

LGA Submission to CLG Select Committee Following the Government's Response to 'Councillors on the Frontline' report 10 April 2013



Submission

1.0 Key Messages

- 1.1 The LGA welcomes the opportunity to follow up on Government's response to the Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2012-13, 'Councillors on the Frontline'. A Government response is often the final point in an inquiry and the Committee's continuing work to maintain momentum to drive this important issue forward is welcome. The LGA would like to work with the Select Committee to continue to promote the work of the councillors on the front line and we hope that this momentum is utilised by the sector, Whitehall, the voluntary sector, and all other stakeholders.
- 1.2 Councillors are at the heart of their local communities. The councillor role is a unique civic role; it is one with a democratic mandate. It is one that has a lasting impact on local communities, with responsibilities for hugely important services. Councillors give up a considerable amount of time, both from their work and from their families. They give their time to serve their communities and will have an even bigger role to play in the future not a smaller one.
- 1.3 The Prime Minister has accepted the importance of Community Budgets, which further underlines the changing role of councillors to become leaders of place. While councils are working to achieve this, it is still new territory for the rest of the public sector and Whitehall needs to recognise councillors' changing role. Whilst we are clear that we do not support a professional role for councillors, this new leadership of place role is putting more pressures on councillors' time and remuneration and the support they are given should reflect that.
- 1.4 The role of councillors is changing, becoming more demanding coupled with rising expectations. We need to see a step change in how we view and support councillors and all, from local stakeholders to central government, ministers and national politicians, need to play their part. The challenge of representation is not limited to local government; this is an issue across all political representation in England¹. As the role of councillor is fundamentally changing we need to ensure that all stakeholders, including the private sector, are also engaged in understanding and working with them. We also think that

¹ See the Speakers conference on parliamentary representation:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/speakers-conference-on-parliamentary-representation/>

councillors should continue to have access to the Local Government Pension Scheme because access to a pension is a factor in attracting a broad cross-section of people to become councillors

- 1.5 The LGA would like to support the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the CLG Select Committee to explore how this could be achieved. But to make a real impact this is bigger than the local government sector alone. A whole system change is needed, across all bodies accountable to democratically elected representatives. We would welcome and support and work to address this. It is critical to get this right if we wish to maintain a vibrant representative democracy both locally and nationally.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Committee asked us to give our view on the Government's response to recommendation 2-5, 8-9, 13-15 and 21-25 and we welcome the opportunity to continue our work with the Committee on this inquiry. Our views are listed below.

3.0 Recommendations 2 & 3 – the role of the councillor

- 3.1 The Committee recommended that the Government should not 'accidentally undermine the authority of councillors' and that councillors in turn should be getting out in their communities and encouraging their communities to make the most of all opportunities available to them, including those in the Localism Act 2011.

- 3.2 The Government responded by saying that it is committed to localism and the Localism Act 2011 has created powers for councils and communities: 'No longer should the Town hall (sic) be the focus for councillors, but rather their wards and the communities that live in them.'

- 3.3 The Committee's third recommendation was that councillors should be working with external organisations, broadening their understanding of key issues facing their community

- 3.4 The Government responded by saying that it should be for councillors themselves to determine 'how and with which individuals and organisations they should best build these relationships'.

3.5 LGA View

- The LGA is broadly supportive of the Government's response. As public services are transformed in an era of rising expectations and shrinking funding the relationship between the citizen and the state is being reshaped.
- The role of councillors is changing. As more powers are devolved to local communities and neighbourhoods, ward and division and town and parish councillors are more able to play active roles in their communities, so making a real impact on people's lives. It is not just the ward role that is changing.

- Council leaders are increasingly focused beyond authority boundaries, looking at conurbations and sub- regions. Councillors in cabinet roles are focusing not just on what is directly delivered, but on local public services as a whole.
- Councillors will increasingly need to influence other organisations and service providers to ensure their residents receive services that meet their needs and help them realise their local aspirations. To achieve this there needs to be greater understanding and two-way engagement with these organisations to make sure that councillors are supported to deliver the best outcomes for their local communities and the people they represent.

4.0 Recommendation 3 – supporting councillors in their role

- 4.1 The Committee recommended that councils should be seeking to devolve power and resources to councillors at the local level, ensuring they have an active role in their communities.
- 4.2 The Government's response stated that councils and councillors should determine what is appropriate in their particular circumstance. However, the Government does recognise the 'crucial role of councils in supporting and empowering their councillors'.

4.3 LGA View

- The LGA welcomes the recognition from both the Select Committee and DCLG of the crucial roles that councillors play in their communities. The LGA believes it is essential that councillors are appropriately supported to achieve their potential for their communities and encourage our members to review and share best practice of existing support arrangements. We are pleased that the Government recognises the LGA's work in this area.
- There are over 20,000 councillors in England and so the desire to support them to reach the best potential for their communities must be balanced by practical and financial constraints. However, as the councillor role becomes ever more challenging and demanding, the need for support will likely rise and the support offer will need to adapt in response.
- The LGA is engaging with councillors to take ownership of realising these ambitions and to reach their leadership potential for their local communities. We are working with councillors on a variety of fronts to support them in the changing policy landscape arising from the Localism Act 2011, public health changes, strategic commissioning and demand management, introduction of police and crime commissioners and more.

5.0 Recommendation 5 – relationships with external service providers

- 5.1 The Committee found that where services are delivered by external

providers, it is important that the role of the councillor is not reduced. The Government responded that irrespective of who is delivering services councillors should be able to 'influence provision of these services so that they might better reflect the needs and priorities of local people'. The Government stated that it will be for individual councils and councillors to develop working relationships with service providers.

5.2 LGA View

- The LGA agrees that councillors will increasingly need to influence other organisations and service providers to ensure their residents receive services that meet their needs and help them realise their local aspirations.

6.0 Recommendation 6 – localism

6.1 The Committee said that it remained concerned about the Government's 'mixed messages' on localism and urged 'the Government to rein in its interventionist instincts'. In response, the Government stated that there were no mixed messages on localism but said that 'whilst local government is freer of central control, this does not mean Ministers, as nationally elected politicians should be denied the right to express their opinions'.

6.2 LGA View

- The LGA firmly believes that powers should be decentralised to the lowest appropriate level and that services should be democratically accountable. We welcome the developments under the Government's localism agenda such as the introduction of the General Power of Competence which have demonstrated that there is a willingness from the current Government to begin to devolve powers to local government.
- However, control over local government's powers and funding remains in the hands of Westminster and Whitehall. Any improvement in councils' autonomy granted in the last few years could be eroded by the stroke of a future Secretary of State's pen or completely reversed at the whim of a future government.
- Parliament should enshrine in statute local government's right to greater financial autonomy and protect councils from the threat of interference in their daily business. A new model should be based on partnership working rather than diktat from central government. This is the accepted norm in most Western democracies; it should become the norm for local government in England too. To see the benefits of local decision-making, councils of all types need the freedom to make independent decisions about local issues.

7.0 Recommendation 8 – Boundary Commission

7.1 The Committee recommended that from time-to-time, councils 'give formal consideration to their electoral arrangements' and if they are minded to, seek to make the change.

7.2 In response, the Government stated out that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has statutory responsibility for the upkeep of electoral and administrative boundaries and councils can make representations to the body. However, only the Secretary of State can request reviews on the structure of local government and Ministers believe the priority should be on greater joint working across boundaries and sharing of back office functions.

7.3 LGA View

- The LGA believes that councils should have a greater say in the setting of electoral and administrative boundaries as part of greater independence for local government. However, council leaders are focused not just on their authorities but beyond their boundaries such as to cities and regions, sharing best practice, information and strategic vision. Cabinet members will also be looking not just at what is directly delivered, but at local public services as a whole.
- LGA research on shared services shows that at least 337 councils across the country are already involved in 281 shared service arrangements, resulting in £263 million of efficiency savings.²

8.0 Recommendation 9 – representation of communities

8.1 The Committee was concerned that the composition of councils does not always reflect that of the communities they serve and said that it is important that membership of councils is better aligned to the make-up of the local populations they serve.

8.2 In response, the Government stated that it recognises that 'with new emerging roles of councillors, there is a need to ensure that there is a good mix of people with appropriate skills and interests, ready to offer their services'. The Government does not believe there should be central prescription and pointed to the role of political parties in working locally with the communities they represent. They also highlighted initiatives such as the LGA's 'Be a Councillor' campaign.

8.3 LGA View

- The LGA believes that increasing the pool of talent from which councillors are elected is a key challenge for local government. Only by encouraging the brightest stars to stand for election can we ensure that councils are able to do the best for their communities. We need plenty of high-quality prospective councillors ready and willing to work hard to make a difference to their local communities.
- We are very pleased with the recognition of the LGA's 'Be a Councillor' campaign but believe we need to see a wider change across the system and would like to see more stakeholders engaged in the process.

² For more information, see http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/productivity/-/journal_content/56/10171/3511353/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

- The LGA is keen to work with DCLG and the Select Committee as well as other relevant bodies and organisations to promote a much wider agenda to reinvigorate political representation.

9.0 Recommendation 10 – Political Parties

9.1 The Government agreed with the Committee's recommendation that political parties have a significant role to play in recruiting underrepresented groups to stand as councillors.

9.2 LGA View

- We agree with the view of the Committee and the Government that there is a significant role for political parties in recruiting candidates to stand as a councillor. 93 per cent of councillors in England represent one of the three main political parties – this means that we must have an understanding of those political processes to understand issues around recruitment. The different parties have their own methods for encouraging people to stand, selecting candidates, as well as supporting their members and colleagues. These processes will reflect the parties' values and principles and will often also have local elements to reflect local needs and challenges.
- Political activity outside of the three largest parties also provides various ways of finding and encouraging people to stand for election such as through independent networks. There are a substantial number of independent councillors or councillors who stand for a smaller political party. Standing as an independent has its own strengths but carries additional challenges.
- The LGA, through our political groups, will continue to work with and support the political parties to consider their recruitment and selection practices and to encourage the drive for all in local government to actively talent spot and encourage people from all walks of life to become councillors.

10.0 Recommendations 13 & 14 – local democracy

10.1 The Government agreed with the Committee's recommendations that local authorities should be actively promoting democratic engagement, recognising that many already are but said that there is no need for central prescription.

10.2 The Government agreed with the Committee that there is no need for the establishment of any new organisation to promote democracy. Furthermore they praised the LGA's 'Be a Councillor' campaign which aims to increase involvement in democracy at a local level.

10.3 LGA View

- The LGA sees the public attitude toward politics,³ coupled with

³ The July 2011 Veracity Index compiled by Ipsos MORI showed politicians to be the least trusted profession. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2818/Doctors-are-most-trusted-profession-politicians-least-trusted.aspx>

the lack of awareness of the role of local politicians, as a key barrier for new people to get involved in politics. We need to improve the recruitment of councillors, use their time and skills better and to support them better. These are mutually supportive elements to reinvigorating local politics.

- Again, we are very pleased with the recognition of the LGA's 'Be a Councillor' campaign but believe we need to see a wider change across the system and would like to see more stakeholders engaged in the process.
- The LGA agrees that central prescription is not required, but believes that all institutions that are politically led must play an active role in growing public understanding of local democracy and championing the role all politicians play in their communities.

11.0 Recommendations 15 & 16 – Employers

11.1 The Committee recommends that councils consider assigning to each councillor an officer to assist with casework. In response, the Government stated that decisions on this should be taken at a council level.

11.2 However, the Government did not agree with the Committee that parallels could be drawn with the Ministry of Defence's consideration of support for military reservists.

11.3 LGA View

- Both the Select Committee evidence and the Speakers Conference report highlighted the difficulty that many people wish to become elected representatives without significantly impacting on their employment or careers. The LGA would like to see this issue explored further.
- It would also be helpful to Councillors in receipt of benefits to have more clarity about how their benefits may be affected when they are in receipt of a Special Responsibility Allowance. The LGA is supporting the Government Equalities Office 'Access to Elected Office for disabled people' initiative. Clarity on how benefits may be affected by working as a Councillor would be welcome.
- Councillors spend, on average, 23 hours per week on council/political business, with eight per cent spending more than 40 hours a week. Yet for the majority of councillors this is a voluntary role, with no salary, only basic expenses covered and some allowances for time spent in council meetings. This means it is not an alternative to full time work. In fact it often has a detrimental impact on their career prospects⁴ either when looking for work or through the demands on their time.
- We disagree with the Government that there are not parallels to be drawn with the MoD's consideration of support for military reservists. We need employers to view the time needed by

⁴ Source evidence from the select committee

councillors in the same way they view that taken by members of the Territorial Army.

- We would like to explore with employers their role in supporting the work of councillors as we believe that employers receive a significant benefit from the skills and experiences of employees who are councillors. We would like to hear from employers who do support their staff who are councillors.

12.0 Recommendations 17, 18 & 19 – Remuneration & councillors as volunteers

12.1 The Government did not support the Committee's recommendation that the Government give councils the ability to transfer responsibility for setting allowances to independent local bodies. It also did not support the option of providing loss of earnings.

12.2 The Government also said it has 'made clear the position that being a councillor is a voluntary public service'.

12.3 LGA View

- The councillor role is a unique civic role. It is distinct to any other voluntary role as it comes with a democratic mandate. Policy decisions and democratic oversight of how public money is spent and the vital services it provides cannot be carried out by attending the occasional meeting and signing off a few letters drafted by officials. Many councillors are indeed part-time, but others, particularly more senior councillors, have demands in excess of those of an average full time job. The decisions they take have a direct impact on everyone's lives. To describe a councillor's role simply as volunteering is out of touch with the demands of local communities and the expectations of Parliament.
- At a time of difficult decisions about public services, it is more important than ever that local government is representative of the people it serves and that anyone, whatever their means, is able to consider standing as democratically accountable councillors able to properly scrutinise and direct council staff.
- Councillors are dedicated public servants and publicly accountable. Allowances, on average £7,000 per annum and fully taxed, are not the motivation for serving their communities. However, they ensure that local democracy is not the preserve of just the retired, well-off and those on benefits.
- It is generally agreed that we would like to see more people from all walks of life interested in and standing for political office. We are clear that we do not want to see a professional class of councillor. However, if we want to see increasing representation of local councillors, particularly those of working age, we need to look at the role in its entirety. Remuneration alone will not overcome this issue; however, remuneration needs to reflect the loss of earnings councillors may face. We also think that councillors should continue to have access to the Local Government Pension

Scheme because access to a pension is a factor in attracting a broad cross-section of people to become councillors.

- Councils should also make sure they make best use of councillors' time and that local arrangements do not unduly place demands on councillors' jobs and family or caring commitments.

13.0 Recommendations 21-25 – councillor performance, training and support

13.1 The Government believes that it is a decision for political parties to make when deciding who to select to stand. They also said it should be for councils to decide whether to put in place light touch arrangements for monitoring councillor performance. The Government also said that it should be for councils to decide meeting their councillors' needs.

13.2 LGA View

- All councils provide training for councillors. There is however a challenge for councils to ensure that their local development offer adequately supports the evolving role of councillors. The LGA agrees that it is for each council to decide what training would best support their councillors. There are over 20,000 councillors in England and so the desire to support them to reach the best potential for their communities must be balanced by practical and financial constraints.
- The LGA's Local Government Workforce Survey shows that councils' median gross training expenditure in 2011-12 remained almost unchanged from in 2010-11.⁵
- As the councillor role becomes ever more challenging and demanding, the need for support will likely rise. If we are to see people from all walks of life becoming councillors then this support offer will need to adapt in response.
- The LGA works with councils to raise the capacity of the local government sector. We are committed to supporting our members to be 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. We also offer a suite of support and training for councillors.
- Beyond formal training and support – the role of mentors and peer-to-peer support, especially for those from traditionally under-represented groups is essential. Not only does it encourage people to stand but also supports them in the role so they are more likely to stay in the role. This was also highlighted in the Speaker's Conference report on parliamentary representation.
- Through the 'Be a Councillor' programme the LGA will explore the possibility of finding politicians across the parties and from the

⁵ Reports available from <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-pay-and-workforce>.

ranks of independents and regions who can be champions and mentors for these under-represented groups. We would be open to discussions with the parties as to whether this would be relevant for MPs and PPCs as well.