

Putting Councillors at the heart of what we do

Communications and engagement approach

We're aiming to sow the seeds of cultural change in our organisation, by putting councillors at the heart of what we do. Councillors have a unique and constant role in connecting us to our communities. Strong councillors are at the centre of local networks and help us to grow our relationships with our citizens.

The Democracy Commission's work has shown that the valuable role of councillor is often misunderstood, by both our citizens and our staff. Yet through our most recent work we have also found a shared enthusiasm amongst councillors and officers to improve working relationships. Above all, we've heard a desire to create more trust.

Our approach is about recognising the essential role of councillors in our organisation and in our neighbourhoods, about creating stronger relationships, and about encouraging shared activities that will have meaningful outcomes for our citizens. It's a key part of our work to grow a stronger local democracy, from the ground up.

What we'll focus on

We're developing our communications & engagement activities around 3 key ideas:

People – *Personal and Political*

Trust grows from getting to know each other. We're going to tell personal stories online and actively encourage more interaction between our councillors and staff. Confidence grows from understanding. We're going to promote opportunities for staff to learn about working with councillors and change attitudes to doing this.

Places – *Presence and Pulse*

We're going to recognise the value of councillors as representatives of our local places – being present in their wards and being able to share insight with both citizens and officers. Together we can improve our ward-based working. We can also improve the flows of local information that councillors are at the centre of.

Partnership – *Practical and Productive*

We're going to create more practical opportunities for councillors and officers to collaborate. We must be able to demonstrate meaningful results for our citizens. We'll also promote successful work with our partners and amongst the wider local government community. This means being ambitious and working in the open.

What we'll do

We will develop new activities and approaches in direct response to the issues and potential actions identified by councillors and managers in our workshops. As a priority, we will respond to those actions highlighted by the Democracy Commission Working Group and Programme Team.

Working closely with councillors to develop relevant content

Whilst some of our existing content is already helping to raise the profile of the councillor role, we now need to bring these elements together into a coherent and prominent campaign, and to refine our approach to new content. So we will create:

- **A series of thought-provoking campaign bursts** with custom artwork that will challenge the way our staff currently think about working with councillors. We'll use these to encourage take-up of training and advice. [*Hero content*]
- **A rolling programme of storytelling content** – blogs, videos, live tweets and imagery. This will help engage our staff by introducing the people who are our councillors, rather than just the role. We will give clear examples of how to work effectively with councillors, and encouragement to do it. [*Hub content*]
- **New promotion of opportunities to learn the basics** about working with councillors, to meet and to work together, along with bitesize advice and reassurance, including snippets from our protocols. [*Help content*]

Hero content is occasional, high-impact content that creates an emotional response.

Hub content is about telling stories – it's what keeps people coming back.

Help content is useful information that we know people are looking for day-to-day.

Improving our methods of communicating with councillors

We need to recognise the shift towards supporting councillors in their wards and make sure that we have effective methods of communication in place. We should:

- Review our current communications channels and approaches.
- Pilot an approach to sharing timely, bitesize information on ward-level issues.
- Test an approach to encouraging staff to ask for insight from councillors.
- Promote existing tools that can help when used well, such as People Finder.

There are also opportunities to develop our participants' ideas about using ward-level social media as part of the "Local democracy in a networked society" elements of the wider Democracy Commission work programme.

Encouraging openness in the way we work with councillors

We know that our staff can be fearful of working with councillors. Many think that councillors only get involved when something has gone wrong, and officers say they do not feel confident talking to councillors. We've also learned that Scrutiny is seen as particularly challenging. Making our work together more open will help us to change those perceptions. Some of the ways we can start doing this are:

- Share some of our collaborative work as it happens (for example, via live social media coverage), so that working with councillors begins to feel like a more open process, and other officers are encouraged to participate.
- Create and share a concise video introduction, explaining how Scrutiny works.
- Share video interviews with Scrutiny panel members and officers who have worked with Scrutiny, describing their journey in an honest and open way.

Sharing our work locally, regionally and nationally

We want to be known as the council that has put councillors at its heart, so we should make the most of opportunities to highlight our joint work. We can:

- Feature events and activities as part of Local Democracy Week (October), UK Parliament Week (November) and our New Councillor Induction (May).
- Grow awareness as part of the Democracy Commission work programme.
- Work towards wider promotion of our approach with other councils. We should work with one or more of our national partners to do this.

What we'll achieve

Our work will contribute to these agreed outcomes of the Democracy Commission:

“Councillors have the confidence, skills, support and capacity to lead the changing relationship between the council and local citizens. They are placed at the heart of the Council.”

“The councillor role is clear, widely communicated and universally understood.”

Timeline of activities

Content	Date	Key themes
Campaign burst #1	October 2018	People
Campaign burst #2	To confirm	People, Places
Campaign burst #3	To confirm	People, Partnership
Storytelling content	Ongoing	People
Help content	Autumn 2018 onwards	Partnership
Improving methods	Date	Key themes
Review channels & approaches	September 2018	Places, Partnership
Ward-level bitesize info pilot	To confirm	Places
Test encouraging Cllr insight	To confirm	Places, Partnership
Promote existing tools	Autumn 2018 onwards	Partnership
Encouraging openness	Date	Key themes
Coverage of collaborative work	Ongoing	Partnership
Video: intro to Scrutiny	September 2018	Partnership
Video: working with Scrutiny	October 2018	Partnership
Sharing our work	Date	Key themes
Local Democracy Week	October 2018	People, Places, Partnership
UK Parliament Week	November 2018	People, Places, Partnership
New Councillor induction	May 2019	People
Democracy work programme	Ongoing	People, Places, Partnership
National promotion	Autumn 2019	Partnership