

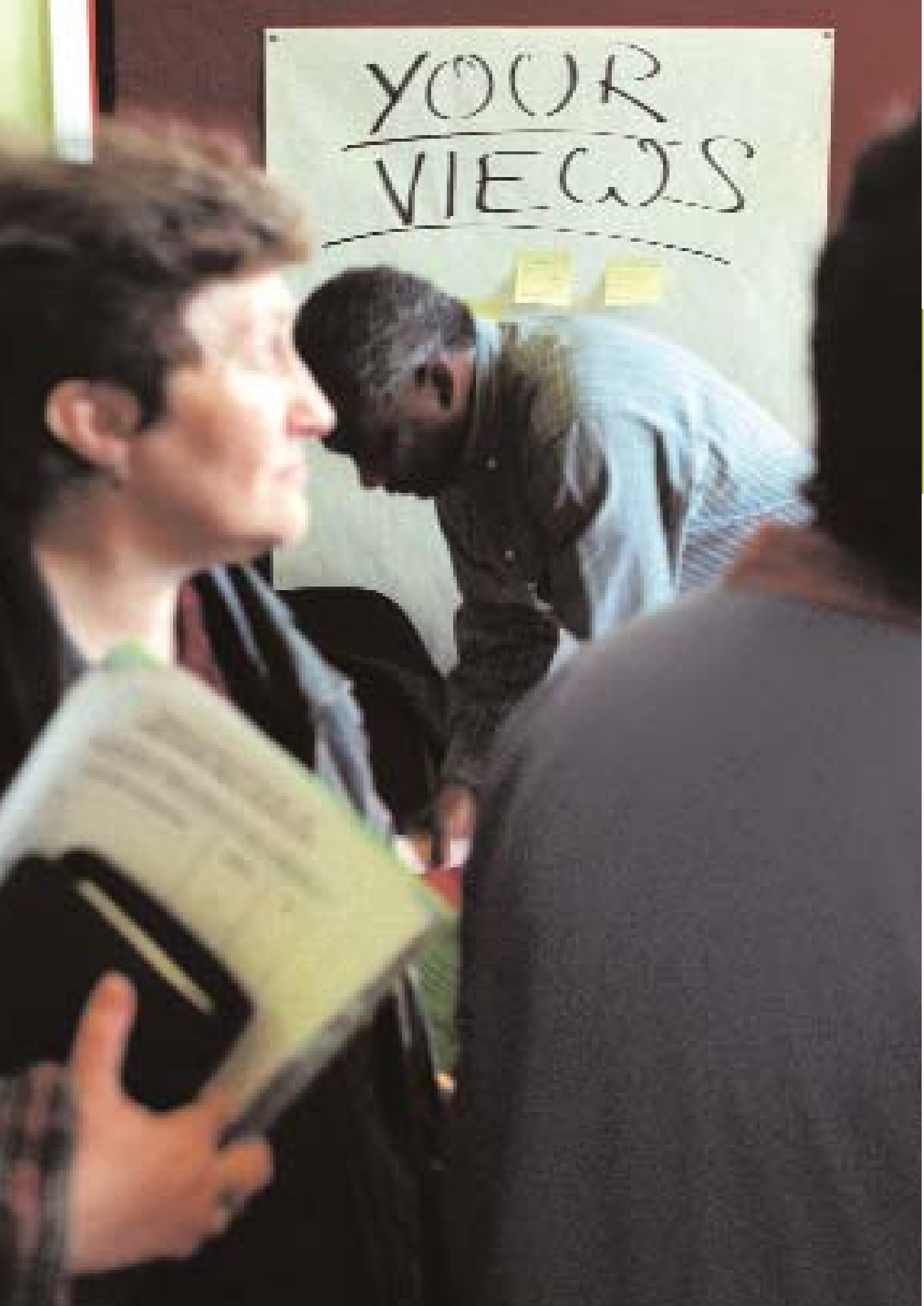


## **POLITICS MATTERS**

**MAKING CABINETS MORE EFFECTIVE**



YOUR  
VIEWS



# Politics matters

Politics matters. And because it matters the skills and experience of cabinet members in local government are critical to the continuing success and improvement of individual local councils.

Yet as a sector local government invests little in the development of leadership skills for its senior members.

The reasons may be understandable – for one thing, many managers and local government agencies want to steer clear of politics and prefer the certainty of responding to the development needs of senior managers, but there may also be a belief among politicians themselves that they have most of the skills they need simply from getting where they are.

The Leadership Centre wants to challenge these perceptions and by providing support and development to elected members, help them be more effective representatives of their communities.

This is especially relevant to those members in cabinet positions. Created as part of the Local Government Act 2000 working in cabinets requires new skills for members in relation to teamwork and working with a range of internal and external partners. The Leadership Centre's new development centres are the first initiative to work with cabinets to build these skills.

Local politicians have great opportunities to improve the life chances of their communities but also to fail them. We want to work with those councils and cabinets who want the best for their localities.

# Developing excellence in cabinets

Could cabinets be made to work better? The Leadership Centre believes they can – here's how

## Cabinet development centres

Could cabinets be made to work better is a question that has very rarely been asked, let alone answered. Some cabinets work, some don't and if they don't, the attitude has been, let's either change the people, or the party or both.

Before now it has never been considered that the people in the existing cabinet could be helped to work better, both together and individually. The development of our political leaders, on whom so much of the success of local government depends, has come woefully low on the list of ways to improve councils' performance.

Cabinet development centres work with cabinet members both as individuals and as a group, it helps them look at the way they work together, what their individual strengths and weaknesses may be, and how they could be more cohesive. It is as one participant observed: 'an opportunity to get away from daily business, to air ideas on structure, style and development.'

'Development centres are a confidential and supportive way of bringing a whole group of people – in this case a cabinet – together so that members can learn about how they work together, give each other feedback, and

learn where the gaps in their own development lie," says Professor Jo Silvester, the occupational psychologist who has been behind the project. "They are a tried and tested way of offering personal and objective feedback to people about their development needs. They have been used extensively in the private and public sectors and are based on the belief that everyone has the capacity to improve, but most people need support and guidance to do so.'

Development centres provide answers to some of the most common questions asked by people in organisations such as: how do I compare with other people? Where are my strengths? What areas do I need to develop? How do I do this and how can I trust the person who is telling me I need to develop? They do this in a private and encouraging environment, in a way that allows both the individual councillor and the cabinet as a whole to understand themselves and each other better, and to consider how best they might develop their own particular areas of weakness.

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**Professor Jo Silvester**

## How they work

The purpose of the development centre is to give participants personal and confidential feedback on their style and performance in a range of exercises. It is run by occupational psychologists and experienced political observers, who understand the demands on cabinets.

Taking part in the development centre process takes a day and half, and consists of a series of exercises that reflect different aspects of a senior politician's role. Some of these exercises are done as a group, some on an individual basis, and are scrutinised by expert observers

(normally a mix of occupational psychologists and approved political observers) who give balanced and objective feedback.

The development centre is most effective as a tool for building political leadership if every member of the cabinet takes part. In the pilot centres, authorities used it as a standalone exercise, part of the drive for these 'good' and 'excellent'-rated councils to maintain and push beyond their present status. But the centre could equally have a role in a more integrated leadership development strategy within an authority.

## Background

The Leadership Centre's development centre for cabinets is the result of a two-year project looking at developing a process for diagnosing and developing political leadership capacity among cabinet members.

The project has been led by Professor Jo Silvester of the Work Psychology Partnership, a group of organisational psychologists who are experienced in translating the latest academic research into solutions to real organisational problems, and have worked in both the public and private sectors.

The first step in the project was to identify exactly what skills councillors need for their various roles. We interviewed leaders, chief executives, cabinet members and chief officers in five councils and

from the information gathered we drew up a skill framework for elected members (see appendix 1). This focuses on those distinct skills needed for community leadership such as regulating, monitoring, scrutinising, excellent communications skills, partnership-working and political understanding. Negative behaviours were also identified.

Armed with this information we created a range of relevant, challenging and rewarding exercises and materials to use in the centre, which allow us to see participants at their best. We then developed feedback systems and trained expert observers to ensure high levels of reliability and credibility. The full development centre was piloted in Westminster City Council, the London Borough of Kingston, Hampshire and Bracknell Forest Council.

# A day and a half in the life of a development centre

Cabinet members are asked to give a day and a half to the development centre – time well-spent, believe many

# 1

**Day one:** On this first half-day, participants are introduced to the development centre, the exercises, the observers, and how to get the most out of the process. Participants are asked to complete an initial self-assessment, a personality test, and one of the exercises. They are also asked to give anonymous feedback about their colleagues. The results of this feedback, and the personality test are relayed back in a one-to-one session via a facilitator on day two.

The first individual exercise of the development centre is the 'in-tray'. This is a series of items – letters, telephone messages, requests for meetings – typically found in a cabinet member's in-tray. The participant's task is to assess the items and deal with each as appropriate. The observers are interested in how the participant responds and why.

The second individual exercise is a role play. Here the participant is given a fictional scenario facing a cabinet and asked to play either the relevant cabinet member or the chief officer. The aim is observe the participant's abilities in a range of advanced skills such as managing performance, providing vision and working in partnership.

The final exercise is the group exercise in which the real cabinet is observed role-playing a situation facing a cabinet, where each member is defending his or her portfolio from budget cuts.

These exercises are followed by individual feedback sessions and development needs analysis relating to the cabinet.

While hard work, the development centre is not a stressful experience, and most people who have taken part so far have enjoyed it more than they expected, as well as getting more out of it than they imagined, as the case studies overleaf illustrate.

# 2

**Day two:** Day two is a full day (normally 9-6) involving individual and group exercises, and individual sessions with their nominated observer to discuss their performance and to design a development plan for each participant to follow over succeeding weeks and months.

'For the cabinet members in these authorities, this exercise is the first time that they have taken part in development activities that relate to their political roles. I know it has sometimes been difficult for leaders to get the whole cabinet together for the day and a half it takes, but when they have, the benefits to both individuals and the group have been profound and long-lasting.'

'The reactions from the pilot authorities have been so encouraging that we are now preparing to work with a much wider group of authorities, because we are sure that authorities of all levels will benefit from this kind of development.'

'The pilots have also allowed us to refine the centres in the light of their feedback – sharpening the exercises to make them more relevant, using real-life scenarios instead of the fictional ones we originally proposed, and making sure that every minute of the day and a half is useful and productive.'

**Professor Jo Silvester**

## Next steps

The development of political leaders is a top priority for the Leadership Centre, so as we roll out the cabinet development centre initiative we are offering it to all authorities.

The development centres can be used as a stand alone development product, or as part of a wider leadership development strategy. The Leadership Centre will also fund a proportion of the development programmes that result from each centre.

For a discussion about how the development centre might work in your authority, please call:

**Joe Simpson**

Director of Relationships and Partnerships on  
**020 7038 9355**

## Case Study

# Westminster

## Westminster was the first cabinet to experience the Leadership Centre's development centre

Despite concerns that it might be a bit time-consuming, everyone, says leader Simon Milton was pleased that they were there on the day. 'Several of the members would actually have valued spending a little more time on the process,' he says.

Simon was able to get all, bar one, of his members to take part – and the remaining member very much wished he'd attended, when he heard the reports. The members all felt that the process would help them to function more effectively as a team – and in fact, the impact of the development centre was felt almost immediately at the next informal cabinet meeting. 'People clearly modified their normal competitive behaviour and there was a much greater sense of the team in the discussion.'

The most powerful element of the process for members was learning what their colleagues thought about them. Most people's assumptions about their own strengths and development needs were confirmed by the feedback from the observers, but afterwards they felt more confident about understanding their own development needs. Members would now like to go through a similar process with the senior officers they work with in order to get their feedback

As a result of the centre, Westminster has agreed to set performance objective targets for individual cabinet members and to organise mini-assessment centres for colleagues outside the cabinet. Some members have already started to take things further with a personal development plan and looking proactively at other opportunities to learn and develop – finding the time to attend more external meetings where they would mingle with councillors from elsewhere, for example.

'Overall we derived real value from the centre as a team,' says Simon Milton. 'It was what we needed. As an already 'excellent' authority, to help us answer the question, where next? It boosted the confidence of less experienced cabinet members; energised the team and helped people understand how the team dynamic could be improved; it generated a list of 'to do' tasks around working together, development and performance management that will be fairly simple to implement; and got all cabinet members as individuals to focus much more enthusiastically on their own self development. What more can you ask from a day and a half?'



**Case Study**

# Bracknell Forest

## A more cohesive team was an important outcome for Bracknell Forest

For leader Paul Bettison the key benefit of the centre was getting everyone working together. 'You tend to take your close colleagues for granted and forget you are a team sometimes. The exercises made us work as a team,' he reflects.

Paul couldn't persuade his whole cabinet to take part – 'I only wanted people there who were bought in,' he says – but empty places were filled by what he calls his rising stars, the deputy portfolio holders. That had its benefits he believes: 'The centre helped my up-and-coming young members to mature, and it helped us see them in a different light, as colleagues on the team.'

Everyone who took part felt it was worthwhile. 'It was a comprehensive experience set in a realistic context, with exercises we could all relate to in our lives as leading councillors,' says cabinet member Terry Mills. 'It's good that the whole concept of raising leadership standards among councillors in local government is being addressed and the development centres will I believe make a positive contribution.'

It was an intense day and half for everyone. They all felt that the exercises really stretched them, and similar to members from Westminster, found the most revealing part was the 360 degree feedback 'It let each of us individually and privately find out what others thought of us, and that is such incredibly useful knowledge,' says Paul. 'It's not at all usual in politics to be given that much insight. Being able to discuss that with the mentor at the end was very helpful, to highlight where our areas for further development lay, and how to access the information and skills we need.' Members also benefited from focusing the group exercise on a real Bracknell Forest issue.

Paul sees the development centre as a useful weapon in his leadership development armoury: 'This isn't something I see us doing once, ticking the box and moving on,' he says. 'Because it is more about how the team works than about the individuals, it's an evolving process, and when the team changes, it will be time to revisit the development centre.'

'It's good that the whole concept of raising leadership standards among councillors in local government is being addressed and the development centres will I believe make a positive contribution.'

## Skill framework for elected members

### Community leadership (CL)

Community leadership (CL) engages enthusiastically and empathetically with the community in order to learn, understand and act upon issues of local concern. Mediates fairly and constructively, encouraging trust by representing all sections of the community.

#### Positive indicators

- engages proactively with community, canvasses opinion and seeks new ways of representing others
- keeps up-to-date with community and issues of local concern, drawing information and resources from a range of sources and people
- approachable, is empathetic and understanding and encourages trust
- provides a voice for all sections of the community and develops partnerships inside the council and with external organisations
- mediates fairly and constructively between people with conflicting needs
- campaigns with enthusiasm, courage and persistence on behalf of others

#### Negative indicators

- does not engage in community activities, waits to be approached and is difficult to contact (eg says 'I'm not your councillor')
- keeps a low public profile and is not easily recognised by members of the community
- is exclusive in approach, and does not focus equally on community groups or issues
- does not have detailed understanding of local issues and needs
- concentrates on council processes and meetings rather than constituents
- unrealistic about what can be achieved and does not deliver on promises

### Regulating and monitoring (RM)

Regulating and monitoring (RM) understands and executes judicial role by following protocol, evaluating arguments and making decisions that balance public needs and local policy. Ensures progress by monitoring and intervening where necessary.

#### Positive indicators

- evaluates arguments according to evidence, makes independent and impartial judgements
- chairs meetings effectively, follows protocol and keeps process on track
- follows legal process, balancing public needs and local policy
- monitors performance and intervenes as appropriate to ensure progress
- seeks feedback on own performance and engages in self-directed learning
- understands and acts on judicial role in order to meet legal responsibilities (eg duty of care, corporate parenting)

#### Negative indicators

- does not declare personal interest and makes decisions for personal gain
- does not check facts or consider all sides of a story, makes subjective and uninformed judgements
- leaves monitoring and checks on progress to others
- makes decisions without taking advice or considering regulations and wider development frameworks
- fails to recognise or address limits of own knowledge and expertise
- misses deadlines, leaves business unfinished and lacks balance between council work and other commitments

## Skill framework for elected members

### Scrutiny and challenge (SC)

Scrutiny and challenge (SC) acts as a critical friend by seeking opportunities for scrutiny and providing constructive feedback. Analyses information quickly and presents arguments in a concise, meaningful and easily accessible way.

#### Positive indicators

- looks for new methods and topics for critical challenge and scrutiny
- quickly analyses and assimilates complex information, taking account of the wider strategic context
- presents arguments in a concise, meaningful and easily accessible way
- inquisitorial, asks for explanations and checks for implementation of recommendations
- objective, rigorous and resilient in challenging process, decisions and people
- acts as a critical friend, provides constructive feedback and acknowledges the success of others

#### Negative indicators

- does not prepare thoroughly or check facts, uses selective information and draws subjective or biased conclusions
- overly reliant on officers and tends to back down when challenged
- fails to recognise or engage in scrutiny as part of their role
- assimilates new information slowly, focuses on detail and does not distinguish between important, irrelevant and inaccurate information
- adversarial in style, aggressive and confrontational when challenged
- prefers political 'blood sports' to working collaboratively for the good of the council, abuses scrutiny processes for political gain

### Communication skills (CS)

Communication skills (CS) listens sensitively, uses appropriate language and checks for understanding. Communicates regularly with individuals and groups in the community, speaks clearly and confidently in public, and makes sure that people are informed.

#### Positive indicators

- communicates regularly with community via newsletters, phone calls and local media
- listens sensitively, checks for understanding and adapts style as necessary
- builds relationships with local media and creates opportunities for communicating key decisions, activities and achievements
- speaks clearly and confidently in public, uses accessible language and avoids jargon or 'council-speak'
- provides regular feedback, keeps people informed and manages expectations
- uses appropriate language to communicate key points verbally and in writing (eg letters, reports, interviews and presentations)

#### Negative indicators

- interrupts, appears not to listen and uses inappropriate or insensitive language (eg shouting, being rude or abusive)
- communicates reactively and is slow to respond when approached by others (eg public, colleagues, officers or media)
- fails to listen to others' views and presents rigid and inflexible arguments,
- uses information dishonestly to discredit others and is unwilling or unable to deliver unpopular messages
- fails to participate in meetings and lacks confidence speaking in public
- presents subjective and confused arguments using poor language and style

## Skill framework for elected members

### Working in partnership (WP)

Working in partnership (WP) builds positive relationships by making others feel valued, trusted and included and by working collaboratively to achieve goals. Maintains calm and focus, recognises when to delegate or provide support and is able to take a long-term view in developing partnerships.

#### Positive indicators

- builds good relationships with colleagues, officers and wider community
- achieves goals by co-ordinating others, maintaining task focus and persisting in the face of setbacks
- empowers others to take responsibility, knows when to delegate or provide support
- makes others feel valued, trusted and included, recognises and is inclusive of people from different backgrounds
- patient, takes a long-term view in developing networks and partnerships
- maintains calm and focus when criticised or under pressure

#### Negative indicators

- uses status and position to exert control or impose solutions, fails to involve people in decisions
- exclusive in approach, fails to utilise diverse skills and perspectives of others
- unable to work across political divide and places political gain before collaborative working
- acts alone rather than seeking help or working as part of a team
- uses divisive tactics to upset relationships, council policies and decisions
- defensive when criticised, blames others for failure and does not admit to being wrong

### Political Understanding (PU)

Political understanding (PU) acts ethically, consistently and with integrity when communicating values or representing group views in decisions and actions. Works across group boundaries without compromising values or ethics.

#### Positive indicators

- actively represents group views and values through decisions and actions
- helps develop cohesion within the group and contributes to healthy communication between the group and the council
- communicates political values through canvassing, electoral campaigning and by identifying new ways of engaging the public
- committed to developing own political intelligence and understanding of local and national political landscape
- acts ethically, understands and communicates political values to others
- works across group boundaries without compromising political values

#### Negative indicators

- demonstrates inconsistent political values, lacks integrity and tends to say what others want to hear
- has poor knowledge of group manifesto, values and objectives
- puts personal motivations first, goes native or changes beliefs to match with those in power
- acts alone and fails to support group colleagues in public forums
- fails to translate group values into ways of helping the community
- lacks understanding of how central government policy impacts on local issues and council functioning

## Skill framework for cabinet members

### Providing vision (PV)

Providing vision (PV) creates a shared council vision by establishing strategic policies and prioritising actions. Actively encourages involvement of others in policy formation and works collaboratively to analyse information and promote understanding. Open to new ideas and ways of doing things

#### Positive indicators

- establishes strategic policies and prioritises actions based on local needs, manifesto and regional opportunities
- works with officers to collate and analyse information and inform budget priorities and performance plans
- actively encourages involvement of stakeholders in policy formation
- creates and communicates a shared council vision, providing clear direction and promoting understanding
- open to new ideas and adapts innovatively to a changing environment (eg e-government)
- acts to broaden perspective and enhance effectiveness by learning from others and sharing best practice (eg other councils, IDEA)

#### Negative indicators

- takes short-term 'quick fix' approaches to policy formation, focuses on day-to-day issues rather than future needs and fails to see beyond the next election
- excludes members, officers and public from decision-making and is overly selective in use of information to guide policy decisions
- resistant to change, prefers 'old ways' of doing things and fails to draw on the experience of others (eg councils, peer support)
- does not identify or act on opportunities to promote the council or influence national and regional agendas
- inward looking, does not communicate and explain council vision and policies
- does not work within CPA guidelines or act on recommendations

### Managing performance (MP)

Managing performance (MP) works closely with others to develop, promote and achieve objectives and represent council at a strategic level. Encourages scrutiny, monitors performance and responds positively to feedback and ideas.

#### Positive indicators

- works closely with senior officers to develop, agree and implement portfolio strategies
- sets and communicates realistic and achievable objectives, monitors performance and acts to address deficits
- develops knowledge of council systems and inputs council views at area specific meetings (eg planning, licensing)
- emphasises a team approach and shares responsibility for success and failure
- encourages scrutiny and responds positively to feedback, challenge and ideas
- represents electorate and council at a strategic level through links and partnerships at local, regional and national levels

#### Negative indicators

- uses support inconsistently or ineffectively, fails to consult or is too reliant on officers or external support
- inflexible and resistant to scrutiny, alternative views and solutions
- creates a 'them and us' attitude to officers, opposition, non-cabinet members or external councils and agencies
- operates in secret and fails to open processes and decision-making to others – 'tells' rather than 'sells'
- overly focused on process and debate, fails to reach conclusions
- fails to integrate own portfolio with wider cabinet agenda

## Skill framework for leaders

### Excellence in leadership (EL)

Excellence in leadership (EL) provides visionary and charismatic leadership, is well prepared, able to troubleshoot and juggle conflicting responsibilities. Works to shape a culture of excellence by acting as the public face of the council and a role model for others. Encourages co-operation and communication across political and council boundaries.

#### Positive indicators

- provides visionary and charismatic leadership, inspires trust in others and gains commitment to policies and decisions
- shapes a culture of excellence and acts as a role model for appropriate behaviour, ethical practice and democratic process
- builds strong relationships with senior officers and cabinet based on open communication, co-operative working and trust
- acts as the public face of the council and champions council needs in regional and national debates
- works across political and council boundaries to foster communication and encourage co-operation
- well prepared and able to troubleshoot, judges what to get involved in and when to say 'No'
- committed to learning, developing others and sharing best practice
- effectively 'juggles' numerous, potentially conflicting, responsibilities

#### Negative indicators

- maintains personal control by imposing views and being overly directive
- demonstrates partiality for own party members and uses position to promote party agenda to the detriment of wider council needs
- defensive, avoids making difficult or unpopular decisions and unwilling to admit mistakes
- lacks clear parameters between own role and that of CEO, fails to delegate or make use of others' strengths
- overly reactive, fails to plan ahead or foster a sense of mission
- does not encourage communication with community or promote the council, lacks public recognition as a figurehead
- inconsistent in style and behaviour, fails to 'walk the talk' or set an example for others
- lacks detailed knowledge of different council sectors and fails to integrate information to provide an overview of council functioning





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