

Be a Councillor – Exercise Worksheets

Exercise – how much do you really know about your local area?

Think about the area that you would represent if you decided to stand for election. It would be important for you to know about the different communities who live there, the industries and workplaces and the infrastructure that exists to serve and support local people. Write down what you know about the following:

How many people live in the area?

How many different languages are spoken?

What proportion of people claim housing benefit?

What proportion of the local population are of retirement age?

What do the most recent crime statistics tell you about crime concerns?

Who are the major employers?

How many people commute into the area each day in order to work?

How many affordable homes are being built?

Reflect on your responses to the questions above.

How well do you feel you know the area now?

Could you learn more?

Would you feel comfortable to be asked any of these questions by one of your constituents or the local media if you were a councillor?

Exercise – seeing the ‘bigger picture’

Look at the individual cases presented below and write down some of the potential issues that might lie behind each.

1. Four separate cases reported of potholes on a stretch of highway

2. A rise in the number of queries received by the local councillor about on-street parking by people commuting in from other areas

Imagine you were the local councillor who received these cases.

How might you react?

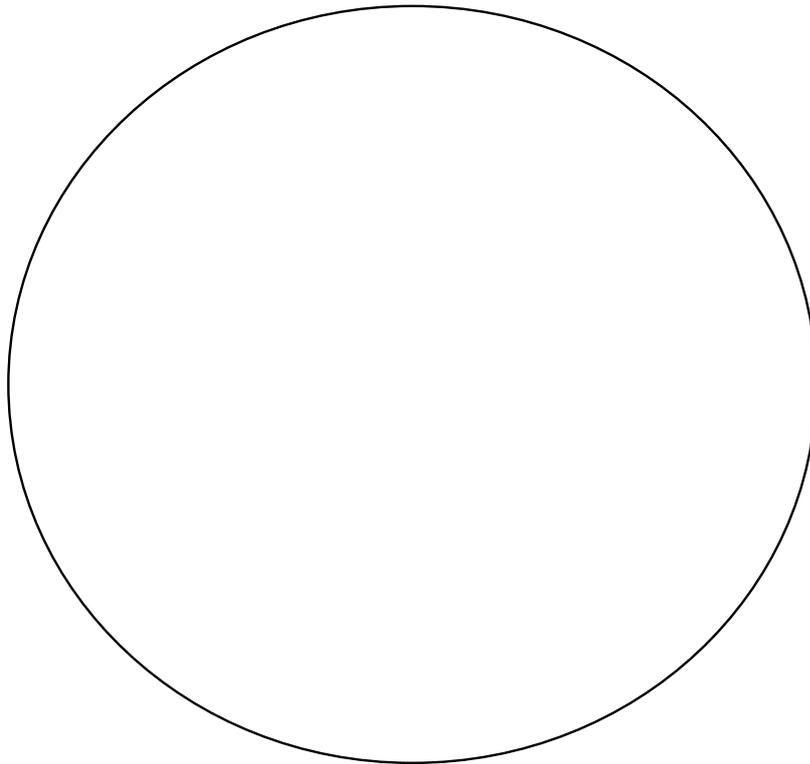
What wider concerns would they suggest?

What first steps would you take?

Exercise – how you use your time

Think about the time you spend in a typical week on all your commitments, e.g. work, training, education, family duties, hobbies, leisure interests, sports, eating, sleeping etc.

Using the pie chart below, apportion the time you spend on each activity to build up a picture of how you are currently using the time available.



Reflect on the results.

Does your analysis suggest that you might struggle to make time available in taking on the role of councillor?

If you were keen to take on the role, what activities might need to be changed, sacrificed or reduced?

Managing casework

Some councillors find casework the best part of their role – the opportunity to sort out problems for residents. Casework can come from a variety of sources:

- letters, phone calls, emails and social media (Facebook, Twitter etc)
- councillor drop-in surgeries, advice sessions and doorstep calls
- campaigning and other political activity.

Dealing with casework requires councillors to develop their own simple, but effective, ways of managing the information and tracking progress.

Good note-keeping and diary management can help, as well as an efficient filing system.

The amount of casework any councillor receives will depend on the nature of the area they represent, although research suggests that the higher the level of deprivation in an area, the more casework there is likely to be.



Casework – a further source of guidance

The Local Government Association (LGA) has a workbook on handling casework. In summary, the general steps that need to be considered are:

- Identifying what the problem is – establishing the facts and finding out how the constituent wants to be helped. Identifying whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past.
- Referring the problem to the appropriate council department – most councillors find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or email is the quickest and easiest way to sort out casework problems.
- Providing feedback – after initial enquiries, letting the constituent know what has been done and keeping them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes.
- Considering the wider issues – reflecting on the issues raised and letting other councillors know. A number of similar concerns raised with councillors may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review.
- Monitoring your own performance – review your approach to casework and consider whether what you do could be improved, or whether other councillors or officers could help with any high volumes. And, remember to reflect on the difference you have made to people's lives through your casework!

Source: 'Handling casework', LGA Councillor workbook, LGA, 2017

The 7 Principles of Public Life

First set out by Lord Nolan in 1995, the 7 principles of public life apply to anyone who works as a public office-holder. This includes people who are elected or appointed to public office, nationally and locally, and all people appointed to work in: the civil service, local government, the police, the courts and probation services, non-departmental public bodies, health, education, social and care services. The principles also apply to all those in other sectors that deliver public services.

1997 Committee on Standards in Public Life (known as the Nolan Committee)

Selflessness: Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

Integrity: Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity: In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability: Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness: Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty: Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership: Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.