

July 2017 Monitoring Report

This report looks at two issues: the first is the role of councillors drawing on a just released Local Government Information Unit guide 'Community Collaboration: a Councillor's guide' and the second a number of reports on household incomes and poverty.

Community Collaboration

This guide begins with the observation:

An essential component of local democracy is building strong connections between citizens and the institutions that represent them. By including residents in the conversations that affect their lives, local government builds trust and mutual respect. This has never been more important. At a time when trust in public institutions is at a low ebb, councils have a vital role to play in restating and rebuilding the social contract between citizens and their governments. They can only do this by engaging openly with residents and responding to their concerns.

The guide's purpose is to encourage councillors to see their role as including empowering citizens in helping them achieve what the guide calls resident-led solutions. To do so, it includes a number of brief case studies showcasing example of how councillors can work in supporting communities.

Case study: Cllr Kathy Ford, Saughall and Shotwick Park Parish Council Working together for a multi-use games area in Saughall

During a consultation around the annual Parish Council Plan refresh, residents of the Saughall and Shotwick Park parish identified a need for more sporting facilities for local children.

Cllr Ford played a key role in bringing together members of the community to design and support the proposal for a multi-use game area in Golden Jubilee Park and to donate their skills and expertise. The police supported the proposal as part of their work to prevent anti-social behaviour, and headteachers helped to push the idea forward in order to gain more activity space for their students.

Alongside the residents, Cllr Ford began the process of acquiring the necessary permissions and raising money. With the

help of a network of Community Investment Champions – individuals or organisations who contribute time and resources to the community – the parish council's steering group was able to demonstrate a clear need for a new sporting facility. For example, a

local developer volunteered his time to help draw up plans and estimate pricing, and the school council was involved in consultations and helped to design the facility.

With such a wide-ranging support base, which also included the local MP, the steering group was able to make a convincing case for funding to the district council and environmental funder WREN. Both organisations agreed to fund half of the £80,000 needed with only a small contribution required from the parish council to unlock the funding.



Each of the case study examples shows councillors acting as a combination of advocate, broker, facilitator and networker. It's an approach which is relatively unknown in New Zealand despite the fact that many councillors will see themselves as representing the interests of residents in their dealings with the Council.

From a New Zealand perspective, the principal question the guide¹ poses is whether the framework within which New Zealand councillors operate would support them acting in much the same way as the councillors in the various case studies covered by the guide. Amongst the important differences between New Zealand and England are:

Typically, the representation ratio for all but the smallest councils is much lower in England than in New Zealand, sitting at about 2600:1 in England, but often exceeding 6000, 8000 or even 10,000:1 in New Zealand.

Councillors in England are all elected on a Ward basis and recognised as having special obligations in respect of residents within their Ward. As an example, the Constitution of Wiltshire Council provides that the key roles and responsibilities of councillors are to:

- ☐ Champion their division
- ☐ be a community leader
- ☐ keep in touch with constituents and help resolve their problems
- ☐ attend meetings and contribute to the decision-making process
- ☐ be a 'corporate parent' for looked-after children
- ☐ represent the council
- ☐ undertake training offered

This contrasts with the New Zealand situation where first, many councillors are elected at large, rather than from wards and secondly the primary obligation is to the best interests of the District or region as a whole as evidenced by the oath of office:

Declaration by mayor or chairperson or member

"I, AB, declare that I will faithfully and impartially, and according to the best of my skill and judgment, execute and perform, in the best interests of [*region or district*], the powers, authorities, and duties vested in, or imposed upon, me as [*mayor or chairperson or member*] of the [*local authority*] by virtue of the Local Government Act 2002, the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987, or any other Act."

A further difference is the policy/operation split built into the New Zealand local government act. It could be argued that for councillors to act in a similar manner as outlined in the LGIU guide would amount to crossing the policy/operation boundary, something which is not an issue in the UK where councillors do have significant involvement at an operational level, especially if they are executive councillors.

One consequence of the difference may be that in New Zealand little is done to formally support the role of councillors acting as local leaders. In terms both of engagement, and of the effectiveness of councils in their placemaking role, should New Zealand councils look

¹ the guide is available at: <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/reports/>

more closely at whether councillors should be encouraged to adopt a similar role to the one outlined in the LGIU guide? The question of whether this would amount to crossing the policy/operation boundary could be addressed by the Council itself adopting a specific policy in terms of the role of councillors as local advocates, facilitators, enablers, brokers...

Household Incomes and Poverty

The past month has seen the release in the UK and New Zealand, respectively, of updated reports looking at issues of poverty (UK) and household incomes.²

Each makes quite sober reading in terms of statistics on the extent of poverty, especially after housing costs and in terms of the numbers of children living in poverty.

The reports are dealing with quite complex statistical analysis and to gain a full picture do need to be read but extracts give a sense of the overall picture being presented. The New Zealand overview report notes after housing cost incomes for low-income households with children are still lower now in real (inflation-adjusted) terms than in the 1980s, despite the real increase in before housing cost incomes. This is mainly because housing costs are now much higher relative to before housing cost incomes, especially for low-income households.

After housing cost incomes are much more dispersed than before housing cost incomes and there is evidence of higher after housing cost income inequality in the last few years as compared with the mid 2000s and earlier.

The English report also reflects the impact of after housing cost on low income households, but also in the English situation the impact of tax and benefit changes, with the overview observing:

The rate of absolute low income after housing costs is projected to stay flat to 2020/21, although the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates the proportion of children in absolute low income will increase by around 3% points to 30% in 2021/22. All of the increase in absolute child poverty is attributed to the impact of tax and benefit reforms.

For local government in both New Zealand and England, these reports do raise the question of the role of local government in addressing issues of ongoing poverty within their communities. Although both the New Zealand and English reports indicate fluctuations over time, both also suggest that relatively little has changed in terms of the proportions of people, especially children, in poverty and that there is relatively little reason for expecting significant change for the better.

The question for New Zealand councils is whether and to what extent seeking to put in place measures to address poverty, especially in the longer term should be part of their role or is this something best left entirely to central government and perhaps the voluntary sector?

² the New Zealand reports are available at <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/household-incomes/index.html> and the UK report at: http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN07096?utm_source=LCiU+Subscribers&utm_campaign=432addb5fb-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_07_28&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_4e47157211-432addb5fb-198970185