1st August 2014

Report to the Communities and Local Government Committee Select Committee: Councillor Workshops: Councillors on the Frontline

1. Introduction

The report sets out the findings of four workshops with councillors that were organised for the committee by the Local Government Research Unit at De Montfort University. The workshops were designed as a deliberative forum within which councillors could explore their experiences as local elected representatives, how their roles were changing and the pressures and demands made upon them. It was also an opportunity to explore issues arising from the committee’s report - Councillors on the Frontline – and the Government’s response to that report. This report presents the key themes that emerged from the discussions and provides an overview of those themes with example quotes from the discussion.

The report is structured around the four major themes that arose from the workshops and provides details of those themes: the next section provides a brief overview of the workshops. The third explores the issue of ‘voluntarism’ and the councillor’s role. The fourth section examines the 24 hour nature of the councillor’s office. The fifth considers the nature of the work councillors undertake beyond the council and with other organisations and bodies. The sixth section looks at the changing nature of the councillor’s role. The seventh sets out a series of bullet points that also arose from the workshop discussions. The report concludes by drawing out the main issues and by suggesting the direction that a national debate could take on the roles, responsibilities, powers and duties of councillors. A note of caution is needed here as the issues that are reported may appear to be unrelated, but what is set out is the results of the workshops that emerged from the discussion and so reflect those matters that are currently of concern to councillors.

2. The workshops

Four workshops were held between October 2013 and early March 2014. In total 24 councillors took part in the workshops, ranging from a maximum of nine attendees to a minimum of five. While these numbers may appear low the workshops were specifically designed to ensure that small groups of councillors would attend to explore the issues they wished to raise and found important and to do so in depth. Qualitative research does not produce the statistical data of quantitative research but it does allow for deep and rich explanations and understandings to be developed.

The workshops were held in the following locations: Portcullis House; De Montfort University, Leicester; The University of Bristol; and, Northumbria University. The locations of the workshops meant that there was a good geographical spread of attendees. In addition, all types of councils were represented: Counties, Districts and unitary councils. All participants were sent a copy of the committee’s report - councillors on the frontline - and a copy of the government’s response to the report. The workshops were run on an open, discursive style with a number of prompt questions used to stimulate discussion. The discussion did not focus exclusively on the committee’s report or the government response; rather, the open questioning was designed to prompt councillors to explore those issues which were most pressing or immediate to them and to examine their experiences as a councillor. The rest of the report explores the four major themes that arose from the workshop discussions.
3. Voluntarism

A recurrent theme in all of the workshops touched on the very nature of the councillor’s office and a central part of the Government’s response to the committee. The Government’s response was based on a notion that councillors should ‘fundamentally be volunteers’ and saw the alternative of full-time salaried councillors as something to be voided. The term ‘volunteer’ however, was seen as a loaded phrase by councillors – across parties – and one which not only belittled the work that they undertook, but which was seen as a woefully inadequate assessment of the responsibilities and roles of the councillor. As one councillor summed it up:

*I may have volunteered to be a councillor, but by that token MPs and MEPs volunteer too; no one forces you to become active in politics but you can’t just pick and choose what you do, when you do it and whether you do it well or not*

It was clear that councillors reacted negatively to the rhetorical thrust of a debate that casts councillors as lay volunteers who should give willingly of their time for little or no reward and certainly not for a pension. It was felt that the rhetoric of the volunteer councillor was designed to project a very clear image of a role and approach that was amateurish, unprofessional, part-time and bordering on being unnecessary. The concept of professionalism, for councillors, was about an attitude of mind and an approach to each and every one of their council duties – being professional was about the care, attention and high standards of work that are vital to properly fulfilling the role and duties of the councillor. It was not necessarily being a full-time, fully-paid politician.

The idea of councillors as volunteers was also criticised on the basis that the duties expected of the councillor cannot be avoided especially those of case work and ward related duties. The term ‘volunteer’ creates the image, for councillors, of an individual with the freedom to decide what they undertake, when, how long for and to what effect and this is just not the case for the work councillors undertake. While councillors may not always be full-time, or able and willing to give up work to become a councillor that is not an indication of lack of commitment or professionalism in the role; rather, it was recognition of the structural and functional difference between councillors and MPs or MEPs. As one councillor commented: ‘our former council leader gave up his job to become the leader and then two years later he was deposed by the group and he had nothing left’.

While the term ‘volunteer’ did not do justice to the office of councillor, there was also reluctance to see the role as requiring full-time commitment from every councillor. Although continuing in full-time employment placed a great strain on many councillors it was clearly seen that it was a personal choice to remain in full-time (or part-time) work. One revealing comment which summed up much of the discussion was made by a councillor who stated that: *if you work there is little chance of being a councillor and if you’re in private industry you’re committing career suicide; I had to leave work and set up my own business to get the flexibility to stay on the council.* While the role of the councillor is something that can continue to be undertaken, alongside full-time work (no matter how difficult that may be to manage) then the charge of voluntarism can always be made – no matter how inaccurately it describes the office of councillor. Summing up the debate a councillor commented:

*I have never thought of being a councillor as being a volunteer; I do voluntary work and did before I became a councillor and being a councillor is far beyond being a volunteer.*
4. A 24 hour a day job

The day-to-day experiences of being a councillor are alone sufficient to undermine the notion of the councillor as a volunteer. At each of the four workshops it was pointed out that being a councillor was a: ‘24 hour a day job’ and that there was little or no distinction between public and private life. A unique feature of the role of the councillor is the proximity and immediacy they have to their voters and the communities they represent. That continual close proximity distinguishes councillors from elected representatives at other levels of government, who will have an operational base often a considerable distance from the areas they represent. As was pointed out, councillors must live, work, shop, relax (possibly), socialise and on a day-to-day basis and be a connected part of the communities for which they have an elected responsibility.

It was clear that the day-to-day experience of councillors was that of few, if any, boundaries between the political, personal and private and those experiences are shaped by the every-day accessibility of the councillor as politician but also as a local citizen. Indeed, the councillor’s proximity to the public is not an expectation, or even a requirement, rather, it is a fundamental feature of the office. While that proximity may be masked in larger, anonymous urban areas and particularly in large cities, the councillor is still part of that community and area and is part of it on a daily basis. As one councillor commented:

*Being a councillor is about being contactable and when someone needs to get hold of you, they’ll do it and it doesn’t matter what time of morning, day or night it is, they will phone or call round to the house. You never know what will come up on a resident’s radar and as soon as something is in the public domain, you’re a target.*

*There is no typical day as a councillor, let alone a typical week*

Councillors reported that the simplest of trips to the shops, pub, restaurant or any local facility exposed them to possible contact from the public – a form of local notoriety, if not celebrity status, ensures that any facet of their life can be interrupted by the public. Such interruptions were not exclusively case work, but occurred also around important local issues or council decisions that had attracted adverse publicity. Moreover, contact from council officers on official council business spilled over, for many, into their working environment as well as what might be considered to be free time at home.

In contrast to these potential interferences into the councillors’ non-public/political life, the overwhelming view among councillors was that they sought office to be able to ‘*give something back*’ to their communities. The notion of public service is certainly not dead.

A disturbing theme that arose was the hostility with which councillors would often be confronted, either over policy decisions or some unresolved case work and such hostility was not confined to council or public meetings, but could be displayed in the street or in any public place. Councillors explained this as being a result of the general lack of respect with which politicians appear to be held. As a councillor explained: *I don’t mind too much people having a go at me as that comes with the territory. But, shouting and swearing when I’m out with the family or friends is going too far. It doesn’t happen much, but it happens.*

Proximity to the community and fuzzy boundaries between the various spheres of an individual’s life are central features of serving as a councillor and both these features have a consequence for the
private and working life of those elected as councillors. Yet, interference into other aspects of their lives, by council duties and case or ward based responsibilities, is an accepted and expected part of the office.

In addition, some aspects of public discourse about councillors also reflected what was seen as a dismissive attitude about the office reflected in government. To illustrate the point councillors again made reference to debate around their ‘voluntary’ status and picked up on comments made by ministers over issues such as councillor allowances and pensions and how the role of the councillor had been likened to scout-leaders. The debate here did not produce many concrete examples but was reflective of a general feeling that the centre viewed councillors and their office with distain.

5. Working Beyond Boundaries

Another example of the blurred boundaries which councillors must navigate arises from the work they conduct not being confined to the council of which they are a member. The work on what is often referred to formally as appointments to ‘outside bodies’ extends far beyond a councillor being appointed as a representative to a local community group’s management committee. Councillors’ appointments to a range of bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, Police and Crime Panels, Fire Authorities or other partnership bodies, places them in a formal position of responsibility with that body and also provides opportunities for councillors to act as governors, in shaping the policies and decisions of those bodies to bring them into alignment with the council.

The workshops allowed councillors to articulate the view that this aspect of their work – engagement with a range of powerful external bodies - was often not fully understood either by the public, the council, their councillor colleagues or the bodies on which they often sat. The potential that such involvement provided for councillors to be able to shape and influence what other organisations decide and the policies they develop, has not gone unrecognised by councillors involved in membership of such bodies. But, it is a role that councillors often felt unprepared for, that they lacked resources and support from their councils to undertake and was a role that was often un-coordinated across the council.

In addition to formal positions on ‘outside bodies’, councillors reported that their case and community work in particular brought them into contact with every conceivable body or organisation which had some impact on their wards, divisions or councils as a whole. The public in particular, have begun to see councillors as a way of seeking redress from not only the council, but from the following examples raised in the workshops: hospitals, bus companies, rail companies, public utilities and private business. The councillor’s post-bag has become blurred with that of an MP. Indeed, councillors reported being required to meet with a range of public and private bodies on both case work and as an informal mechanism for influencing decisions and policy.

The office of councillor does not hold centre-stage in the locality, nor even in the ward or division concerned and this is felt to be as a result of the down-grading of their office and the diminution of its standing and status in the eyes of the community and the organisations with whom they must inter-act. Councillors are encouraged to engage outside the council, but feel undermined in this by continual distain for their office and role emanating from central government. It is worthy of note here that such a view existed across party and was not focused on the current government alone;
rather, it was about the apparent low regard with which central government (and civil servants) are generally seen to hold local government and councillors.

The following comments illustrate the point and came from across the political spectrum:

There is a constant eating away at the responsibilities of local government, giving responsibilities to quangos or neighbourhoods, or anyone except local government; this has been going on for decades. It’s as if we are not trusted to run things competently or make the right decisions (Labour Councillor)

It’s as though being elected means nothing, or very little and that’s a shame because I do believe that the vote means something and it certainly gives us a legitimacy to act. But I have the feeling that’s not how government sees it and it prefers just to appoint boards and commission to run things – I don’t just mean this government (Conservative Councillor)

I’ve run a business and made decisions about investment and had responsibility for employing people. I’m also a councillor and have been elected but I don’t just forget all my experience on election and I sometimes think government looks at us [councillors] as having no relevant experience or abilities and certainly not when it comes to almost any other partner or organisation we work with. (Independent Councillor)

What was obvious from the workshop was that councillors assessed their office as not one where they could make decisions as authoritative politicians with powers to enact change across a vista of organisations. Rather, to be an effective councillors they must interact in networks of different sizes and scope, which often operate beyond the boundaries of the council and often consist of a vast range of individuals and organisations in complex multi-layered networks. The task of the councillor in such networks is to exert pressure, pursue influence and attempt to shape the decisions and policies of higher-level players. The corollary task for councillors is to develop the capacity and critical mass of resources to shape the behaviour and decisions of others and the view was expressed that councils were not organised to support councillors, that were not part of the leadership, in this work. It was clear that councillors recognised the vital role they played in governing through influence and engagement with other bodies and that support in this role needed to be structured effectively.

6. Constant Change: Confused Expectations

One area where councillors were particularly vociferous in their opinions was in regard to the constantly changing roles, responsibilities, structures, functions and expectations of the office they hold. They were equally frustrated about constant change imposed on local government in general which although seen as part and parcel of the position local government and councillors held, it generated some frustrations and uncertainties for councillors. The view was expressed that central government thinks and acts as though the office of councillor, unlike elected representatives at other levels of government, is somehow under-developed, in need of constant re-shaping and re-appraisal, disconnected from those represented and is a product of a lower level of governing capacity and ability when compared to central government. It was felt that such views displayed a lack of clarity and understanding about the office of councillor and often arises from a disregard for local representative democracy as a fundamental underpinning to a wider democratic state.
Central control over all facets of the role of the councillor and government’s ability to re-shape the office of councillor is a powerful determining force in ensuring what councillors can and cannot do and reflects central concerns and opinions, rather than local needs. It was strongly felt that the centre sees the office of councillor as something to be re-modelled depending on the answers given at any one time by any one government in response to questions such as:

- What is the role and purpose of the councillor?
- What do we want them to be able to do or not do?
- Which powers and responsibilities should they have?
- How will their decision-making processes be structured?
- What will they be able to decide about?
- Do we want them to be local leaders or take a lead from central government?
- Are they politicians and policy-makers or managers of public services?
- Who do we want them to be?
- What do we want them to look like?
- How many should there be and where?
- Should they be professional paid politicians or volunteers?

What worried the councillors at the workshops was that the answers to these questions are given by the centre at different times, when faced with different pressures or ideological and policy determinants. They are not, for the councillors present, answered in terms of what would make the best system of local government or the best type local elected representative: the councillor. Councillors inhabit a structure and system which they do not control and have functions and responsibilities which are handed to them. As a councillor commented:

*I just wish they’d [government] make their mind up what they want us to do and then let us have a period of stability so we can get on with things. But, when government changes, new governments want us to achieve all the promises they made about services so there’s another change and another set of ideas about what we should be doing* (Liberal Democrat Councillor)

An example given of changing priorities was of the exhortations currently being made to local government and councillors to pursue and promote economic regeneration, growth and to stimulate economic activity. Although this was now seen as a priority for councils and councillors, and an understandable one, it was a priority which would change again, once the current economic situation had improved. Concern was expressed that local government was being recast to deal with one problem and that it would be recast again and again as the centre needed it to change to address its own view of national priorities. Indeed, one long-standing labour councillor stated:

*I recall when the government (he was referring to the Government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) didn’t want us anywhere near economic development and took powers away from us and gave them to development corporations, or almost anyone but councillors.*
Now, that’s all government wants’ us to do [focus on economic growth] – it’s good to know mind, but just stop the chopping and changing

While it was felt that councillors can shape the functions and responsibilities they are allocated and to a large extent determine priorities between them, they do so in the knowledge that there is no settled will, at the centre, about the office they hold. That uncertainty may not affect day-to-day activities too much. But, the longer term lack of stability and any potential changes emanating from shifting government priorities and policies results in a degree of fatalism about the long term prospects for the office of councillor. There is an opinion among some councillors that despite the number of former councillors in Parliament the government and the centre generally, just does not understand what it is to be a councillor.

7. General Concerns

The section bullet points a number of general concerns raised by councillors throughout the workshops, but it is worth noting one consistent theme in more detail.

Councillors expressed strong feelings about the support they received for the various roles they undertake. In some councils the levels of support for case work, policy development and decision-making was seen to be inadequate or focused too heavily on the executive and the view was expressed that generally councils were not structured to provide the right support to councillors.

Research support was seen as the area of greatest inadequacy and that view was particularly strongly made in regard to councillors interacting with, or appointed to, bodies such as LEPs or other strategic organisations. It was also felt that there was a lack of co-ordination in providing research material, even if it existed within and across councils. One councillor summed up the feeling of most when she commented:

No one seems to want to take responsibility for it [research]. If I want alternative views, or a review of policy papers, or to know what information and data is available on a particular subject, I more or less have to find it myself. I can ask officers and they may get round to it, but it’s not their job – or that’s how they see it. I want to be able to phone an officer – a central point – and say: I want to know all there is about ‘X’ and then they’ll provide it. It’s the same with my ward – I want to know what’s going on, but we’re either not told, or when we ask it take too long coming or doesn’t come at all.

Other issues raised throughout the workshops were as follows:

a. Increasing work-loads and time pressures for councillors
b. The way in which social media was recasting how councillors operate and the imbalance in the use of social media among councillors of the same council
c. Managing the tension between ward and divisional based work and a broader council wide perspective – especially when council decisions generate protest within the ward/division
d. Constant legislative change altering councils and councillors roles and responsibilities
e. Developing and setting strategic policy directions that cuts across the activities of other bodies
f. Developing stronger scrutiny powers for internal and external scrutiny
Difficulties councillors have in influencing external bodies such as the health service and Police (formal structures to one side)

Lack of public awareness and knowledge of councillors’ powers and responsibilities and public cynicism about politics and politicians

Shifts to participatory democracy undermining the role of local elected representatives and tensions between councils and neighbourhood structures

Proliferation of meetings

Disconnect between council executives and non-executive councillors

Training provided by councils not matching the needs of councillors

Navigating the levels of detail in council reports

Replacing multi-member with single member wards – a view mainly confined to members outside London. London councillors preferred multi-member wards.

Difficulties in finding candidates in some, but by no means all, wards

Fears about future reductions in number of councillors leading to greater work-loads for those remaining

Conclusions

In a short report of this nature it is only possible to give an overview of the results of the four very detailed and in-depth discussions that took place in the workshops. But, what is clear is that four key themes concerned those councillors in attendance: the debate around whether or not the office of councillor was that of a volunteer and the implications that flow from that conceptualisation; the effects of the proximity of the councillor to the community on other facets of the councillor’s life; developing strategies for working in complex governing networks; and, government inspired changes that impact on their office and its roles, functions and responsibilities.

Councillors were very clear however, that the office they hold does not exist in isolation from external factors; it is not the product of simply what individual councillors do, or of what any one council expects of its elected members. Neither is it shaped by its location in a single place alone. Moreover, it is an office subject to differing political and ideological interpretations of its importance, role and place within not just the government of the localities, but also within the overall governance of the country. What councillors seek is some convergence of views about their role and for a period of considerable stability around their office. The debate about the role of the councillor, is however, likely to continue and such a debate is not unhealthy, so long as it results in a settlement and a sustained period of stability for councillors. The question was posed by one councillor: how would MPs and MEPs feel if they [the office not the person] were constantly under the microscope and changes to what they can and can’t do brought in by someone else?

The committee might like to consider the following (though not mutually inclusive) suggestions as part of its desire to see its report – councillors on the frontline – result in positive change for the role and standing of councillors:

1. Act as a focus for a national debate on the roles, powers, responsibilities and functions of the councillor. That debate to be conducted with a view to:
   a. consolidating past debates and inquiries
b. addressing and answering the question as to whether some or all councillors should be full-time, salaried and pensioned and assessing the implications and consequences of such a move

c. engaging the public in exploring their own expectations and requirements of councillors

d. supporting the Local Government Association in constructing an outline of the roles, powers, responsibilities and functions of the councillor that reflect that national debate and set the broad parameters within which the office of councillor can be set

2. Consider ways in which to enshrine the right of councils individually to agree the roles, powers, responsibilities and functions of the councillor that would suit their needs and to protect those decisions from central interference

3. Consider ways in which to enshrine the ability and power of councils to set their own training, remuneration, support and any ancillary frameworks within which their own councillors will operate, independently from other councils and government control

4. Ensure that the debate and public rhetoric about the role of the councillor and councillors in general is one which raises the esteem and status of councillors and does not undermine their standing in the community

The time, commitment and energy given to local public service by councillors is a testament to their dedication and to the contribution they make to the governance of the country. That they do so within a framework where decisions about their roles, responsibilities, tasks, functions and powers remains with central government and where they interact with bodies that make public decisions and spend public money without the electoral legitimacy that councillors hold, further displays their contribution. Public debate will continue about whether councillors are volunteers, in the broadest sense, but the workshops clearly indicated that councillors are professional. Professionalism is a state of mind and an attitude towards one's duties and the councillors in these workshops exemplified professionalism. The pool of potential councillors will not dry up as there will always be committed and dedicated individuals who wish to govern and contribute to their communities. But, without action to raise the standing, status, and esteem of the councillor and to enhance the powers and freedom they have to govern locally that pool is likely to recede.