



*Manifesto for a
modern local politics*

Are you a 21st Century councillor?

Now more than ever, rebuilding confidence in politics requires raising the game of politics locally.

The Leadership Centre's manifesto for a modern local politics is doing just that. We are advocating for a change in the way we do politics and believe we are at our best when we promote and strengthen local governance.

Our manifesto for a modern local politics is focusing on the 10 key challenges that define the new direction of local government.

Is your politics fit for the 21st Century?...

Revitalising recruitment

Ask people why they got actively involved in politics and you get one of two answers: either they got involved in a local campaign, or someone asked them. This campaign includes modernising the selection and recruitment of more talented councillors in local government.

Since 2008 the 'Be a Councillor' campaign has resulted in hundreds of new candidates for London's 2010 local elections - and has been rolled out and led by the parties nationwide throughout 2009. The Leadership Centre is publishing *Finding the X factor* – a guide to recruitment in your area to complement this campaign.

We believe politics and governance will benefit enormously from attracting people hitherto put off from standing for election because of practical constraints, cultural barriers or the lack of a clear and easy way to get involved.

This means opening up selection, supporting flexible time commitments, encouraging active recruitment and promoting talent.



Ask them, ask them again, ask them again, and don't stop until they say yes!



Understanding leadership of place

Realising new ambitions for people and places needs three changes in our collective mindset. Firstly, engaging with the **Total Place** work - looking beyond the current constitutional and regulatory constraints on what councillors are responsible for. Secondly, looking **beyond place** – since no place is self-contained. We need to embrace an agenda that supersedes geographical boundaries of the place we are elected to represent, for example in how we think about transport. Finally, **the politics of place** - a move from a technical one based on party to an inherently political one based on power.

We believe there is no substitute for political leadership, it is the only show in town where residents can hold decision-makers to account. There is also no excuse why decisions happen because of bureaucratic reasons rather than because of the needs and priorities of an area.

This means starting with your community and its needs and working backwards to the town hall and the other statutory partners. Those coming to the table should be expecting to influence the whole of the public purse, not just the council pot.



Be suspicious if you spend too much time talking to officers, and not enough time talking to people.



Developing cabinet members for your ward

The local councillor should be the fundamental building block of representative democracy and unless these foundations are strong then the whole edifice can collapse. Therefore, the role of the councillor should be seen as an opportunity to become an expert on and champion of the issues in a particular area.

We believe that there is no such thing as being a backbencher – every member of a council has an executive job within their own wards and districts, and the fact they are directly elected gives them a unique responsibility to the community.

This means every council and Leader needs to champion and devolve responsibility as much as possible to every councillor in the form of area committees, devolved budgets and local partnership engagement.



People come into politics to do something, not to rubberstamp other people's decisions.

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Promoting effective scrutiny

Scrutiny should operate beyond the authority and work with local public services more generally, finding solutions to shared problems and not just focusing on what the authority itself does. There should be more engagement of local people in scrutiny and more pre-decision scrutiny giving councillors the opportunity of asking “should we?” as well as “why did we?”.

We believe that scrutiny is the council’s own internal inspection regime to hold itself and its partners to account. The process should be about people and their experiences – focusing on the ends and not the means.

This means examining honestly whether you are making the best of your Scrutiny Committees. Where can you introduce a new approach? Are the right questions being asked of the right people?



Think of scrutiny as the posh word for campaigning and holding people to account - you are the representative of the people to the town hall, not the other way around.

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The politics of austerity

After more than a decade of sustained growth in public expenditure local government is going to endure its period of famine. In tighter times decisions are inherently political: core to the political task is the reconciliation of different interests and beliefs. In making tough calls politicians cannot find solutions for a blue-sky world, but have to make judgements about what is achievable in the here and now. The tougher the financial environment, the more acute these dilemmas become.

We believe we have to move beyond the efficiency agenda of cuts and salami-slicing into one requiring more astute political decisions.

This means considering the political implications for your area of reducing the total provision of services, passing provision into some voluntary sector management or perhaps into some partnership with the private sector.



Nobody will tell you what to do, but they'll certainly blame you when you don't do it. Just as local government has led on the efficiency agenda, it can show the way on the austerity agenda.

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Levers of influence, not levers of power

From 'Nudge' to 'wicked issues' to 'adaptive leadership challenges', leadership is moving from old-style command and control to a more responsive and enquiring approach. In seeking to influence people's behaviour, aspirations, or beliefs, we need first to recognise that we are dealing with the power of influence and not the power of control.

We believe the agenda should be not so much in *doing things to people* as in *engaging people to change*. As Jonathan Sacks put it "We need to learn to build houses together".

This means recognising that people are at the heart of directing resources and making decisions, therefore people, (rather than strategies or theories) should be at the heart of transforming outcomes in a place.



People are political animals, with instincts, hunches, interests and motivations. This is where our political space is, not in theories espoused round meeting tables.

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Championing community Identity

There has been a lot of discussion about the local role in dealing with community cohesion. But that agenda seems to have been restricted to simply addressing the issue of better integration of Muslim communities (and trying to reduce the risks of further terrorist attacks). Important though this is, putting that issue into the wider context of maintaining community identity and achieving some sense of shared identity better captures the challenges. Central to this process is storytelling. Creating a story about a place that people can believe in, helps create that sense of shared identity and buy-in.

We believe community identity is not just about ethnic diversity or 'community cohesion', but about a shared space which needs to be nourished by leaders.

This means identifying the story of your place, finding the common elements everyone can sign up to as well as creating spaces where people can discover and understand their shared values and interests.



Only a few people read corporate plans, but everyone 'gets' stories. If you can find ways to describe your place in terms people understand, you have won half of the political battle.



Localist politics - the art of engagement

We have to ask the question not how do we win the vote, but how do we win the hearts and minds? National political parties can broadcast at voters as much as they like, but if the voter has switched the mute button on then it is either completely useless or anything the voter does hear is interpreted as reinforcing their own previously held views.

We believe the solution to this dilemma is not for even more sophisticated messaging done from the centre but a different form of doing politics altogether - first engaging activists and then voters, rather than traditional and hierarchical models of leadership. But this means we must change the way we communicate, and recognise the key role councillors can play with this.

This means we must treat councillors as a scarce resource: empowering them but also having high expectations of results - and using every modern method of communication available, to move from push communications (the publishing model) to conversations (the social media model).

An important maxim in social media terms is “if you don’t publish it, someone else will”. This is not an optional extra for modern councillors, its about a return to street politics and engagement through talking to people.



Member orientated institutions

The switch to the executive model of local government was meant to lead to a radical reduction in the number of meetings, and also the ability to redeploy the not insignificant amount of senior officer time that was consumed in servicing that structure. Yet visit most town or county halls and you find almost the same plethora of meetings, now re-titled as some special subgroup or task force or some such.

We believe that we lose vital good will and effective leadership from our councillors when we don't put their contribution at the heart of what a council does.

This means councils need to look at the time commitment of a councillor (akin to a non-executive director of a PLC), their resources, their priorities, and the ways for councillors to continuously develop and acquire skills.



The most forward thinking local authorities are ones that treat their councillors as indispensable, and treat their time and contribution accordingly.



Politicians prepared to raise their game

'Be the change' is a mantra now in the general consciousness. The question is whether politicians really want to change. Politics will also remain the territory for those who are both personally ambitious as well as ambitious to make a difference, but there should be a culture where political learning is seen as legitimate. In practice most opposition leaders will denounce any investment in political learning by the administration as wasteful. What is perhaps most striking is how bad most political leaders are at group dynamics when being able to cement better group dynamics is not a nice-to-have option, but core business.

We believe this argument is not about re-creating politics as a moral debating society, but politicians being better at their core business.

This means not just performance management for the system, but continual learning and development for the politician. We should bring in modern understandings and assumptions about human resources, but ally it with what the practical realities are for the political cycle – succession planning, change of control and recognising talent.

Councillors have demonstrated over the years a willingness (far more than most colleagues at Westminster) to develop personally and as politicians - it is critical to success - so demand that your council invests in it.



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A 21st Century Councillor is one who is a supported, confident, talented and professional community leader. One who understands but can also transform their place. One who can think strategically, as well as be informed and inspired by their local roots. In short, being a 21st Century Councillor is a role that many more people should understand and aspire to fulfilling for at least a part of their lives.

Things you can be doing to promote this agenda and finding out more:

- 1 Talk about it with colleagues, find out what they think and let us know feedback from your patch. www.21stcenturycouncillor.com/contact.jsp
 - 2 Tell us examples where you think councils are doing well and where you are up against resistance. www.21stcenturycouncillor.com/contact.jsp
 - 3 Keep up to date, and keep networking. There is a comprehensive set of links on www.21stcenturycouncillor.com and lots of ways to test yourself and your experience within the council.
 - 4 Use the resources and funding available through the local government family to promote and support you and your council group to develop and lead in your area.
 - 5 Politics is not a dirty word - reclaim what we do as an integral part of our civic governance and be proud to be a 21st Century Councillor.
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The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



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