

Testing The 21st Century Councillor Framework

A report for Jam & Justice, with
North West Employers.



Exploring the roles of The 21st Century Councillor with
Councillors, council officers and other citizens.

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1. Background to the project and organisations

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) awarded funding to the Universities of Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham, together with the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation, for a research project called *Jam and Justice: co-producing urban governance for social innovation*. **Jam and Justice** is a Greater Manchester-based action research project, asking what enables greater citizen involvement in decision-making in our cities? What can we do together to achieve fairer and more inclusive outcomes for all?

The research funding was used to design and deliver ten projects. Each project used different ways to test and innovate ways of governing in Greater Manchester. This report relates to one of the ten action research projects: **Testing The 21st Century Councillor Framework**.

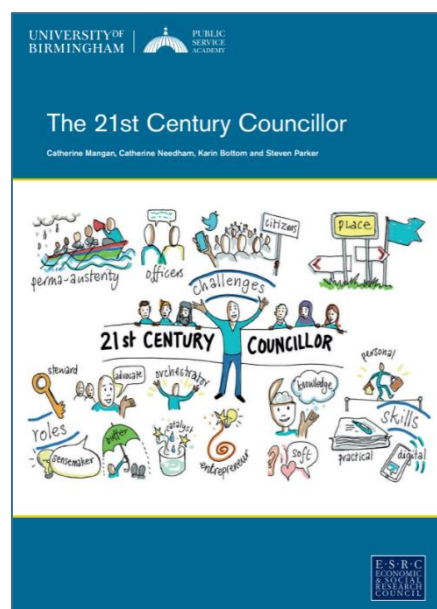
Testing The 21st Century Councillor Framework was supported by North West Employers, an Employers' Organisation serving the 41 local authorities in the North West of England. North West Employers supported the work by facilitating access to Elected Councillors and organising regional events to share the findings.

Why was this project needed?

Councillors' roles are constantly evolving and many demands are placed on local politicians. During 2016 the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) at the University of Birmingham undertook a research programme which set out a series of roles that local elected members could and do play. *The 21st Century Councillor* framework (pictured) tried to describe how local Councillors could respond to the many challenges and opportunities in their constituencies.

The original 21st Century Councillor research highlighted the changing role of the Councillor and identified some key skills for the future. The framework highlighted seven different roles (see next page).

A full account of that research is available from:
21stcenturypublicservant.files.wordpress.com



The University of Birmingham, in partnership again with North West Employers, then developed an online skills assessment that would enable individuals to complete a self-assessment and invite feedback from others about their current skills with a view to identifying areas that they might wish to develop in the future, in line with *The 21st Century Councillor* framework.



Figure: The roles of The 21st Century Councillor (credit: Birmingham University)

Buffer – mitigating the impact of austerity on citizens. Although some expressed this as the traditional concept of a protector, others suggested this role involved helping citizens to find alternative support.

Sensemaker – translating a shift in the role of public services and the relationship between institutions and citizen.

Catalyst – enabling citizens to do things for themselves, and having new conversations about what is now possible.

Entrepreneur – working with citizens and partners to develop new solutions.

Steward of place – providing coherent stewardship of scarce public resources, across their locality, and working in partnership with others to make the most of resources available.

Advocate – acting on behalf of all citizens. Being responsive to those who are vulnerable and those who struggle to make their voices heard.

Orchestrator –described in a variety of ways including convening groups of people to work together, mediating between different groups, and helping to broker relationships.

There have been very positive responses from local authorities to the framework and its sister framework for public sector officers, *The 21st Century Public Servant*. Many councils have already used the framework to shape their work. Since the publication of the framework there have been some key debates and discussion.

Some of the discussion has been about the terms used: Do the words make sense to Councillors? Can Councillors recognise themselves in these roles? Some debates have been about when and how different roles might be appropriate. Other issues include how to support elected members to develop new skills to play these roles, and how to harness existing skills.

We wanted to look at such debates in more depth. Our project **Testing the 21st Century Councillor Framework** was developed to explore these issues.

2. Our Approach

Our approach was to use the roles and skills identified in the 21st Century Councillor research and undertake an action research project to test this framework by asking: Are the Councillor roles and descriptions in the framework what people see? Do they make sense? What else is needed to enable better outcomes for the communities, Councillors and officers and the council itself? This report focuses on the feedback received in relation to the 21st Century Councillor research.

From the North West Councils who had expressed an interest in the 21st Century Councillor research, four from the Greater Manchester area were approached and agreed to seek approval to be involved: Bury Council (BC), Manchester City Council (MCC), Oldham Council (OC), and Salford City Council (SCC). The project commenced in April 2018 with focus groups and meetings with stakeholders running until April 2019.

A wide range of participants took part in the project through a series of 10 focus groups with 57 people in total, held in four authorities. These included local elected Councillors, individual citizens, members of community groups, members of youth organisations, and council officers. A breakdown of the participants is provided further in the report.

3. Methodology

The project focused on strengthening relationships between local Councillors and citizens in positive ways to achieve better outcomes for all.

We wanted to talk to people around the North West, using the Councillor roles described by the Birmingham researchers. Do they make sense? Are they useful? Are they roles which citizens want Councillors to play? Do Councillors see themselves in these roles? How can a joint dialogue between Councillors, with citizens, constituents, community and voluntary groups, and officers take place? How can we focus on strengthening relationships between the different groups in positive ways to enable effective policy outputs and outcomes for all?

We invited Councillors, citizens, community groups and officers to be part of focus groups in each local authority area to discuss these issues. We ran between two and four focus groups per council.

4. The Process, Engagement and Attendance

a) The process

Throughout the process, we had an ongoing discussion with Birmingham University's Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) in respect of the feedback received from the focus groups and possible next steps.

This report will be shared with stakeholders in the North West, firstly through an event, where we will share the findings and invite feedback from those involved. We will invite Greater Manchester councils, and North West Employers members via North West Employers themselves, to encourage more conversations in different Greater Manchester and North West councils about the changed relationships between Councillors, citizens and officers and the demands placed on them. Depending on what stakeholders want as outcomes, together we may identify ways to update the tools to support Councillors when working with citizens, namely, *The 21st Century Councillor* framework produced by Birmingham University and the 360-feedback tool. Learning and development interventions to support the changing roles and requirements may be reviewed and updated.

b) Engagement

We were looking to work with up to four councils within the Greater Manchester area who had shown a particular interest in the research around the 21st Century Councillor. Councils were identified from attendance and engagement at previous events facilitated by North West Employers. Four councils, namely Bury, Oldham, Salford and Manchester City Council were identified and contact was made with the officer who led on Councillor development in each council. Firstly, agreement was sought from the leader of each council; some councils were able to commence the process from this point, others had to wait for executive boards or learning and development groups to meet and sign off the project. Once agreement had been made, all councils provided contact details to the Jam and Justice-commissioned delivery partner/consultant who was coordinating and facilitating the focus groups. Contact details consisted of Councillors involved in learning and development, Councillors who it was thought would wish to engage in the process, and officers who had contact with Councillors within their roles. An invitation was sent to all those identified asking them if they would like to be involved. All Councillors and officers contacted were keen to be involved and provided contact details for community and voluntary groups, who were then sent invitations to attend focus groups.

c) Attendance

From the four councils who agreed to be part of the project, the Councillors who formed part of the focus groups represented the different political parties, experience and roles. There were cabinet members, backbenchers and portfolio holders. Similarly, the council officers who attended came from across different departments and services including neighbourhood services, customer contact, legal, democratic services, and engineering. The officers were in a range of roles and positions in the organisation, from Heads of Services, to front-line workers, The officers, community and youth groups, and active individual citizen were all engaged in some way with Councillors within their work. In the summary tables we have included community and youth groups, individual citizens, and community and voluntary sector members under the broad category of 'community'. This provided a variety of voices to hear and individuals to engage with. The set of focus groups in a given area covered people from each of the three main participant types (councillor,

officer, community) Some of the focus group discussions included all three sets of participants in the same session. Some focus groups ran specifically for Councillors due to dates and times that suited them. In some cases, it was felt that it would be more appropriate to have separate groups, so that people could discuss issues with people with similar backgrounds.

The process of liaising with participants and the co-ordination required to enable the focus groups to run was time consuming. Consequently, the focus group sessions continued beyond the original deadline. This did not cause issues as the end date for the project was flexible, ensuring that those that wanted to be part of the process could attend the groups.

Each focus group ran for between one and two hours and was structured around key areas for discussion as discussed below.

Table 1. Focus group participants

Council	Participants	Number attending
Bury Council	Officers	10
Bury Council	Community groups	4
Bury Council	Councillors	4
Oldham Council	Officers	6
Oldham Council	Community groups	7
Oldham Council	Councillors	1
Oldham Council	Youth group	9
Salford City Council	Officers	10
Salford City Council	Councillors	5
Manchester City Council	Councillors	2
Total		57

Table 2. **Designation of participants**

Participants	Roles
Council Officers	Career Engagement Coordinator
	Programme Managers
	Youth Worker
	Improvement Advisor
	Group Engineer
	Contact Centre Managers
	Head of Democratic services
	Neighbourhood Engagement Coordinators
	District Coordinators
	Director of Legal Services
	Community Development Worker
	Service Manager Youth Service
	Head of Constitutional
	Neighbourhood Development Officers
	Assistant Director
	Head of Community Safety
	Neighbourhood Teams Administration Support
	Acting Head of Service Customer Support Collection
Community groups	Mixed Groups from within each council area
	Village Associations
	Residents Associations
	Community Group Leaders
	Chair of governors (Local Colleges)
	Local Residents involved in community projects
	Trustee of Youth and Community Association
	Community Volunteers
	Community Champions
	Youth Worker Trainer
	Community Foodbank Representatives

Table 2. **Designation of participants (cont.)**

Participants	Roles
Youth Council	Mixed Roles
	Communication and DMYP
	Children in care council
	Youth Councils members
	Events and Outreach Officer
	Campaign Officer
	Greater Manchester Youth Combined Authority Representative (GMYCA)
Councillors	Mixed Roles and Political Party
	Cabinet Members,
	Backbenchers
	Portfolio Holders

d) Focus group agenda

The format of the focus groups was structured to include introductions, background to the project and key areas for discussion, as detailed below:

Agenda

Overall purpose:

Testing *The 21st Century Councillor* framework, the roles and descriptions identified.

The 21st Century Councillor: 7 Roles (see above, page 2)

Questions:

- ☐ What do you think of the roles identified, do they make sense?
- ☐ Do any of the roles particularly stand out as key?
- ☐ Which roles do you see being played out or play out?
- ☐ Are there any roles that you don't see played?
- ☐ Are there barriers to the roles?
- ☐ Are there roles you don't like or don't feel right?

We also wanted to have conversations linked to *The 21st Century Councillor* framework about new ways to develop relationships to meet changing demands in roles and expectations, how to strengthen relationships between the different groups in positive ways, and to explore emerging issues and ideas.

5. Findings and Recommendations

Overall themes are discussed first **(a)**, followed with a closer look at what different types of participant said: **(b)** council officers, **(c)** Councillors, **(d)** community members, and **(e)** youth representatives.

Subsequent discussion examines possibilities for **(f)** strengthening the Councillor's role and developing relationships between Councillors and those they work with, highlighting **(g)** emerging issues. Potential **(h)** learning and development interventions are suggested. The discussion concludes with **(j)** summary next steps and recommendations.

a) Summary of overall feedback (all groups)

All focus groups felt that the roles made sense. It depended on the skills of the Councillor whether they saw the roles being played out. There were mixed responses depending on who was feeding back.

Key points that stood out about the roles were:



Officers and Councillors felt that **buffer** could sound a little patronising, as if communities can't deal with things themselves. Interestingly, the community groups did not feed this back in respect of the label.

It was also felt that **buffer** was the wrong word to use and the statement going with it needed simplifying. In the descriptor, the phrase "realistic mediator" was suggested as an alternative to "protector". Officers and Councillors felt citizens would definitely want their Councillor to play this role.

It was suggested **community champion** could be included in the roles as a title or as part of the description, as this is what Councillors do and play out.

The groups liked the title and description of the **sensemaker**. It explained how the Councillors worked with all of the different stakeholders and communities. They felt it linked in and flowed round the **catalyst** and **buffer**.

They said that the **sensemaker** was important in order to translate what is happening on the ground and to be aware of all the players who are involved in a given issue or project.



The title and role of the **catalyst** received positive feedback:

- As a creator of change
- Making links to the role around lobbying for support on issues
- Campaigner
- Preparing youth to support
- Influencer, getting people to behave differently



The role that received the most negative comments was the **entrepreneur**. Councillors, officers and the community recognised the need for Councillors to have a business focus, but thought this sounded more as if it was about money-making.

It was felt that **innovator** could be included as a title to describe how Councillors are required to think, make, or do new things in different ways. More and more, they are required to identify how to do things differently with reducing resources', to meet demands and provide better outcomes for all.



Community groups made positive comments in respect of the **catalyst**, the **advocate**, and the **orchestrator** and that Councillors should be able to provide people with advice and support, because they are the “power of authority”.



Councillors said that they feel at times like they are “the appeals court for people who didn’t get what they wanted from officers”. There was a feeling of being a mix of the **buffer** and the **sensemaker**. As a Councillor within the opposition said, perhaps they get more of the feeling of being “piggy in the middle”.

Some felt that the description for **steward of place** conflicts with the name, because it is only about resources in the description. They identify with the title but do not agree with the description as the focus is on resources.



Councillors and Officers highlighted other concerns:

Officers felt that the fundamental resources to support communities were there but Councillors won't spend the money because of clashes between themselves and communities, and that there was also a lack of awareness of projects on occasions.

Both officers and Councillors recognized a lack of awareness by Councillors when they were first elected, about the role, what the council does and how it works.

Discussions on the skills of the Councillors came up a number of times. A wide spectrum of skills were required. It was felt that many Councillors didn't have the skills or weren't supported enough to develop the skills required. Councils provided support around the "town hall" roles but not so much around relational skills (communication, connective, digital, and reflective skills) highlighted as key in the 21st Century Councillor research. Councillors need to be consistent in displaying these roles. For this to happen, it depended on their skills and knowledge. Some parties actively recruit women. A question was asked about recruiting for the skills required to support the roles.

Is it possible to recruit potential councillors based on their existing skills?



Councillors and officers were aware of the demands on each other. Positive comments were made from both groups about the great job each of them does and the reasons why they do the job. However, both groups felt that there was a need to "push it out more" to communities, to empower communities to do more for themselves, to enable more to be done. This means having different conversations and managing expectations. It also links in again to the question of skills and capabilities, and the balancing act Councillors in particular have to perform. Councillors felt that they are increasingly trying to get people involved, rather than doing things by themselves but recognised they could do more with this.

Some Councillors commented that people can be suspicious of each other. There was a need to recognise that not everyone has a "game plan".

Officers were aware that Councillors lead the council, so challenging Councillors felt difficult. These differences in power and responsibility can make some conversations difficult. Officers want to make sure that Councillor decisions are put in place. However, the number of officers has been cut and Councillors often struggle to fit everything in. The chance to talk properly is rare, but it was felt to be important and that a more collaborative way of working should be built into the process.

Officers also noted that Councillors were thrown into the deep end and "had to more or less, hit the ground running". To take on the different roles and develop the skills required of the 21st Century Councillor is a challenge.

A register of individual Councillors' strengths would be useful to draw upon.



Comparing what was said in the focus groups, we noticed three recurring themes that affect the work of Councillors: austerity, culture, and skills.

Austerity: Sustained reductions in public spending and tax rises, intended to reduce the government budget deficit and the role of the welfare state, have put a huge strain on councils, Councillors and communities. Councils are forced to look at new ways of doing things and delivering services. These have required different sets of skills.

"In times of austerity, it is necessary to get citizens to do more in the community and this can be seen as part of the role of Entrepreneur. There is also an element of innovation/finding new ways of making things work with less resources."

Austerity loomed large in discussions about the **steward of place** role.

"Councillors often don't seem to understand the implications of the cuts they've voted for, because then they expect the officers to still deliver everything."

The **advocate** role resonated, again tempered by austerity.

"Acting on behalf of citizens is tricky and has to be informed by knowledge of the parameters of what is realistically possible."

Culture: The need for a "change in culture" is linked to austerity and the impact this is having. It also reflects a change in the way people want to work together, more co-production and collaboration. It is not just "the way of doing things round here".

"A 'massive culture change' would be required to achieve the roles that are outlined in the 21st Century Councillor framework."

"Councillors need to empower communities to do more for themselves, to enable more to happen."

Skills: The skills of the Councillor, how they engage, communicate and influence can make a huge difference to the outcomes achieved.

Groups recognised that Councillors are required to do more with less resources (austerity again) which means doing things differently.

"Councillors are thrown in at the deep end with not enough preparation. This increases the pressure on them."

"Councillors are changemakers."

"Councillors need training on how to support communities and strengthen relationships."

"A wide spectrum of capabilities are required."

The groups identified similar barriers, challenges and skills required by the Councillor to enable them to follow through with the framework roles, with an overall aim for all stakeholders to find ways to work closer together for better outcomes.

Barriers: It is important to be aware of and look at ways to work round the perceived barriers that get in the way of the groups achieving what they would like to achieve.

Barriers

Time and resources (people and money)
Perceptions of the Councillor role
Community expectations
Skills of the Councillor
Councillors' influencing skills
Party politics
Silo working

Challenges

Austerity - doing more with less
Encouraging groups to work together
Enabling communities to do more
Demands of different stakeholders

Skills development

Empowering communities
Strengthening relationships with officers and communities
Different ways to communicate
Strength-based style
Influencing
Asset-based community development
Dealing with conflict
Resilience
Financial understanding

b) Officers Focus Groups: Individual quotes and feedback

What do you think of the roles identified? Do they make sense?

Sensemaker: "We feel officers do this."

"This [sensemaker] role is sensible and citizens would want their Councillors to play it. However, members aren't informed enough currently to act accordingly."

What about policy maker?
Where is this role?

"Councillors do see themselves as a link to the community, but that more often than not they are passing the problems on to officers, rather than acting as **catalysts** and **stewards**."

One group felt broker would be a good term instead of **orchestrator**. Do Councillors need to be more proactive?

"**Orchestration**, often only takes place when a problem has already happened. Councillors need to take more of a lead in the community overall."

Do any roles stand out as key?

"The **sensemaker** role comes first but only works face to face."

"**Entrepreneur** – however, we would expect them to act as an independent member of the council who is business-minded and supportive of the council, but this doesn't happen."

Catalyst, though officers thought it was necessary to manage expectations.

Which roles do you see being played out?

"Now only 20% of Councillors play out these roles."

“Some Councillors do all those things and more, whereas others do less of these things. There doesn’t seem to be any consistency.”

Any roles you don’t see?



*“Many Councillors do not play the **advocate** role very well, because they don’t get involved in processes.”*

*“Citizens are often not aware of who their Councillor is, and so unlikely to approach them as an **advocate**. Young people are particularly unlikely to approach their Councillor.”*

*“Councillors are not really taking on the role as **advocate**, as Councillors tend to take everything at face value that they hear from citizens, rather than engaging critically with what people tell them.”*

*“In order for **orchestration** to be done effectively, all voices have to be taken into account, but what happens most often is that the loudest voices are heard. Young people specifically are often overlooked.”*

*“The roles of **entrepreneur** and **catalyst** are a big gap, because there is a lack of creative thinking to come up with solutions.”*

Barriers to the roles?

“Who will challenge the Councillor’s behaviour?”

“The electorate don’t have a clear idea of the Councillors’ role.”

“How do we tell the public about the Councillors role?”

“Some Councillors are not visible enough.”



*“In respect of the role of **entrepreneur**, Councillors need to be made aware of their role of finding ways of plugging the gaps, rather than passing the buck to officers. When statutory duties are delivered, there is not enough money left.”*

*“While the **buffer** it is a good role for Councillors to play, some take it to an extreme. Instead, Councillors should be aware that the books have to be balanced as well. Councillors need to be aware of the actual budgets in key areas of work.”*

*“One barrier to the **sensemaker** is that Councillors are not fully aware of the financial and operational implications of certain promises that they are making.”*



The recommendation to Councillors was to admit that they don’t know and ask the right person, i.e. officers, for the information they need to make informed promises to their citizens. It was also pointed out that Councillors need to take an interest in all areas of work, rather than focus on what they’re interested in.

“It would be helpful if Councillors and officers got away from the ‘us and them’ confrontation and instead could work together, e.g. go out into the public together to speak to citizens about certain issues.”

“Councillors seem to have an identity crisis. They still blame ‘the council’ for everything. They talk about the council in the third person.”

Create a behaviours norm – training practice and support

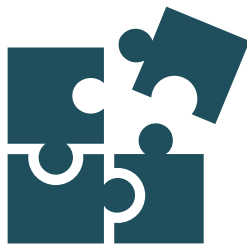
“Officers need to be empowered to influence Councillors, but we need to support officers to do this.”

Any roles you don’t like or don’t feel right?

“Buffer as mentioned previously”

c) Councillor Focus Groups: Individual quotes and feedback

What do you think of the roles identified? Do they make sense?



“Buffer doesn’t say how difficult this is.”

“Sensemaker makes more sense and links to buffer”

“Missing - the sign poster – but not just that role in total, as Councillors also provide guidance and sometimes act as a referee. This role could possibly be called the connector as this explains the journey that is taken more.”

“Missing campaigner, key to big role party politics.”

“Language won’t be clear. Unless it is words used all the time, many Councillors won’t see them.”



“Could possibly do a sense check around the title and the language.”

Do any of the roles particularly stand out as key?

“Advocate is key”

“The sensemaker role is important, because there is a shift in the role of the local authority and that this shift needs to be explained to the public. It links to buffer, but the description is possibly better”

Others agree, noting that they spend a lot of time explaining why things no longer exist.

Councillors felt they played out the catalyst role all time.

“This covers what we tend to do, i.e. getting people to do something about an issue / campaigning”

Which roles do you see being played out or play out?

Councillors could see all the roles being played out to some degree.

catalyst is generally about creating change

“Councillors might not see these titles in their role. Some of the language around the description and the title may not be clear.”

Any that you don't see?

The **signposter** is missing in the roles. Others argue that it might be contained in the **orchestrator**, but another point is that it's less active than orchestrator.

Barriers to the roles?

Time is an issue. Councillors explain that “*we're all snowed under*”. There are fewer officers in post. There is a lot less money available, so much so that many Councillors are hesitant to approach officers with issues.



Another Councillor points out that demand is going up, but resources have gone down, so “*When is it going to break?*”

Comments were made on the “*dissonance*” between the changing role of Councillors and the rise in demand. The general public still see Councillors in their old role, as an **advocate** and don't understand that the role has changed.



“Councillors can feel that it is always a ‘NO’ from officers / councils. Fewer nos would be good and more discussion!”

It was thought there may be a lack of understanding:

“Perceptions from others about how hard Councillors are working are mixed.”

“How much do we as Councillors understand the shift, new ways of working, new power how do we take people with us to enable the roles to be played out?”

“There can be a lot of resistance to working differently. New groups coming through now want a more coalition approach, all working together.”



It was felt that Councillors need to ensure they can adapt to working differently. They felt that a need to have more of a mediation role and the skills to do this, to enable them to deal with “*conflict*” and “*toxic*” behaviour when it arises.

“Councillors need to share what they are doing, build on their strengths. Someone needs to look at how to do this better / more”.

“People can be sceptical about what you do. Perceptions are mixed.”

“Not enough happens to draw on Councillors’ skills.” This may link back to the question of limited resources and austerity.



“Some Councillors use deprived areas as a badge of honour: ‘Look how difficult it is here’. What we don’t hear so much is what has happened/changed or what we are going to do.”



Support to enable Councillors to be fully present would be useful.

Any roles you don't like or don't feel right?

*"Don't like the title **entrepreneur**, too business orientated. More a creator role / community leader."*



Some felt that being a Councillor is creative, rather than business-like, therefore **entrepreneur** isn't a good label.

"You need to know and understand the area you serve."

Others agree and say that *"community leadership on the ground"* is a better term. More agree, pointing out that Councillors are the face for things, including failure. There is a strong feeling that **creative** should be in there somewhere.

When one person reports that **entrepreneur** doesn't feel right, others in the group don't seem to identify with that role either.

*"Unsure about the **buffer**, the description is a political statement in its own right, rather than a description."* Others agree, and argue that the description is taking it as a "given" that alternative ways of support should be found, when *"that's not right, is it?"*



*"**Steward of place** is about working with the community, feels a bit like 'king of the Castle', my responsibility. We are not just one person. I don't like this title. We have more of an enabling role."*

Someone suggests **connector**, rather than **signposter**. Other Councillors think that this is a good way of saying it, because it works both ways, i.e. Councillors are connecting with people but people are also connecting to Councillors.

Councillors say that much of their work is about finding compromises in a situation where it's impossible to make everybody happy. *"It all comes down to austerity."*

A Councillor thinks that **steward of place** links in with other roles in the framework. Another questions the phrase "coherent stewardship", because they think that everyone has to take ownership, whereas Councillors have an "enabling role".

Although they could connect with the **signposter** as a description, all felt that it was a lot more than that, they do not want to be the one who passes the buck. One Councillor felt that being a Councillor is about "seeing people through the whole process," rather than just signposting them. It was thought that this is connected to the role of the **entrepreneur**, because it's about trying to find a way of solving the problem.



It's a journey, where you can't just cut ties to someone once you've signposted them, but that you tell them to get back to you afterwards if they have not resolved the issue that way.

d) Community Focus Groups: Individual quotes and feedback

What do you think of the roles identified? Do they make sense?

Groups agreed that the roles as such made sense. A comment confirmed that Councillors need all of the roles, but they are not sure that they currently play these roles. They add that Councillors need to be “responsible”.



*“Catalyst is key, links in with **entrepreneur** - but does imply a business description, so not sure of this title. More of a **visionary**.”*

All roles are interrelated. Some roles move things forward more into the 21st Century: **buffer, catalyst, entrepreneur**.

Positive comments were made in respect of the **catalyst**, the **advocate** and the **orchestrator**, adding that Councillors should be able to provide people with advice and support, because they are the “power of authority”.

The **Advocate** was seen as a good description of what a Councillor should do. One member of the group added that Councillors also need a “bit of a punch”, a “strong ethical and moral backbone” and that this was missing from all the roles, as far as they could see.

It was felt by some groups that the language around the title **Steward of Place** seemed strange, but the description of what the role encompasses was deemed good.

They said that Councillors do work in a way that fits into the description, “entrepreneurial activities” and that perhaps the **entrepreneur** role could be renamed **facilitator**, i.e. “people who look for new things to do”.

Community members fed back that coordinators do a lot of the work linked into the Councillor role and are the “right arm of the Councillors”.

The group thought that the **buffer** role could involve sourcing some funding for community groups. This could consist of supporting community champions with bid writing.

The **sensemaker** role was thought to be somewhat patronising but also enabled working together. The **buffer** role followed, based on having first played the **sensemaker** role.

Do any of the roles particularly stand out as key?

Catalyst, orchestrator and **advocate** were felt to be key roles in one group. Another group also felt these three were key roles, whereas the **buffer** seemed irrelevant, but the others were “roughly right”.

*“Party politics don’t come into the **advocate** role, it’s all about supporting. Linking in with other agencies to support communities”.*

*“**Orchestrator** - linking in different groups/officers.”*

*“The **sensemaker** is important in order to translate what is happening on the ground and be aware of all the players who are involved in a given issue.”*



Steward of place and **advocate** were felt to be important, because they are about resources and transparency.

One group discussed about how the **steward of place** role could work, e.g. to use money to fund bid writing. Employ a project manager, deliver bid-writing workshops for Councillors and local people to enable better outcomes for place.



Which roles do you see being played out?

They were played out in practice but not in any consistent way.

*“The **buffer**, **entrepreneur** and **catalyst** are the really important roles that could really move things forward in that respect. The rest of the roles are pretty much a description of what Councillors do now.”*

Any that you don't see?

*“**Advocate** doesn't stand out – Councillors are there to represent the public”*



It was felt that the **catalyst** role is heavily underrated and not properly understood by Councillors, but extremely important. If citizens are to be enabled to be part of the solution of issues.

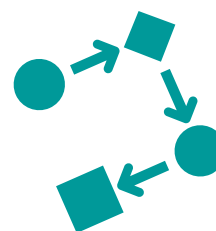
There was a comment about the **buffer** role being irrelevant. When asked why, it was felt that the community groups themselves are actually the **buffer**.

*“Community groups often act as **buffers**, rather than Councillors playing that role.”*

Barriers to the roles?

Time, money and training for Councillors, upskilling, gaps in IT social media were highlighted. Also public expectations, informing people, taking discussion back to the importance of the **sensemaker**.

**Councillors are changemakers.
Councillors need training on how to support
communities and strengthen relationships.**



“Officers and Councillors need to understand communities.”

A comment was made that the problem with the **orchestrator** role is that everybody is so busy that it's virtually impossible to get them all in the same place.

Again, this comment was made. *“Barriers to the roles are time and money. The focus is on how to get the money to go further.”*

Some felt there was a gap, in that Councillors need to be educated about the voluntary sector. *“There are sometimes unrealistic expectations of the voluntary sector (what can they actually achieve and how many volunteers are there?). They need training, too, not just the Councillors.”*



Any you don't like or don't feel right?

*"The title **sensemaker** sounds a little patronizing but is a key role."*

The group agreed that **entrepreneur** had a strange ring to it and thought that **enabler** might be more appropriate as a label. Also, participants perceived that parts of the **entrepreneur** role merged well into the other roles, rather than being seen as a separate quality.

e) Youth Council Focus Group: Individual quotes and feedback

What do you think of the roles identified? Do they make sense?

The group see all roles being played out to some degree. **Advocate** and **orchestrator** were key and they see these roles more.

They didn't like the title of **buffer**. They liked the function, but the title *"feels messy – damage control instead of mitigation"*. It was thought that Councillors may have difficulties acting out this role.

Entrepreneur again raised mixed feelings: it sounded like money making. It was suggested it could be **innovator**.

Do any of the roles particularly stand out as key?

*"**Entrepreneur** – very important that Councillors work with local businesses to support and help them grow."*

*"**Advocate** stands out really well."* This comment was made a few times.

Which roles do you see being played?

*"**Sensemaker**, when I see local Councillors meeting people in the town centre and talking things through."*

*"I see **catalyst** and **advocate** and **sensemaker** being played out."*

Others felt differently, which may link again to an inconsistent approach by Councillors mentioned before.

Any that you don't see?

*"We don't see **steward of place**, **catalyst**, **sensemaker** or **advocate** being played out very much."*

*"The **buffer** role is not seen enough."*

Barriers to the roles?

"All Councillors need to put themselves in others' shoes to truly understand."

"We don't see our Councillors enough, although they do attend summer school meetings."

"Difficult for those who have no financial control." "Money and funding are barriers."



It was felt that many are not trained to take on the role of a Councillor and so don't have the right skills or knowledge and that Councillors require training on techniques, on how to deal with situations that may arise.

Any you don't like or don't feel right?

"Buffer seems like its trying to be too many things; I like the name but the description seems to be doing too many things."

"Buffer sounds like damage limitation from central Government."

f) Strengthening the role and developing relationships

The key themes were around communication, understanding what everyone does, what is important to them and what needs to happen. All groups felt more co-production and collaboration on projects were required.

"Councillors should play a role in strengthening these relationships, but the question is how?"

"Capacity to do this is simply not there. Relying on online solutions is not adequate."

"Create situations that bring people together more."



"The practice of hustings should be reintroduced. Bad news has to be given face to face. Rather than Councillors spending a lot of time knocking on doors, talking to individuals, they should convene a meeting where the whole community can attend."

Community groups said that a lot of outreach work needs to be done to reach all communities.

Officers and Councillors liked the idea of joint training, it was felt it would work to bring people together around an issue that is relevant in any given local area, including building on what's good, rather than only focusing on the problems.

"There needs to be more engagement with youth council."

"Other community people are involved in recruitment but not the youth council."

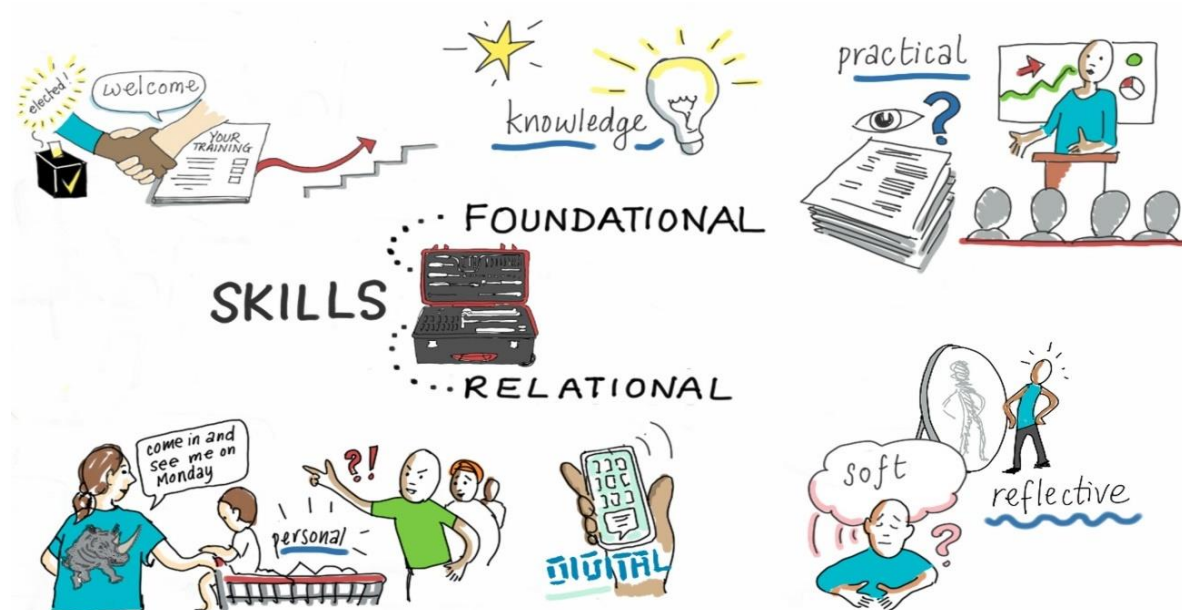


The youth focus group would welcome the opportunity to be involved. It was suggested that annual meetings with Councillors involving members of the youth council could take place.

g) Emerging Issues

- People described a mixed picture. Some people are **stuck working in the same way**. Established community groups sometimes have traditional expectations that their main role is to lobby for change by others, with councils doing the bulk of the work. Some local councillors use the same model.
- In other cases, a **culture shift is visible**, with mixed groups, new and old, working together more. Some emerging community groups work differently, doing things jointly with the council and other partners, with everyone contributing. Collaboration and co-production are happening.
- There are more dynamic places, **different ways of working** being played out, more fluidity. AGAIN WHAT IS A DYNAMIC PLACE
- Councillors are required more and more to draw on their skills to **enable effective co-production and collaboration**.
- Councils need to be **less risk averse** to enable more innovation and collaboration.

h) Learning and development interventions: Summary and suggestions to support the Councillors Role



Illustrations: Laura Broderick for *The 21st Century Councillor*, Birmingham University.

Discussions around the support for Councillors to develop the required skills and behaviours mirrored the relational skills highlighted in *The 21st Century Councillor* research. Discussions focused on the importance of working with Councillors from pre-election, through their induction and then in particular within their community role. Pre-election and a more robust and focused induction came up again and again in the groups and is seen as key. Themes that were discussed in respect of learning and development are highlighted on the next page.

Table 3. Learning and Development: Interventions the focus groups proposed

Councillors Recruitment and Induction

- ☐ Pre-election training: more robust, Job description, in the selection process
- ☐ Identify gaps in Council / party knowledge and advertise
- ☐ Values and expectations of a Councillor need to be updated and built into the recruitment and Induction
- ☐ Build in appraisal for Councillors

Engaging Councillors in Learning and Development

Engagement process to clearly show:

- ☐ The benefits of the training
- ☐ How it links into their role
- ☐ How they will use it
- ☐ How the training will support the different groups they work with

Learning and Development activities

- ☐ 360 feedback tools – linked to the 21st Century Councillor roles and skills
- ☐ Skills Audit
- ☐ Back to the floor: link in with officers
- ☐ Joint training with officers for key areas

Key areas to include in Learning and Development programmes

- ☐ Engaging and empowering communities
- ☐ Strength-based approach to communication and empowerment
- ☐ Asset-based community development
- ☐ Strengthening relationships: what's key?
- ☐ Understanding what's in their area
- ☐ Co-production and collaborative working
- ☐ Pitching for funding: what you need to know
- ☐ How technology can help the Councillors' roles
- ☐ Understanding statutory and non-statutory services
- ☐ Business skills

21st Century Councillor roles to be embedded in all training

- ☐ Relational Skills – Communication skills around. Influencing. Negotiating. Listening. Connecting
- ☐ Reflective skills
- ☐ Emotional Intelligence
- ☐ Conflict Resolution
- ☐ Personal and Leadership Resilience

j) Next steps and Recommendations for Councillors, Community Groups, Council Officers, and others who support Councillors

Based on the focus group discussions, we recommend that:



1. **Political parties** look to refresh recruitment processes for potential new Councillors to ensure these meet the required needs and outcomes of all stakeholders and provide a greater understanding of what is required of Councillors.



2. **Councils** look to review their induction and learning and development offer to ensure there is support in place to aid them in taking up the role as soon as they are elected. Focus groups agreed that it is important for Councillors to have a clear understanding of their role, the values and behaviours and what it means to be a Councillor.



3. **Councillors** seek out development interventions to understand and make sense of restrictions (why some things cannot happen) and enable an all-round understanding of public sector and communities. Focus groups agreed this is fundamental within the Councillors' roles.



4. **All stakeholders** work together to create more spaces where people can develop a greater understanding of: what it means to be a Councillor; what communities are looking for; and how council officers can support this.

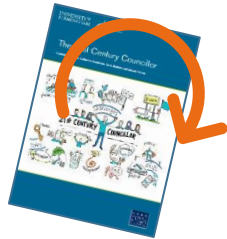
What would you recommend?

What actions can you and others take as a result of this report?



North West Employers support Councils and Councillors, from Councillor induction onwards. To link in with this research, North West Employers will continue to engage with their members to have conversations in respect of learning and development, provide support and consultation, share insights and enable sharing of good practice.

Depending on stakeholders' desires, we anticipate that this will include:



- a) Updating tools to support Councillors when working with citizens, namely, *The 21st Century Councillor* framework produced by Birmingham University/INLOGOV and the 360-feedback tool.
- b) Providing more learning and development interventions to support the changing roles and requirements.
- c) Identifying where Councillors and council officers could benefit from joint training, to build on the strengths of each group and share knowledge and understanding. This might be co-production (working together on a project for better outcomes), community development, and relational skills training.

In addition, **Jam and Justice** researchers at the Universities of Sheffield, Manchester, and Birmingham are refining a resource pack to enable those working in or with local government to *Develop Co-productive Capacities*.

Together, Jam and Justice and North West Employers commit to:

1. **Share this report and findings** with key stakeholders in the North West.
2. **Work with stakeholders** to agree the desired outcomes and possible next steps.

Acknowledgements

The action research team guiding this work included:

Andrew BurrIDGE (North West Employers); Dawn Kelly (North West Employers Associate); Liz Richardson (University of Manchester); Susanne Martikke (Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation); and Sharon Senior (North West Employers).

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<https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/21st-century-public-servant/21st-century-councillor/>

How can councillors best fulfil their mandate as the closest elected representative to the people that chose them? What impact do changes in local government and the reduction of funds and services have on the skills that councillors need to discharge their democratic mandate?

The role of councillors has changed dramatically since 2000 when new legislation changed how councils make decisions and what powers local elected representatives have. Previous research from the Institute for Local Government Studies developed *The 21st Century Councillor* framework setting out what sorts of skills councillors needed and roles they could play.

Exploring ways to 'make devolution matter', Jam and Justice worked with North West Employers to test this framework through focus groups with Councillors, council officers and community members in Bury, Manchester, Oldham and Salford. This report brings together findings from these conversations. It has been produced for Jam and Justice and North West Employers by:



**North West
Employers**

Dawn Kelly

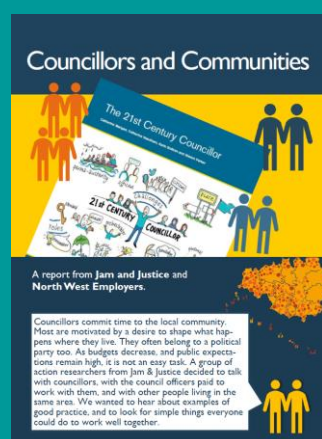
North West Employers Associate

Jam and Justice ARC Commissioned Delivery Partner

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Copies of this and related reports can be downloaded from: jamandjustice-rjc.org

For a summary introduction to our research Testing The 21st Century Councillor Framework, see ***Councillors and Communities: a report from Jam and Justice and North West Employers***. Sheffield: Jam & Justice, March 2019.



Prior research on *The 21st Century Councillor* from the University of Birmingham is available to read online at: 21stcenturypublicservant.files.wordpress.com

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