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The Twenty-First Century Councillor – Lessons from the Literature

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For more information about the 21st Century Councillor and 21st Century Public Servant research, visit our blog at <http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>

This literature review summarises eight lessons from the existing academic and policy literature on public service change and how change is impacting on elected councillors in local government. It is designed to complement existing research on other parts of the public service workforce, as part of the ongoing 21st Century Public Servant project.

Lesson 1: The roles and skills of councillors are changing in response to a number of issues, including fiscal austerity, devolution, and changing citizen expectations.

Lesson 2: Structural changes to local government, including elected mayors and combined authorities, are reconfiguring local political settlements.

Lesson 3: Channels of accountability are becoming obscured as service delivery becomes more fragmented.

Lesson 4: Skills of collaboration and leadership are becoming increasingly important for councillors.

Lesson 5: A public service ethos continues to be central to the role of councillor, accompanied by newer concerns for public value and social value.

Lesson 6: There is a growing disparity between the diversity of communities and the typical profile of elected members.

Lesson 7: New methods for ongoing citizen engagement with local government are becoming well-established but can be difficult to reconcile with the formal mandate of elected office.

Lesson 8: Supporting 21st Century councillors to adapt their roles and skills in response to these challenges requires new approaches.

About the Research

The 21st Century Councillor research builds on the successful 21st Century Public Servant project (2013) and the University of Birmingham Policy Commission (2011) into the Future of Local Public Services. These projects saw a significant amount of interest from practitioners, identifying the need to pay attention to the changing roles undertaken by public servants, and the associated support and developmental requirements.

During 2016 we have undertaken research into the 21st Century Councillor. North West Employers (the Employers' Organisation for the 41 local authorities in the North West of England) is supporting the work by facilitating access to elected councillors and organising regional events at which findings will be shared. We are also undertaking fieldwork in other regions, and sharing the emerging findings with councillors in other regions, and with the LGA-SOLACE-PPMA 21st Century Public Servant steering group to ensure that the themes have resonance outside of particular regional contexts.¹

This literature review is designed as a **companion piece** to the **full project report** in which we share analysis of the new empirical findings. Both documents are available from the project blog: <http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>

Research Questions

The broad research questions for the 21st Century Councillor project are below. The research questions mirror those asked in the 21st Century Public Servant project and it is intended that the two projects are seen as interrelated rather than standalone pieces of work.

- What is the range of roles that the 21st Century Councillor is required to perform?
- What are the competencies and skills that councillors require to undertake these roles?
- What are the support and training requirements of these roles?

About the Literature

A review of the existing literature on elected councillors within English local government is the first stage of the 21st Century Councillor project and eight key findings from that review are presented here. The lessons were identified by undertaking a search of academic databases, using pre-defined search terms linked to the roles and skills of elected members, and imposing pre-agreed inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g. on the geographical scope and recency of the literature). These were complemented with reports and blogs from key policy organisations (e.g. the LGA), which further informed the themes identified from the academic literature. Bringing different literatures, information and viewpoints together is multifaceted and this document aims to be an accessible piece which signposts some of the main areas highlighted in the literature.

Lesson 1: The roles and skills of councillors are changing in response to a number of issues, including fiscal austerity, devolution and changing citizen expectations.

Local government can be described as being in a state of permanent revolution, given the tendency of central government to alter its structure and powers. However the current decade has been characterised by a particularly intense period of transformation in local public services, triggered by budget cuts, devolution and the combined authorities' agenda, greater demands for service user voice and control, and increased public expectations about service delivery.

The impact of these developments on local institutions has been considerable¹ and for councillors subject to pressure from local and central government policy, the implications mean managing a role that is constantly changing. There is a well-established literature that addresses the role of local representatives² and more recently it has been argued that current municipal contexts require councillors to hold a wide variety of roles such as:

- **Political representative:** connecting the community and representing everyone fairly, balancing local concerns with the wider council priorities and with the political demands of the group manifesto.
- **Community advocate:** involving people from different backgrounds, cultures and values and having the confidence to speak freely and challenge the executive.
- **Community leader:** supporting local projects and initiatives and encouraging participation.
- **Service transformer:** understanding how local government works with the ability to hold service providers to account, work in partnership and use knowledge strategically.
- **Place shaper:** identifying priorities, and working with officers and service providers to address local issues and manage delegated budgets.
- **Knowledge champion:** the councillor as a primary source of local intelligence flowing between community and council.³

Many of these roles are not new. However some of the literature suggests that 'the range of skills required by councillors is perhaps broader than it used to be, covering both a very astute strategic sense and sound political judgement to bring to decision making...'⁴ Indeed, the complex and 'wicked' nature of public policy challenges demand innovative and collaborative solutions which require councillors to step outside traditional role boundaries and work differently.

This is particularly evident in councillor/officer relationships which have traditionally been defined by a clear role separation – one that arguably, is becoming increasingly irrelevant for modern day governing environments, given budget cuts and structural change. The need for synthesised working relationships between politics and local bureaucracy is long recognised,⁵ as is the understanding that effective outcomes require robust and collaborative leadership from political and managerial leaders.⁶ Though the extent of councillor/officer role separation has waxed and waned in response to political circumstances and governing practices over recent decades,⁷ the introduction of New Public management-type reforms has seen a reconvergence of politics and bureaucracy at the local level.⁸ Research suggests that this role convergence is better understood in terms of an operating zone – where councillors display managerial skills and officers political skills – as opposed to a role overlap.⁹ A study from Ireland suggests this is most likely to be evident in 'safe' non-competitive spaces.¹⁰ The majority of research on this topic has focused on the officer perspective. Hartley et al. for example, highlight the need for officers' political astuteness. More attention is still required to the factors which explain the adoption of bureaucratic skills by elected representatives.⁹

Councillors engagement with the public was also been a focus for the literature. A recent study of public service workers states that 'relational approaches' are increasingly required to work effectively with communities.¹¹ This is a message of direct relevance to elected members, given the changing contract between citizens and the local state,¹² and the associated support-role that councillors are increasingly having to offer their communities. Although councillors are skilled at forming strong links with the citizens they represent, it is suggested that the relationships and the benefits arising from them are changing. Being an elected member is no longer confined to being a 'bridge' between politics and the community, but it now requires councillors to have:

- A willingness to increase 'public value' by taking advantage of opportunities.
- Enthusiasm, pragmatism and flexibility.
- Expertise complemented by generic skills.
- An ability to rethink public services at a time of budgetary cuts.
- A capacity to advance distributed and collaborative leadership.
- Loyalty and identity in relation to one's locality.
- An ability to reflect on practice and learning from colleagues.³

A recent report from 'Inspiring Democracy'¹³ summarises three main facets of the councillor role: *advocacy* to influence on behalf of and represent individuals and communities; *accountability* for corporate governance and management of the whole area; and *supporting and developing communities* to influence and get involved. To facilitate these roles it suggests that councillors should encourage, support and motivate communities; work with neighbourhoods to build networks; support and inspire local groups and organisations; and influence local political agendas.

The Local Government Association (LGA) states that councillors have a lead role to play in partnership with communities and the public, voluntary and community and private sectors – to develop a vision for their local area, and improve services and the quality of life for citizens.¹⁴ These new collaborative environments present a challenge for established ways of working. Examples of change not only include localism, devolution and the combined authorities agenda, but also citizens working coproductively with local councils to deliver services, e.g. volunteers working in local libraries.

To do this, new approaches to collaboration are required from councillors. Although formal partnership settings remain an important part of public life, as seen in Health and Wellbeing Boards and Community Safety Partnerships, future public services will require softer informal approaches to complement existing governance. This will mean that councillors will need to ensure they gather soft information from work with citizens outside of formal boards. In particular, citizen participation and co-production have been utilised in recent years with an increased dialogue with citizens for the planning and delivery of services.^{15,16,17} However it has also been argued that there has been little engagement of the wider public in the development of community-wide visions, and there is no empirical evidence that points to councillors having increased their support and development function to influence and involve local people.¹⁸

In sum, this is a time of significant change for councillors as they rethink the purpose of local government in response to a diverse set of challenges. Having to implement the austerity agenda is particularly difficult and many elected members recognise that, alongside officers, they will need to do things differently. This will not only include planning for financial savings but also developing different relationships with civil society and 'rethinking public services to enable them to survive an era of perma-austerity'.¹¹

Key messages from Lesson 1 for the 21st Century Councillor

Local government and public services are experiencing major transformations in response to a range of issues. These include budget cuts, localisation, devolution and the combined authorities' agenda, greater demands for service user voice and control, and increased public expectations about service delivery. To adapt to this environment, the role of the 21st Century Councillor is changing. Elected members are not only required to be a representative within their own council; they are also required to adopt new roles whilst understanding, engaging and collaborating with a wide range of citizens and service providers.

Lesson 2: Structural changes to local government, including elected mayors and combined authorities, are reconfiguring local political settlements.

The last ten years have seen a plethora of changes to governance structures and systems that elected members are involved in, both at regional and local levels.^{19,20,21} Key developments include the move to executive and backbench roles, the development of overview and scrutiny functions, a shift to elected mayors, an emphasis on localism and the emergence of regional devolution.^{22,23} Furthermore, changes to planning and decreasing resources have increased complexity around commissioning and procurement processes and the technical knowledge required. None of these changes are new or original in themselves – they have been described as ‘old wine in new bottles’¹⁹ – but the speed of their introduction, alongside the other changes set out in Lesson 1, has been unsettling for councillors and there have been calls to not only increase the amount of information and training that is available to them,²⁴ but also to integrate councillors further into the dialogue about change.²⁵

It is expected that the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 will encourage councils to address current demands by working with other councils, local businesses, communities and other public sector organisations.^{26,27} Proposals include the opportunity to bring public services closer together across organizational boundaries, working more closely on local issues such as transport, economic growth and planning. However, as Carr-West states, the word ‘decentralisation’ conceals ideas about local power, democracy, or accountability,²⁸ and it has been argued that devolved economic and social goals will be challenged by central government’s deficit reduction plans.²⁹ It is also argued that devolution is likely to transfer further responsibility to local government while simultaneously drawing it closer to central government and its control.¹ Anticipating the change process towards devolution is complex for councillors. The regions where a transfer of power is proposed or planned are themselves at the forefront of practice. As of yet, there is a paucity of academic literature in this area, though this will inevitably follow implementation and evaluation. An Inlogov report on Combined Authorities states that there will be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ for devolving powers and responsibilities. The issues involved are challenging, including partnership working that is not coterminous with Combined Authority boundaries; a perceived accountability gap with the public at time of low trust in politicians; and managing deep rooted historical rivalries between councils collaborating in Combined Authorities.³⁰

With the Local Government Act 2000, the introduction of directly elected mayors into the landscape of English local politics has, in some geographical areas, changed the dynamics of local political leadership and the relationship between citizens and local government.^{31,31,32} Although directly elected mayors predate devolution and combined authorities, they have again come to the forefront of political discussions, with the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill likely to lead to a proliferation of directly elected mayors. The call for elected mayors has faced resistance from councillors in many areas who do not welcome the changes in their roles created by the mayoral system.^{32,33} However, some council officers have tentatively welcomed the introduction of elected mayors, arguing that they provide a higher degree of accountability for local leadership – a theme returned to in Lesson 3 below.³² Hambleton and Sweeting identified that the introduction of mayoral governance is challenging for councillors, but there is potential for them to develop productive and fulfilling roles within it, particularly in relation to scrutiny³² which has the capacity to enable influence and impact.³⁴ Nevertheless, the way in which the mayoral role will unfold remains unclear and it is reasonable to suggest that the office’s impact may vary between places which adopted the model through referendums and those where it has been centrally imposed as part of a devolution package.

Negotiating these changes is not just important for the larger metropolitan areas, where there has been a recent focus on devolution, but resonates more broadly in response to localism and communitarianism. Many local authorities are already working together on a shared services basis, particularly for back office functions.³⁵ According to a report from the New Local Government Network, district councils indicated that they believed they could work more effectively with neighbouring unitary councils, but opinion was divided amongst districts councils about working relationships with county

councils.³⁶ In particular, the scale and services provided by districts and counties meant the two tiers were frequently responding to different issues, limiting flexibility and cooperation. An LGA report looked at the scope for top tier councils to devolve services to parish councillors and identified five broad approaches:

1. **The charter approach:** An agreed local charter or formal contract detailing how a larger 'principal' council can work with a local council.
2. **Community asset transfer:** Where a principal council transfers assets to a local council.
3. **Clustering:** Cooperative working across local councils to share services.
4. **Service delegation:** Top-down or bottom up initiatives for transferring service delivery to the local council with the service funded locally from the parish precept, volunteers or some other local resource.
5. **Joint service provision:** Local councils enhancing or 'topping up' existing services provided by the principal council, with funding or volunteers, or principal councils supporting local councils to improve the capability to provide services.²¹

Together the devolution, combined authorities and shared services agendas present some of the most significant challenges to the role of councillor, as areas with different electoral mandates and political compositions attempt to develop shared approaches. Research on shared services identified concerns that a changing political environment may inhibit, undermine or even reverse the move towards shared services.³⁷ In particular, the devolution agenda has important implications for the 21st Century Councillor who requires a sophisticated understanding of changes to the links between regional and local governance, and the delivery of local services. This includes not only having an awareness of the fora which are planning and discussing the changes, but also how they can be informed by activities taking place outside of formal governance arrangements to ensure that 'hard to reach' groups in the community are represented in these changes.

Key messages from Lesson 2 for the 21st Century Councillor

With devolution, combined authorities, elected mayors and the shared delivery of public services, the 21st Century Councillor will be required to work in new ways with local partners. This will be challenging as elected members develop an understanding of the complexities associated with these new forms of collaboration, as well as the implications for their electoral mandate and their relationship with citizens.

Lesson 3: Channels of accountability are becoming obscured as service delivery becomes more fragmented.

The prevalent discourse of integration in local government services overlays decades of fragmentation in the delivery of public services which have changed accountability and risk management procedures.³⁸ A succession of writers on new public management, partnership working and the new public governance has identified the awkward fit between ballot box accountability and complex delivery arrangements. Sullivan, for example, noted how the transformation of many western democracies in the late 20th century had important implications for the practice of public accountability, compounding the problem of 'many hands'.³⁹ Barnett agrees that in an era of 'local governance' local councils are but one actor among many.⁴⁰ However, as Copus points out, this does not replace the direct lines of accountability of the council and its members to the public.⁴¹ It may though create a poor fit between the levers of control and the channels of accountability.

For councillors, one example is the proliferation of academies and free schools, creating education provision which, whilst publicly funded, is not subject to local government planning and oversight. Since these schools have a direct accountability to central government, it may make it difficult for councillors to support and advise parents. Councillors experienced in partnership working need to build relationships with academies, and make the channels of accountability meaningful for parents and local communities.⁴² Similarly, greater integration in health and social care services can weaken electoral accountability, as health services remain insulated from local political oversight.

Accountability creates risks for councillors if they fail to act or intervene in provision that leads to service failure, public harm or financial waste. As part of central government's 'localism' strategy, local authorities are being encouraged to increase the level of their partnership and community engagement activities. However it is already clear that there are risks in this. Partner bodies (from the community, voluntary, social and private sectors) may be unable to deliver the required services to an acceptable standard, particularly given the rapid pace of the transition that is underway. For councillors, the risk may be poor service delivery that puts citizens at risk, or perhaps cuts to an important service.

It is recognised in the literature that accountability is practiced differently in diverse contexts and cannot be reduced to a ready-made formula.⁴⁴ This needs to be placed within a context in which risk itself is becoming increasingly personalised⁴⁵ and perceptions of risk continue to remain pertinent for councillors facing re-election. The 2011 White Paper on Open Public Services states that the provision of 'quality services and good financial management should remain firmly with the provider,'²³ yet it is inevitable that statutory portfolio holders will retain a level of accountability.

A number of authors have provided models for understanding these issues. Focusing on the relationship between localism, representation and accountability, Richardson and Durose asked 'who is accountable in localism?' stating that these concerns sit at the centre of day-to-day experiences and local debates.⁴⁶ The authors provide a framework of accountability, extending from representative/responsible government, where power is hierarchical and delegated to representatives by citizens at elections, to non-dominating and 'relational' forms of power as the basis of authority.

Conceptualising risk, Bovaird and Quirk state it depends on the character of uncertainty in which public service organisations operate and the knowledge domain in which they are making decisions.⁴⁷ They note that while people are eager to embrace accountability for their actions when things go well, they are equally as keen to avoid blame when things go wrong. Distinguishing between a mature approach to accountability and an immature blame culture, they argue, is the key to understanding how approaches to public risk can be improved. To bring about such a radical change, an increased focus on the risks to favourable outcomes for service users and citizens is required, rather than an over-attention to the risks experienced by public agencies.

Key messages from Lesson 3 for the 21st Century Councillor

As moves towards integration overlay decades of fragmenting service delivery, the 21st Century Councillor will need to have a sophisticated approach to understanding accountability and risk. Whereas it may be easier to recognise where accountability lies within traditional council services, with fragmented and personalised services it may be more difficult to locate. Councillors need to foster a culture which avoids blame-shifting and focuses on minimising harm to citizens.

Lesson 4: Skills of collaboration and leadership are becoming increasingly important for councillors.

Denhardt and Denhardt argue that the role of government has moved beyond rowing and steering to 'negotiating and brokering interest'.⁴⁸ The new accountability landscape discussed in Lesson 3 requires that councillors develop appropriate skills. Rather than necessarily having the authority to direct, they will need to deploy negotiation and advocacy skills with providers outside of established governance structures. Councillors will also need to be 'boundary spanners', working across organisational settings and bringing together people who may not have formal experience of involvement in local government.⁴⁹

Ford and Green argue that councillors working in these environments need to develop appropriate personal qualities and 'facilitative' leadership skills to enhance and improve relationships.¹⁸ Key skills will include having a clear, strategic view of the full range of services in their community, with 'the skills to engage and galvanise partners at the highest level from all sectors'.¹⁸ Similar themes are discussed by Copus who explores how councillors are increasingly engaging with wider governance networks and how this is reshaping their role.^{50, 51} He argues that councillors cannot control these networks but are faced with developing strategies to influence them. Although the council is now one player among many, councillors still require so-called hard skills to direct the engagement of non-elected bodies, alongside the softer political skills used to bring them together.⁴¹ It is unclear however what effective hard skills councillors can apply when they do not have the power to direct. This suggests that councillors will have to rethink their role and how it is located within a broader set of forces.

Changing requirements demand new types of skills training. The LGA calls for councillors to have enhanced communication, leadership and change management skills.⁵² Focusing on politicians and personality, the LGA used the Myers Briggs model to increase self-awareness of councillors' leadership skills. It was identified that the number of councillors corresponding to being a 'stereotypical' leader is double that of the general population. This type of leadership is seen in the individual who respects hierarchy, seeks leadership directly and takes charge quickly. In contrast, it was also noted that councillors need to adjust the way they communicate, exhibiting a self-awareness of their own and others' preferences. This means that councillors may choose to adjust the way they communicate in less formal collaborative settings, using skills of diplomacy and negotiation to get 'things done'.

Key messages from Lesson 4 for the 21st Century Councillor

As public services negotiate and broker with service providers and citizens, the 21st Century Councillor needs to listen and reflect, as well as shape. Communication will be central to this role and there will be a requirement to engage with non-traditional stakeholders. This will require the adoption of new and alternative perspectives on leadership. Councillors will have to reflect on what leadership means, how it can be used in softer ways, and what place remains for the so-called hard skills of directive leadership.

Lesson 5: A public service ethos continues to be central to the role of councillor, accompanied by newer concerns for public value and social value.

Recent discussions about councillors in the national media have mainly focused on activities that sit at the heart of integrity and ethics, and have led to formal investigations in some cases, such as Rotherham and Tower Hamlets.^{53,54} These are high profile cases; the main focus on 'ethical behaviour' by councillors in local government is perhaps more mundane, with a focus on standards, codes of conduct, constitutions and officer-councillor relations. Nonetheless research activity in this area remains relevant, and recent years have seen an increasing academic interest on the role of ethics and values in public life. The public service ethos has been described as 'long-established values and rules providing a benchmark for public servants and their institutions'.⁵⁵ A report by the Public Administration Select Committee in 2002 highlighted the need for an updated interpretation that informs accountability, reflecting the progression from an 'unwritten traditional ethos' to a clearer and more explicit set of principles that reflect the values held by public officials.⁵⁵

Existing studies of public service ethics have given more attention to officers than elected politicians.⁵⁶ Issues that require further elaboration include whether good conduct for politicians can be promoted with ethics regulation, how ethics regulation interacts with other factors influencing politicians' behaviour, and whether there are features of political conduct which resist formal ethics regulation. Although every local authority is expected to publish a constitution, according to the Local Government Act 2000, there is little research on the extent to which these documents are used in practice.

Attempts to manage standards, ethics and values have generated significant activity, as seen in attempts to identify agreed behaviours for those engaged in public life.^{57,58,59} Macaulay and Lawton assessed the impact of the Committee for Standards in Public Life on local government in England. They noted that although distrust of local government remained high, the impact of the Committee's work had been significant through its development of a policy on standards and a new ethical framework.⁶⁰ Cowell et al. studied the impact of regulation introduced in England in 2000 to improve the conduct of elected local councillors.⁶¹ They found that although the regulation had contributed to improvements in conduct, impact had been highly uneven, reflecting the wider contextual behaviour in organisations. The Localism Act 2011 placed a duty on authorities to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by elected members, through a code of conduct that included, amongst other things, the registration of pecuniary interests and a requirement for independently led investigations of alleged misconduct.

In recent years, there has been a growth in academic literature focusing on value and values, rather than ethos. Work on 'public value' has been very influential, arguing that although, economic and market-based uses of value have tended to dominate, the public sector has wider and more complex goals and values.^{62,63} Complementing this, the Social Value Act 2012 placed a duty on public bodies to consider social value ahead of the procurement of goods and services. There is as yet a lack of published research into how councillors are engaging with the concept of social value and integrating it with a broader public service ethos.

Key messages from Lesson 5 for the 21st Century Councillor

As public services negotiate and broker with service providers and citizens, the 21st Century Councillor needs to have not only an understanding of the 'rule based' approaches of standards and codes, but also the shift to public value and social value, and how these apply to new collaborative settings. This will require new ways of defining behaviour, both within established organisations and amongst wider communities.

Lesson 6: There is a growing disparity between the diversity of communities and the typical profile of elected members.

There is a well-established academic literature that focuses on councillor demographics – mainly gender – but with a growing interest in councillors’ ethnicity and other aspects of diversity.

The most prevalent type of research on councillor diversity addresses gender, particularly the involvement of female councillors in local politics. Evans and Harrison explore ‘second order’, or non-national elections, including those held at the local level. They argue that the rhetoric advocating women’s representation is not always matched by selection, and electoral systems can impede the diversity of candidates selected.⁶⁴ Welsh and Halcli explored the influence of the feminist agenda on women councillors in local government England.⁶⁵ They found that equality of opportunity for women was valued, but that as elected representatives women felt it was equally important to represent all individuals within a ward, regardless of gender or background. In a study of women councillors, Bochel and Bochel studied the progression of women to senior political posts in local government.⁶⁶ They identified that women were less likely than men to achieve senior positions, a finding corroborated by the Fawcett Society in 2013 which reported that women comprise 12.3 per cent of council leaders in England and 13.3 per cent of elected mayors.⁶⁷

Yule examined the tensions of being a woman in male-dominated party groups, identifying that their portfolio might be restricted to so-called ‘women’s concerns’ including social work and education.⁶⁸ With a focus on the motivations, expectations and experiences of female councillors, Briggs found most female councillors had experienced difficulties making the decision to enter local politics having concerns about managing child care responsibilities,⁶⁹ in addition to lacking the confidence necessary for entering male dominated environments, characterised by meeting schedules appearing to favour men,⁶⁷ who are less likely to balance their councillor role with caring responsibilities.⁷⁰ Recent research found that the two persistent gender-related challenges at the local level are the recruitment of women but also their retention; for example, women are much more likely than men to step down from office at the end of their term.⁷¹ Furthermore, when women do leave, they are far less likely than their male counterparts to pursue high profile political activity, such as becoming an MP; rather, they tend to return to constituency-level voluntary work. Indeed Allen draws attention to what Rallings and Thrasher term as a double whammy – high turnover of new councillors present one particular set of challenges to a local authority while low turnover of long-serving councillors creates another.⁷¹ Allen suggests that this problem is particularly acute when considered in relation to diversity, as new recruits to local office are more likely to be drawn from under-represented communities whilst long serving – generally white male – colleagues are likely to emanate from over-represented communities.⁷²

Little academic research exists on ethnicity and locally elected politicians. The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors reported that 96 per cent of councillors were of white ethnic origin with 4 per cent from other ethnic backgrounds. The Census also reported that between 2001 and 2013 numbers had barely increased, though the dispersion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) councillors was not consistent across the country: a greater proportion of London councillors were from minority ethnic backgrounds (15.7 per cent) compared with England as a whole.⁷⁰ Councillors in the North East and South West were most likely to be white compared with other regions.⁷⁰ Recent research on ethnicity includes a study of the Respect Party and Muslim communities,⁷³ and a study of minority councillors in London boroughs by Tatari and Yukleyen, which explored the factors which facilitate or hinder Muslim political representation in Britain.⁷⁴ Focusing on the intersectionality of Muslim female representation, other research has found that this group of councillors bring particular qualities to their advocacy role in terms of perspectives, strategies, and opportunities; the authors argue that the provision of these

qualities set them apart from their male Muslim councillor colleagues.⁷⁵ An issue that has received even less attention in the literature is the relationship between councillors and new communities, for example those from Eastern Europe. The need for further research in these areas is clear because evidence suggests that the electorate is less likely to vote for candidates with surnames that suggest non British origin, whether European or non-European.⁷¹

With regards to age, the most recent Census of Local Authority Councillors reported that the average age of councillors is 60 and the proportion of retired councillors is increasing.⁷⁰ The earlier Councillors' Commission noted that teenagers' knowledge and understanding of the role of councillors was poor and, furthermore, only 3.5 per cent of councillors were aged less than 30.⁴ Literature on other types of diversity – such as disability and sexual orientation – is currently absent, although these aspects of representation may be given a higher profile in the future, given that they are protected characteristics under the Equalities Act 2010.

As well as tracking the extent of councillor diversity, key questions are *if* and *how* councillor diversity improves local politics and community representation. Some literature suggests that such characteristics are less important than passion and commitment, and that if councillors have the requisite skills to conduct their role effectively, they do not necessarily need to come from a particular section of society.¹⁴ While the research in this area does not offer clear conclusions, the importance of 'local representation' is unequivocal,⁷⁶ as demonstrated in the importance that the electorate seems to be particularly attuned to a candidate's place of residence.⁷⁷

Key messages from Lesson 6 for the 21st Century Councillor

Councillors are elected to represent the whole of the community regardless of their background. However, with changes to the composition of communities and an under-representation of young people, women and ethnic minority councillors, there is an increased expectation that these forms of diversity will be represented amongst councillors. Other types of diversity – for example relating to sexual identity or disability – are little discussed in the literature but are also relevant in relation to representation.

Lesson 7: New methods for ongoing citizen engagement with local government can be difficult to reconcile with the formal mandate of elected office.

New communication technologies are responding to and reinforcing public expectations of transparency and accountability from public services. The immediacy of internet-based technologies means the ways in which citizens use public services, and their relationships with councillors are changing, through sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. Citizens can distribute their own content, and the immediacy of social media demands that public services depart from the formal and prolonged responses to feedback prevailing in the past.⁷⁸

Discussing online communicative spaces in local government, Firmstone and Coleman stated that the communications and engagement strategies of local councils play an important role in public understanding of local democracies and engagement with local issues. Their findings suggested that while there are no grounds for expecting digital media to displace existing channels of public engagement, they are beginning to play an important role within local governance.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Ellison and Hardey remind us that the majority of local authorities have been slow to see the full communicative potential of social media, preferring to engage with the public through traditional methods.⁸⁰ The same authors also draw attention to the way in which social media enables citizens and councillors to engage in new and less restricted forms of conversation – specifically opened-ended and ongoing conversations.⁸¹ Accordingly, the medium has the capacity to offer the public meaningful forms of two-way communication. Cheetham highlights the immediacy of communication through social media, drawing attention to how citizens now prefer to contact customer services desks using Twitter, email or Facebook rather than engaging directly with their councillor.⁸² Accordingly, he asks the question ‘where does this leave the advocacy role of the councillor?’ Whilst it is easy to suggest that new forms of technology and communication will improve councillor-citizen relationships, it is also argued that casework and surgeries cannot be replaced by new technology.¹⁴

A key skill in this digital environment is the ability to make effective use of these new interfaces, both as mechanisms for sharing information but also of listening to and engaging with citizens. The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors reports that the majority of councillors had access to a council email address, a PC, laptop or tablet. However, fewer had access to a smartphone or mobile phone, or were users of a blog, a Twitter account, Facebook page or YouTube.⁷⁰ This information is important because a report that addressed ‘Media in Local Government’⁸³ considered the benefits of social media use by councils and its key recommendations included the open use of social media by local government, informed by evidence on how residents were using traditional and online media. Their usage included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Flickr, but additionally ‘hyperlocal websites’ providing online news and content for a town, village or small geographically-defined area.

Similar themes are reported in Howe’s discussion of the ‘Networked Councillor’,⁸⁴ which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for local politicians operating in an increasingly networked and digital society. Examples of councillors’ usage of social media are given, although little systematic use of new technologies is found, with inconsistent use of social media by members. Howe concludes that although the public would welcome a more open and direct relationship with their councillor, there is little evidence that citizens want to dispense with traditional forms of representation.

Increased awareness of social media by citizens and efficient responses by local authorities raises several issues that require consideration. First, is citizen self-representation changing the role of councillors, generating new demands and ways of working, but also new opportunities for timely engagement? There is at present a lack of evidence on this; it may be that people who self-represent may not previously have contacted councillors, or it may be that the same populations are finding new

ways to get in touch. A second question asks whether access to and use of social media contributes to the efficacy of councillors;⁸⁵ and, third, can social media be applied to some aspects of the councillor role more than others? Whilst the evidence base catches up with changing practices, it is too early to provide definitive conclusions about the role of new technologies. However it is already apparent that they are collectively creating a demand for councillors to deploy new skills.

Key messages from Lesson 7 for the 21st Century Councillor

New communication technologies are responding to and reinforcing public expectations of transparency and accountability from public services. Although it is accepted that there is still a place for traditional casework and surgeries, it is also apparent that the 21st Century Councillor will increasingly engage with social media. What is less clear from the literature is the degree to which new technologies will replace or enhance established functions of the elected member role, how these developments are being responded to and which skills will be required to use these tools effectively.

Lesson 8: Supporting 21st Century councillors to adapt their roles and skills in response to these challenges requires new approaches to training and development.

It is evident from the literature that there is a need to develop the competencies, skills, support and training for the 21st Century councillor. A key theme in the literature addresses the professional status of the councillor role, highlighting the distinction between 'acting professionally' and 'being' a professional:^{51,86} acting professionally suggests councillors require skills for operating in high stress environments, an area of research that has focused on public service professionals but less so on locally elected politicians.¹¹ By virtue of the increased requirements of the role, there are also calls for certain councillors to be paid a full-time salary akin to professional employment.⁵¹ This is particularly the case for executive members, who are recognised to play a significantly different role to that of backbench members.

A study of councillor development programmes remarked that the 'modernisation' process in local government had brought about the most significant changes in councillor roles for decades.⁸⁷ While initial thinking questioned how cabinet arrangements would impact on the role and relevance of back bench councillors,⁸⁸ a recent report by the Association for Public Service Excellence appears to confirm initial fears by drawing attention to the increasing divide that has come to characterise executive and non-executive roles.⁸⁹

Whether or not one welcomes the role of councillor becoming more akin to that of a professional, it is clear that training implications are diverse in terms of skill and complexity needs, knowledge requirements, and members' scarcity of time. A number of recommendations continue to be topical, including the interplay with other employment, the need for clear role descriptions, access to training and induction, and a national framework for financial allowances.³

This awareness has been reflected in a growth in training opportunities provided by higher education institutions, and by sector bodies such as the Local Government Association. Participation in training and development was reported by members to be a largely positive experience, and exposure to training is thought to have made members more responsive to the process of professionalisation – not necessarily to be understood as a paid 'professional', but reflective of a more consistent set of attitudes and expectations.⁸⁷ Since the requirement for councillors to undertake training is not mandatory, members do need to be clear what the advantages are to them of being involved.

Mindful of the increasingly diverse and complex development environment, the Local Government Association provides a framework, or tool kit which seeks to underpin its 'support and development' offer.⁹⁰ Initially developed in 2004 (and revised in 2007) the most recent version of the document identifies six requisite political skills:

- **Local leadership:** the need to engage with the community and be fully cognisant of issues causing local concern.
- **Partnership working:** the importance of building good working relationships and adopting collaborative approaches to secure shared goals.
- **Communication skills:** the ability to demonstrate excellent and nuanced communication skills, including recognition of language and cultural specificities.
- **Political understanding:** the ability to develop a range of political skills alongside a demonstrable understanding of how different contexts require different political skills.
- **Scrutiny and challenge:** the ability to act as a critical friend – specifically the ability to provide challenge and feedback to bodies that are scrutinised, inside and outside of council.

- **Regulating and monitoring:** the need to understand the relevance of legal responsibilities and protocol when engaged in evaluation and decision-making.⁹⁰

The requisite skill set identified by the Local Government Association traverses a number of lessons set out in this review, while also drawing attention to the importance of procedural and institutional knowledge: collectively they highlight the increasingly complexity of the councillor role. Evident also are the clear training needs around requirements for more 'relational' ways of interacting with citizens, and the associated demands these place on the time and privacy of councillors. Councillors are operating in increasingly under-resourced environments which have the potential to significantly impact on their ability to maintain a separation of their public and private roles. While the impact of these developments on officers has been well documented,⁹¹ an area of research that has received less attention is how the current political settlement has impacted on elected representatives.

In addressing the development needs set out here for councillors, there may also be a need for joint training between officers, partners and councillors, recognising the increasingly collaborative nature of working arrangements. It is ironic that with the breadth of literature on joint working, this is a topic that has been discussed little in research about councillors.

Key messages from Lesson 8 for the 21st Century Councillor

Building on all of the lessons above, the challenges identified will demand new types of competencies, roles and skills from the 21st Century Councillor, requiring training and development. This will include focused training on: structural and system changes (e.g. combined authorities, shared services); new forms of communication with officers, partners and citizens; and the implications that these changes have for ethics and accountability. In future there may be a need for more joint training between officers, partners and councillors which reflects more collaborative ways of working.

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