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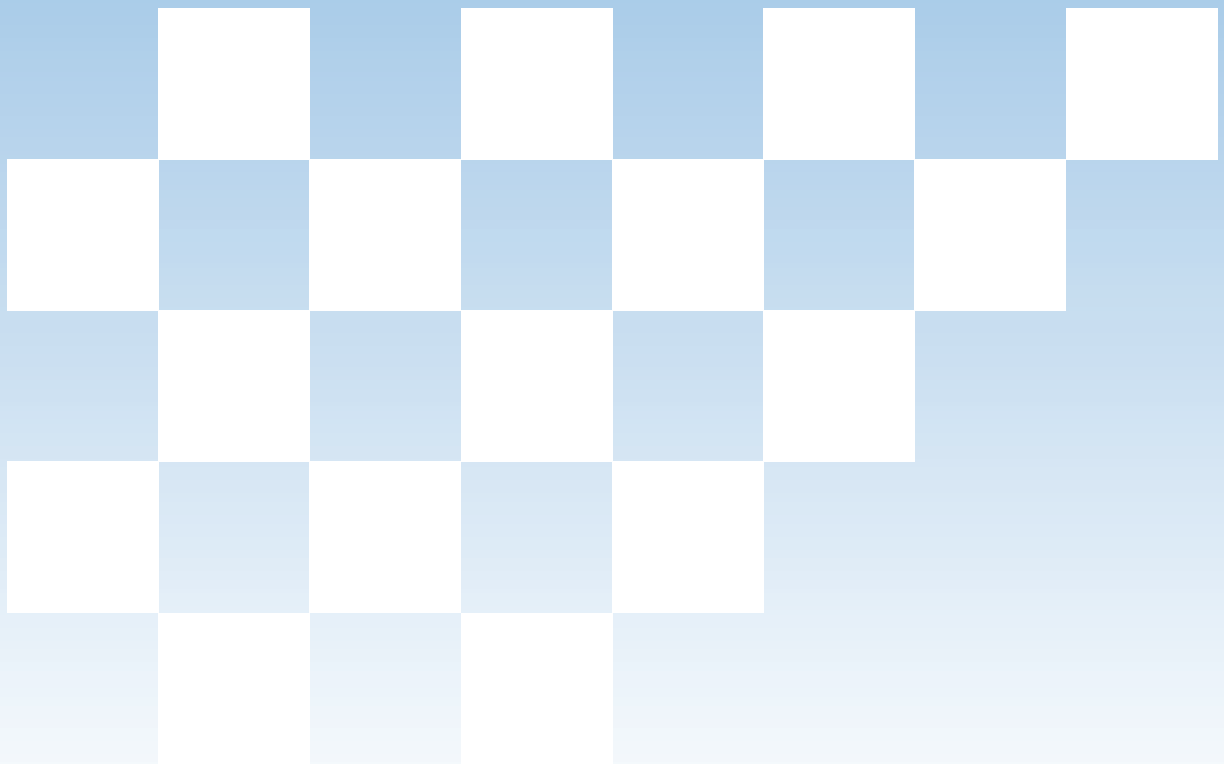
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# the political skills framework a councillor's toolkit

Created by Professor Jo Silvester for  
the Improvement and Development Agency



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# introduction

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Welcome to Version 2 of the Political Skills Framework. After its first phase of development some three years ago we were absolutely astonished at its acceptance and impact. It was the first time that councillors from all political parties and types of councils had sat down with us to really analyse what the role involves in its different components, and we were really keen to produce a framework which was flexible, useful and easy to understand. Councils and councillors all over the country have now used it in a number of different ways and tell us that it has been beneficial.

What we also realised of course is that being a councillor is the only role in which however high up you are promoted, to cabinet or scrutiny chair or leader of the council, you still have to undertake all the parts of the role you started with and forget the local leadership, political understanding and good communication at your peril as far as the electorate is concerned.

While we all, as councillors, want to do a good job for our communities, we can all point to examples where our behaviour or that of colleagues seems to have had the opposite effect. Some councils spend time absorbing lots of councillor and officer energy in petty local squabbles. This is often not because the councillors are ill intentioned but because they are not considering the practical outcome of their behaviour.

The new, revamped Political Skills Framework takes into account feedback from our evaluation of how the original version has been used as a development tool for frontline councillors. It also includes examples of ways in which it can be used, and the benefits of using it for your individual, group or whole council learning.

We hope you will find it useful.



**Judi Billing**

Head of National Leadership, IDeA

# what is the political skills framework and why was it developed?

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To be effective in any job you need to know what is required of you and have the knowledge and skills to achieve it. Teachers, doctors, plumbers and chief executives are not born with the knowledge and skills they need for their jobs – these are learnt, practised and improved over time.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the knowledge and skills required by local councillors despite their role being one of the most complex in politics or the wider work context. It is certainly more complicated than that of Member of Parliament. The local councillor role has also gone through many changes and continues to evolve. There is therefore a growing need to support new and experienced councillors in their efforts to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be effective.

Two years ago the Work Psychology Partnership worked with the IDeA to identify and map the core skills required by councillors. We set up an advisory group, conducted 45 critical incident interviews and held focus groups with senior officers, politicians and visionaries. We validated our findings by surveying more than 350 politicians and officers from all political parties and types of council.

The result was the Political Skills Framework [PSF] and a copy was sent to all local authorities with the aim of supporting development opportunities for councillors and ultimately of attracting new 'members of talent'.

# two years on – evaluating the political skills framework

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Two years after the PSF was launched, we conducted a review of how and where it has been used in local authorities, explored what users like – and do not like – about the PSF, and determined how it can be improved. We talked to many different groups including politicians and officers, local authorities, and other local government organisations using the PSF, such as the North East Improvement Board, the Local Government Information Unit and the South East Employers' Organisation.

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We found that a substantial culture change had happened in attitudes towards political roles and how they are carried out. This included growing recognition of the need for training and development among councillors themselves. We also found that there was widespread support for the PSF, plus evidence of it being used in different ways by different user groups – such as self-review materials, training needs analysis, 360-review systems, structured mentoring programmes, development centres, personal development plans, induction programmes and learning materials.

Nearly all those interviewed said they would like to see wider use of the PSF. They also wanted more information about how it could be used together with tools they could use in their own councils. Many pointed out that the Local Government White Paper, published in November 2006, described new responsibilities for councillors including place shaping, community cohesion and engaging hard to reach groups. All of this led us to review the original PSF to bring it closer in line with what users need.

# the toolkit

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As a consequence of our review we have created this toolkit to support councillors and those working with them to review and support individual development needs. The toolkit contains:

- a revised, easy-to-access political skills framework that takes account of the changes in councillors roles since 2004 and incorporates recent thinking from the White Paper
- background information about the PSF and how it can be used by councillors themselves, or by others supporting member development
- examples of how the PSF has been used by councils to create their own development processes to meet unique local needs
- personal learning reviews based on each of the PSF skill sets that can be used by councillors to identify their own areas of strength and areas for development.

# six core skills for councillors

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There are six core skill areas that apply to all councillors, with more for cabinet members and leaders. This toolkit focuses on the first six core skill areas. They are defined as:

- **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
- **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
- **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
- **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.



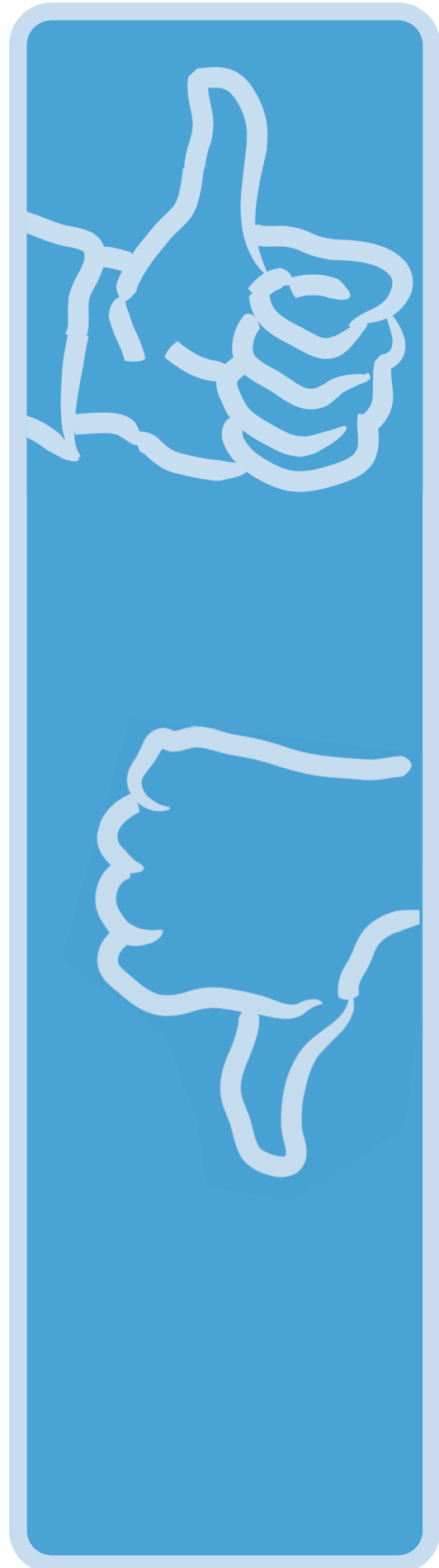
# positive and negative indicators

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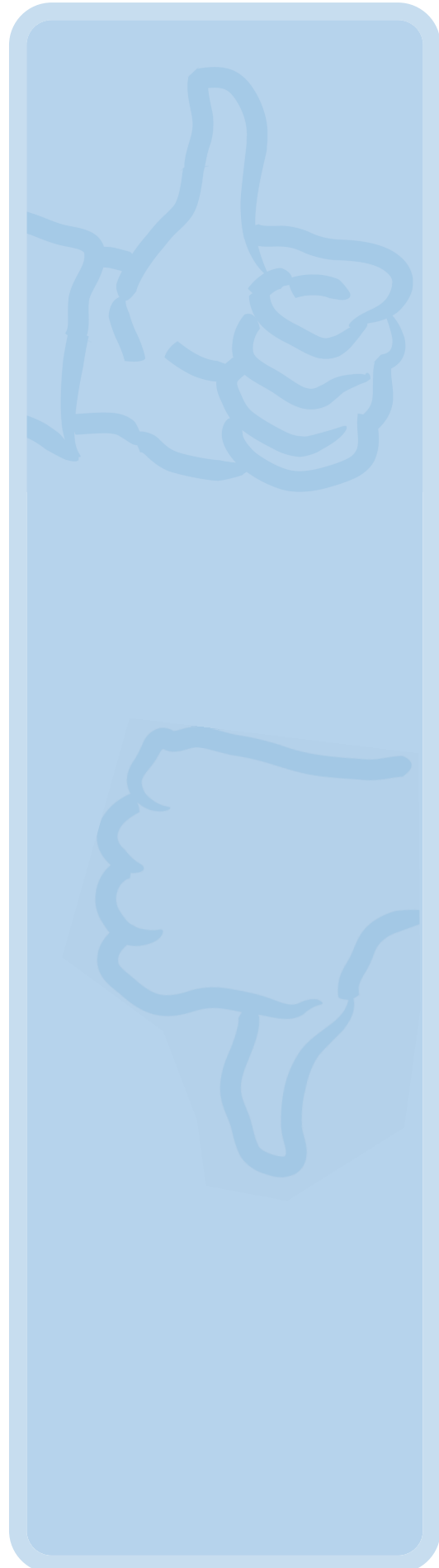
The skill set definitions show what is expected of councillors if they are to be effective and influential representatives of the electorate. We recognise that there is no 'one best way' to be a councillor – after all, we don't want councillors to be clones of one another. While one member may approach 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 councillor 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 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 difficulties.



# local leadership

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**'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.

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negative 

- doesn't engage with their community, waits to be approached and is difficult to contact
- keeps a low profile, not easily recognised 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
- concentrates on council processes rather than people
- is unrealistic about what they can achieve and fails to deliver on promises.

# partnership working

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**'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 criticised 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

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**'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

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**'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

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**'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.



# questions and answers

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**> all these characteristics look very daunting, aren't they a little unrealistic?**

There will be many different ways in which councillors can perform their roles well and no two councillors are likely to perform their roles in exactly the same way. Every member will have their unique areas of strength as well as others they would like to improve.

Councils may of course require different sets of skills at different times – and since a council is a team it's not necessary or even desirable for all members to have all the skills. For example, if the Leader is not a particularly inspired communicator, she or he could ask a colleague to handle the media or major presentations while the Leader concentrates on utilising their strengths.

The PSF provides a starting point for individual councillors to review and understand their own skill profile, before considering what might be the best way to develop. Although some councillors might decide that they want to be excellent in all areas, others might prefer to focus on one or two key areas.

One important message from the work that went into creating the PSF, is that there are common views about what makes a good or a poor councillor and, wherever possible, councillors should strive to demonstrate Positive rather than Negative behaviour.

## **> learning prompt for councillors**

**Think about the way you perform your role. Focus on one of the skill areas and decide how you would rate yourself. Can you think of times when you have demonstrated any of the positive characteristics? Have there been times when you have used the negative characteristics? Are any of them surprising?**

## > why are there negative characteristics?

In any role it is just as important to be clear about what we think is unacceptable or poor behaviour as it is to be clear about what we view as excellent. Although there may be some differences of opinion, this work has helped us understand the views most people share. For example, we know that behavioural integrity is important because most of the people we interviewed considered it unacceptable for members of any political group to continually change their views to fit with those in power. Neither was it considered appropriate for them to act in a way that did not reflect their values or those of their political group. Lack of self-awareness is a commonly found, overarching, negative characteristic.

## > learning prompt for councillors

**Take time to reflect on your own personal values – does your behaviour always reflect what you believe? When is it difficult to act with integrity? Do you think that some styles of behaviour are not appropriate in politics – or does ‘anything go’?**

## > can I change some of these characteristics?

These indicators are valid because they are based on the views of more than 350 councillors and officers, so we do not recommend that you change them. However, they are not prescriptive they provide a base for members and officers to consider their own unique council structure, culture and context. You may decide that the culture within your own authority influences the way in which councillors are expected to behave towards officers, for example, or the way in which political groups communicate with each another.

## > learning prompt for councillors

**Think about the behaviour of political colleagues in your own council. How might this reflect the council’s prevailing organisational culture? For example, how do members generally keep up-to-date with community issues and local concerns? What support is provided to help them to do this? Are there reasons why some members are not as able to keep as up-to-date with these issues as other members?**

## > why is political understanding included?

Most councillors are affiliated to a political party. Even if standing as an Independent, values form an important guide for the electorate in deciding how to vote. Political systems are at the heart of local government and to be successful, councillors must be able to understand the processes by which decisions are taken and influence exerted.

## > learning prompt for councillors

**Learning prompt for councillors: How do the political parties in your local authority work together? Is there the opportunity for cross-party working? In what way does this impact on the success of large council projects?**

# using the political skills framework

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The PSF can be used in many different ways and in many different areas. As part of our evaluation we asked councillors and officers how they were using the PSF and here are some of the examples they gave:

- councillor induction
- training and development programmes
- self-review
- 360-review systems
- mentoring
- learning materials
- personal development plans
- development centres.

For example, Irene MacDonald, a councillor and IDeA accredited peer, has used the PSF for new councillor induction: drawing up and delivering a programme of training linked to the PSF. She has also used it for work with political groups to stimulate discussion. Irene says this works very well because it encourages the political group to share their perceptions of the group's strengths and where they could develop further. This has led to action plans focusing on what is needed to achieve organisational development.

On the following pages we have provided examples of how the PSF has been used in councils as the basis for creating bespoke development activities for councillors.

## case 1

### Personal Development Plans in Sandwell MBC

Lindsey Rogers, manager of the Member Services Unit in Sandwell MBC, has used the PSF as a basis for one to one review sessions with councillors to identify training needs and create personal development plans (PDPs). Her aim was to create opportunities for members to reflect on and discuss how they see themselves in relation to the PSF skill areas.

In 2006 Sandwell started to grow the process as part of its move to achieve full member development charter status. They incorporated a process of ongoing performance review and provision of feedback by members for members. Each member has a PDP interview with another member who is nominated based on their involvement in and experience of specific areas such as scrutiny.

All members conducting the PDP interviews receive a half-day training session and every effort has been made to make the paperwork for the process available to all and as user friendly as possible.

## case 2

### Key role effectiveness criteria in Sheffield City Council

Louise Pellet, member development officer, describes how a cross party working group led on setting up a structured approach to member development in Sheffield City Council. They held workshops where the group consulted with a wide cross section of councillors to design key role descriptions based on a councillor's key tasks and the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to carry them out. In a further workshop, councillors used the PSF to decide on key headings and effectiveness criteria for each role.

So far, Sheffield City Council's role effectiveness framework has been used to carry out personal development planning and the PSF is now being incorporated into learning and development programmes. One example is a session called Representing Our Diverse Communities, which looks at the key effectiveness criteria for community leaders, and is aimed at understanding how best to reach out to diverse communities.

# how can I use the PSF in councillor development?

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On the following pages we have provided some review forms that can be used by councillors to reflect on how they perform different aspects of their roles related to the six political skill sets. It is designed for personal reflection and self-evaluation. Although councillors are asked to consider their own strengths and development areas, they can also use the forms to ask colleagues to provide them with feedback from their perspective.

It is important to remember that the councillor role is complex and there will be many different ways to perform it well. Councillors will have their own personal objectives but this process can provide a way of helping them reflect on their personal style and communicate this to others.













## how good am I at political understanding?

What do you think are your particular strengths in this area – for example, what do you bring to this area of your as a councillor that you think is particularly good?

Prompts...

- are my group's values reflected in what I do?
- how do I build cohesion within my group and improve communication?
- does my campaigning reflect my political values?
- how have I developed my political intelligence?
- how have I promoted democracy and increased public engagement?
- when did I work across political boundaries?

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Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done really well over the past year?

Which of these areas would you like to improve and how?

# learning resources

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There is a growing array of learning resources available to councils and councillors and most councils will, no doubt, already have many resources to draw upon. However, learning and development should be based on a needs analysis and the learning objectives clearly described. The PSF provides a basis for conducting individual and organisational learning needs analyses. Once the needs have been identified the types of development opportunities available might include:

- member handbooks
- new councillor handbook
- induction training
- officer briefings
- guidance notes
- e-learning resource packs
- workshops and seminars
- external training and know-how
- work shadowing
- visits to other councils
- mentoring and coaching
- training
- learning needs analysis
- 360-degree review

The IDeA offers a wide range of information, development programmes and activities for councillors including:

- The Councillor's Guide – an annual publication for new councillors explaining their role, responsibilities, opportunities and the expectations of citizens and central government
- IDeA Knowledge website – [www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)
- Local leadership Academy – development modules on specific themes, capacity building activities, mentoring, and the Community Champion Review, tailored for individual councils, delivered locally, and suitable for all councillors
- Leadership Academy – a variety of residential development programmes, for leaders, portfolio holders, scrutiny chairs and other senior councillors
- Councillor magazine – a quarterly publication featuring the achievements of councillors in their communities
- Toolkits and publications – on various topics, available in printed form and as downloads from the IDeA website.
- Summer schools and the annual Local Leadership Conference
- Charter for Member Development
- Councillor Mentoring – provides opportunities for one-to-one or small group mentoring by an IDeA Member peer
- The Member Development Community of Practice gives access to a range of development materials and to support and advice

For more information about the IDeA's products and services for elected members visit [www.idea.gov.uk/councillors](http://www.idea.gov.uk/councillors) or email [national.leadership@idea.gov.uk](mailto:national.leadership@idea.gov.uk).

## case 3

### North East Lincolnshire Council's training map

This training map, which is used by North East Lincolnshire Council, identifies and charts relevant training courses, learning resources and information sources such as e-learning materials for five of the PSF skill sets. You may like to consider how resources within your own council could be included here.

#### local leadership

- freedom of Information (policy, elected member briefing note and e-learning)
- data protection (policy and practice guidelines)
- the Influential Councillor (audio CD)
- information management – working smarter (e-learning)
- financial skills manual (general reference)
- negotiation skills (e-learning)

#### partnership working

- corporate plan (general reference)
- building partnerships (e-learning)
- member / officer protocol (general reference)
- disability discrimination (e-learning)    diversity handbook (practice guidance)
- drugs awareness – CADES (course)
- valuing diversity (course)
- managing time for better results (e-learning)

#### scrutiny and challenge

- benchmarking (practice guidelines)
- performance information standard (practice guidelines)

## regulations and monitoring

- constitution (practice guidelines)
- the council's report making and decision making guide
- decision making and problem solving (e-learning)
- management learning guides (e-learning)
- the skills of chairing meetings (Audio CD)
- planning approval – councillors (e-learning)
- project management - Prince2 (e-learning)
- project management – 'The fundamentals' (e-learning)
- project management – to support improvement (practice guidelines)

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## communication skills

- A-Z of services (general reference)
- centrex telephone users' guide (practice guidelines)
- coping with a hostile and aggressive situations (audio CD)
- email and the internet (on-line)
- facilitation skills (training course)
- glossaries of acronyms and terms (general reference)
- IT training calendar (training courses)
- media release (practice guidelines)
- meeting skills (e-learning)
- meeting skills – organising (e-learning)
- presentation skills (e-learning and course)
- protocol for Mayoral parties at civic functions (guidelines)
- sign language – British (e-learning)
- style guide – corporate (practice guidelines)
- presentation and speaking skills (training course)
- effective use of English (practice guidelines)
- effective business writing (training course)
- writing reports (e-learning)
- making the speech (audio CD)

# the new code of conduct

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All councils are required to adopt a Code of Conduct that sets out rules governing the behaviour of their members. All elected, co-opted and independent members of local authorities are covered by the Code.

The Government issued a new Model Code of Conduct for members on 4 April 2007.

The Codes of Conduct cover areas of individual behaviour such as members not abusing their position or not misusing their authority's resources. In addition, there are rules governing disclosure of interests and withdrawal from meetings where members have relevant interests. Members are also required to record their financial and other interests.

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## top tips

### do...

- take account of the 10 general principles of public life
- follow the Code of Conduct when you are representing your authority
- be aware of what personal and prejudicial interests are - refer to the Standards Board guide
- keep your register of interests up-to-date
- register gifts and hospitality, received in your role as a member, worth more than £25
- treat others with respect.



## don't...

- bring your authority or office into disrepute
- use the authority's resources for party political purposes
- compromise the impartiality of people who work for your authority
- discriminate against people on the grounds of race, gender, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation and age
- bully, intimidate or attempt to intimidate others
- use your position improperly for personal gain or to advantage your friends or close associates
- attend meetings or be involved in decision-making where you have a prejudicial interest - except when speaking when the general public are also allowed to do so
- disclose confidential information, other than in exceptional circumstances - refer to the Code of Conduct and our guide if you are unsure
- prevent anyone getting information they are entitled to.

**Visit [www.standardsboard.gov.uk](http://www.standardsboard.gov.uk)  
for more information.**

# over to you

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This toolkit is a starting point. It can be used with new members to help them understand their roles as well as a base for member reviews and personal development planning. We encourage you to innovate and adapt the materials for your own use. Our ultimate aim is to support and enhance the performance of local councillors in what can be a complex and isolated role.

# useful contacts

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Councillor development contacts in:

## Improvement and Development Agency

**tel** 020 7296 6600  
**fax** 020 7296 6635  
**email** [ihelp@idea.gov.uk](mailto:ihelp@idea.gov.uk)  
**web** [www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)

## SOLACE

**tel** 0845 652 4010  
**fax** 0845 652 4011  
**email** [hope.house@solace.org.uk](mailto:hope.house@solace.org.uk)  
**web** [www.solace.org.uk](http://www.solace.org.uk)

## Leadership Centre for Local Government

**tel** 020 7630 2180  
**fax** 020 7630 2195  
**email** [info@localleadership.gov.uk](mailto:info@localleadership.gov.uk)  
**web** [www.localleadership.gov.uk](http://www.localleadership.gov.uk)

## Local Government Association

**tel** 020 7664 3131  
**fax** 020 7664 3030  
**email** [info@lga.gov.uk](mailto:info@lga.gov.uk)  
**web** [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

## SEEMP

**tel** 01962 840664  
**fax** 01962 842018  
**email** [info@seemp.co.uk](mailto:info@seemp.co.uk)  
**web** [www.seemp.co.uk](http://www.seemp.co.uk)

## Work Psychology Partnership

**tel** 07970 518911  
**email** [info@workpsychologypartnership.com](mailto:info@workpsychologypartnership.com)  
**web** [www.workpsychologypartnership.com](http://www.workpsychologypartnership.com)

## Member Development Community of Practice

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