

The I&DeA's Political Skills Framework

Six core skills for councilors

- **local leadership**

characteristics: 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

- **partnership working**

characteristics: 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

- **communication skills**

characteristics: 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.

- **political understanding**

characteristics: acts ethically, consistently and with integrity when communicating values or representing group views in decision-making or actions. Works across group boundaries without compromising values or ethics

- **scrutiny and challenge**

characteristics: 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

- **regulating and monitoring**

characteristics: 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 and negative indicators

The skill set definitions show what is expected of councillors if they are to be effective and influential representatives of the electorate. We recognize that there is no 'one best way' to be a councillor – after all, we don't want councillors to be clones of one another. While one member may approach the role of community leader in a different way from another, the comments of more than 350 members and officers have allowed us to identify commonly held views about what actions are associated with good and bad councilor behaviour.

We have included these as Positive, desirable characteristics and Negative, undesirable characteristics for each of the skill sets. No member could be expected to demonstrate excellent levels of Positive behaviours all the time, but excellent councillors would be expected to demonstrate many more Positive than Negative characteristics.

The key aim is to achieve a shared understanding of what constitutes excellent councillor

Annex C

performance and to help councillors and those who work with them to communicate and celebrate this with the wider community.

It's worth noting that at different times some skills may be more in demand than others. In extremis, some that would normally be regarded as 'negative' behaviours could be effective in the short term in getting the council out of severe difficulty.

local leadership

'The best...councillors already work closely with citizens and communities' (Strong and Prosperous Communities, White Paper, volume 1, p.7)

'Local councillors should be known by all the key local public services, community organisations and institutions. They should bind people together, broker solutions and be the advocate for their residents and their localities' (LGA: People and Places, p.29)



positive

- engages with their community, canvasses opinion and looks for new ways of representing people
- keeps up-to-date with local concerns by drawing information from diverse sources, including hard to reach groups
encourages trust and respect by being approachable and empathising with others
- creates partnerships with all sections of the community and ensures their participation in decision-making
- mediates fairly and constructively between people and groups with conflicting needs
- acts as a champion for others by campaigning with enthusiasm courage and persistence.



negative

- doesn't engage with their community, waits to be approached and is difficult to contact
- keeps a low profile, not easily recognized in their community
- treats groups or people unequally, fails to build integration or cohesion
- has a poor understanding of local concerns and how these might be addressed

Annex C

- concentrates on council processes rather than people
- Is unrealistic about what they can achieve and fails to deliver on promises.

partnership working

'The essential ingredients of successful partnerships are a common vision, shared values and mutual respect.' (Strong and Prosperous Communities, White Paper, volume 1, p.95)



positive

- builds good relationships with colleagues, officers and community groups
- focused on achieving goals by maintaining focus and co-ordinating others
- knows when to delegate, provide support or empower others to take responsibility makes people from all backgrounds feel valued, trusted and included
- understands and acts on their role in building and shaping key local partnerships remains calm and focused when criticized or under pressure
- is prepared to assert authority in resolving conflict or deadlock.



Negative

- habitually prefers to use status to exert control and impose solutions, rather than involve others
- fails to recognise or make use of others' skills and ideas
- finds it difficult to collaborate or work across the political divide
- prefers to act alone rather than work as part of a team
- often uses divisive tactics to upset relationships within their group, or council policies and decisions
- defensive when criticised, blames others and doesn't admit to being wrong.

Communication skills

'Councillors have a key role to play in ensuring that people's concerns are listened to....' (Strong and Prosperous Communities, White Paper, volume 1, p.35)



positive

- regularly informs and communicates with their community using newsletters, emails, phone or local media
- listens to others, checks for understanding and adapts their own style when necessary
- creates opportunities to communicate with different sectors, including vulnerable and hard to reach groups
- speaks confidently in public – avoids the use of jargon or 'council speak' provides regular feedback to people, keeping them informed and managing expectations
- speaks and writes clearly, using appropriate language.



negative

- slow to respond to others, communicating only when necessary
- doesn't listen when people are speaking and uses inappropriate or insensitive language
- communicates in a dogmatic and inflexible way
- unwilling to deliver unpopular messages, uses information dishonestly to discredit others
- doesn't take part in meetings and lacks confidence when speaking in public
- presents confused arguments using poor language and style.

political understanding

'political parties can...help sell the role as 'political entrepreneurs' – activists who, with the support of their parties, can work as informed advocates for their local communities and effectively support and challenge a range of local agencies' (Political Recruitment: How Local Parties Recruit Councillors, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, executive summary)

positive



- clearly represents the group's views and values through their decisions and actions
- helps to develop cohesion within the group and good communication between the group and council
- communicates political values through canvassing and campaigning
- actively develops their own political intelligence (e.g., understanding local and national political landscapes)
- looks for ways to promote democracy and increase public engagement is able to work across political boundaries without compromising their political values.

negative



- lacks integrity, has inconsistent political values and tends to say what others want to hear
- puts personal motives first or changes beliefs to match those in power
- has poor knowledge of group manifesto, values and objectives
- fails to support political colleagues in public
- doesn't translate group values into ways of helping the community
- shows little understanding of central government policy or its implications for council and community.

scrutiny and challenge

'We want to strengthen the ability of local councillors to speak up for their communities and demand an answer when things go wrong' (Strong and Prosperous Communities, White Paper, volume 1, p.42)

positive



- identifies areas suitable for scrutiny and ensures that citizens and communities are involved in the scrutiny process
- quickly understands and analyses complex information
- presents concise arguments that are meaningful and easily understood understands the scrutiny process, asks for explanations and checks that recommendations have been implemented
- objective and rigorous when challenging process, decisions and people
- understands and acts on judicial role to meet legal responsibilities (e.g., duty of care, corporate parenting).

negative



- doesn't prepare well or check facts and draws biased conclusions
- too reliant on officers, tends to back down when challenged
- fails to see scrutiny as part of their role
- too focused on detail, doesn't distinguish between good, poor and irrelevant information
- prefers political 'blood sports' to collaboration: uses scrutiny for political gain.

regulating and monitoring

'The making of bye laws will be fully devolved to local authorities' (Strong and Prosperous Communities, Summary, p.2)

positive



- uses evidence to evaluate arguments and make independent, impartial judgements
- chairs meetings effectively, follows protocol and keeps process on track
- follows legal process, balances public needs and local policy
- monitors others' performance and intervenes when necessary to ensure progress
- seeks feedback for self and looks for opportunities to learn
- understands and acts on their judicial role in meeting legal responsibilities (e.g., duty of care, corporate parenting).

negative



- doesn't declare personal interests, makes decisions for personal gain
- fails to check facts or consider all sides and makes subjective or uninformed judgements
- habitually leaves monitoring and checks on progress to others
- makes decisions without taking advice, considering regulations or taking account of wider issues
- doesn't recognise or address limits of own knowledge or expertise
- misses deadlines, leaves business unfinished and lacks balance between council and other commitments.