this area.