

Handling casework

Councillor workbook



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This councillor workbook includes references to materials published by the Local Government Group, now the Local Government Association (LGA).

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgment about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that will enable you to handle your casework more effectively.

For members who are new to local government, the workbook provides essential guidance on the nature of casework and some tried and tested methods for handling the queries, problems and challenges presented to you by your constituents.

The workbook can be used as a stand-alone learning aid or as an adjunct to other material you may cover. It offers few firm rules for members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to use and develop their influencing skills, based on individual preference and confidence. As such, the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

In practical terms, the document will take between **two to three hours** to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach in influencing other people - how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the most effective ways of handling casework. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are ‘pen pictures’ of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendix to the workbook.

Handling casework

What is casework?

Dealing with the people in your community, understanding the issues and concerns they face, and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action in response to their queries, is an important and valued role for any ward member. The problems and issues local people raise with members are often referred to as 'casework'.

Casework can sometimes lead on to policy development or issue campaigning, but can be distinguished from these by virtue of the fact that casework deals with the resolution of an individual problem.

Where does your casework come from?

Casework will often be picked up by members through their day to day activities as an elected representative of the area, ie through letters, telephone calls, e-mails and door knocking. The period before, during and after an election is likely to be a particularly popular time for people to raise issues or concerns.



Casework – a member's viewpoint

“Saturday begins with our weekly ward surgery at Berwick Hills library. I meet up with my fellow ward councillor Eddie Dryden. Stacey and Jacqui, the neighbourhood police officers for Berwick Hills, also join us. Surgeries are well attended and the joint working is beneficial, as we can share information and compare notes. This week, residents' concerns include school fencing, damaged grass verges, nuisance trees, a nuisance neighbour, and antisocial behaviour at local garages. All will be followed up in the next few days, as we agree various actions...”

**Councillor Barry Coppinger,
Middlesbrough Council, 2011**

The amount of casework you receive can vary considerably and it is probably true to say that the higher the level of deprivation in your area, the more casework you are likely to face. But if the casework in your in-tray is consistently sparse, ask yourself the crucial question – is this because you represent a very self-sufficient community, or is it because your profile is too low?

It may be that you need to do more than just sitting back waiting for the casework to come to you.



Casework – some examples

Direct query - a neighbour asks if you could find out what progress has been made in processing her application for a renovation grant.

Indirect query - a daughter, ringing up on behalf of her frail, elderly parent, asks if her mother is entitled to claim council tax benefit.

Complaint - a local housing tenant e-mails you to complain about the repeated vandalism to her council property.

Service request - a shopkeeper asks if you could arrange for an extra trade waste collection at his premises.

Community issue - a group of parents lobby you to prompt the council to remove a burnt out vehicle from a nearby park.



Exercise 1 – your recent casework

Using your existing knowledge or any research you are able to carry out on the council's Think about the nature of any casework you have dealt with in recent months. Briefly describe any examples you can think of under the headings below and summarise any action you took to tackle the queries or concerns raised:

Direct query

Action taken

Indirect query

Action taken

Complaint

Action taken

Service request

Action taken

Community Issue

Action taken

Reflect on the examples you have given. Do you feel comfortable that you did everything you could to resolve these matters? To what extent were your constituents satisfied with your help and advice? Have you made any efforts to check whether the matters raised affected other local people who may not have approached you for help?

Raising your profile – prompting others to get in touch

Raising your profile is not just about being honest enough to admit that many people in your ward will not know who you are and may be even less likely to recognise that you are their local member. Taking steps to make yourself known, and available, to local people should help you to ensure that the bulk of the casework you deal with represents the issues of greatest concern to local constituents.

It is likely that you will have tried some of the more traditional ways of raising your profile in the community, eg media and press coverage, meetings with community groups, posters or leaflet drops. But are you also using, or considering, other, more interactive, approaches to prompt others to get in touch?

For example:

Advice surgeries – these enable you to meet constituents, discuss their concerns and build an understanding of what can be done to tackle the issues raised. In a traditional advice surgery, members advertise a time and place when they will be available to speak to constituents, eg perhaps a couple of hours on a Saturday in a local library or village hall. An alternative is to run a street surgery, where members knock on doors to solicit casework. Both approaches require careful planning and good advertising to ensure that opportunities for engaging with local people are maximised.

The Local Government Association's (LGA), 'Councillor's Guide', can provide you with detailed guidance on setting up and advertising advice surgeries and the comparative benefits of using both the traditional and street surgery approach. If you are not already using them, surgeries



Keeping a high profile

“The methods we use to keep our residents informed and engaged are tried and tested. We publish a regular newsletter, liaise with the local press, keep our website up-to-date, and hold surgeries and consultations.

“If you are a new member and not getting a response to these techniques, don't give up. It may just take some time for residents to feel comfortable with you.

“One example of the contact we have with our residents was when the council had a choice of two traffic-calming schemes. We targeted 200 households along the proposed route prior to the release of the official council documents.

“By delivering tick-box questionnaires in person and asking people to place the completed forms sticking out of their letterboxes, we got a great response. As well as gathering opinions towards the traffic scheme, we collected useful data for our next campaign.”

Councillor Julie Morris, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, 2011

www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk

can be an effective way to raise your profile and generate casework.

Blogging – a weblog, or ‘blog’, is an online journal, updated on a regular basis, like a diary. Visually it looks just like a website, but usually has a simpler design and fewer pages. A growing number of ward members are now using blogs to publish reports of their activities on the web and to solicit responses from their constituents via e-mail or online surveys. Blogging can help to prompt local people to raise issues of concern and can enable others to give their views on any matters identified.

The use of information and communications technology can also assist members by enabling constituents to send electronic documents and photographic evidence relevant to some casework situations, eg it is not uncommon for constituents to send members digital photographs of potholes in the road or community sites that have been blighted by vandalism.

Like many people, a growing number of members are finding that the use of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter is helping them to raise their profile and build engagement with their constituents.

While blogging, e-mailing and the use of social media may not be every member’s preferred route for generating casework, it is likely that some people who might be unwilling or unable to attend an advice surgery may prefer the ease and comfort of corresponding with their ward member from their own home and at a time that suits them.

The LGA’s website (www.local.gov.uk) can provide you with guidance on how to set up your own weblog or use social media and contains some good case study examples of members who have tried these approaches to raise their profile and generate casework.



Creating a blog

Make sure your text can be read easily.

Avoid jazzy backgrounds, or coloured text on a coloured background.

Keep it simple and keep your entries short.

Update your blog as regularly as possible and at the very least once a week.

Use plain English.

Publicise your blog – include your web address on your business card and emails.

Do not mix council and personal matters.



Using social media

A growing number of members are getting online and finding social media tools like Facebook and Twitter are useful in their ward member role.

So how can councillors take advantage of these trends to help them reach out to local people? What are the best tools for reaching different age groups and what strategies can you pursue? What are the possible pitfalls and how can you avoid them?

Many councillors are using a popular online resource, developed by the Local Government Group, based on Connected Councillors: A Guide to Using Social Media to Support Local Leadership.

The guide sets out some background on the use of social media, including how to stay out of trouble online. It covers tools such as blogs and Twitter and how to use them to build engagement. There are plenty of examples of members who are already using social media well. It also covers how you as a member can help your council to get the most out of using social media for improvement, innovation and efficiency.

<http://socialmedia.21st.cc/>



"I am a big fan of Twitter and use it to keep in touch with residents. It allows me to convey messages instantly – something I make full use of by Tweeting regularly from my phone...

...I find Twitter a brilliant tool that allows instant two-way communications, unlike some more traditional ways of contacting people. I can link in with national MPs and I even have a bit of friendly banter with opposition councillors! I think any councillors who aren't embracing new technology like Twitter are really missing a trick..."

Councillor Louise McKinlay, Brentwood Borough Council, 2011

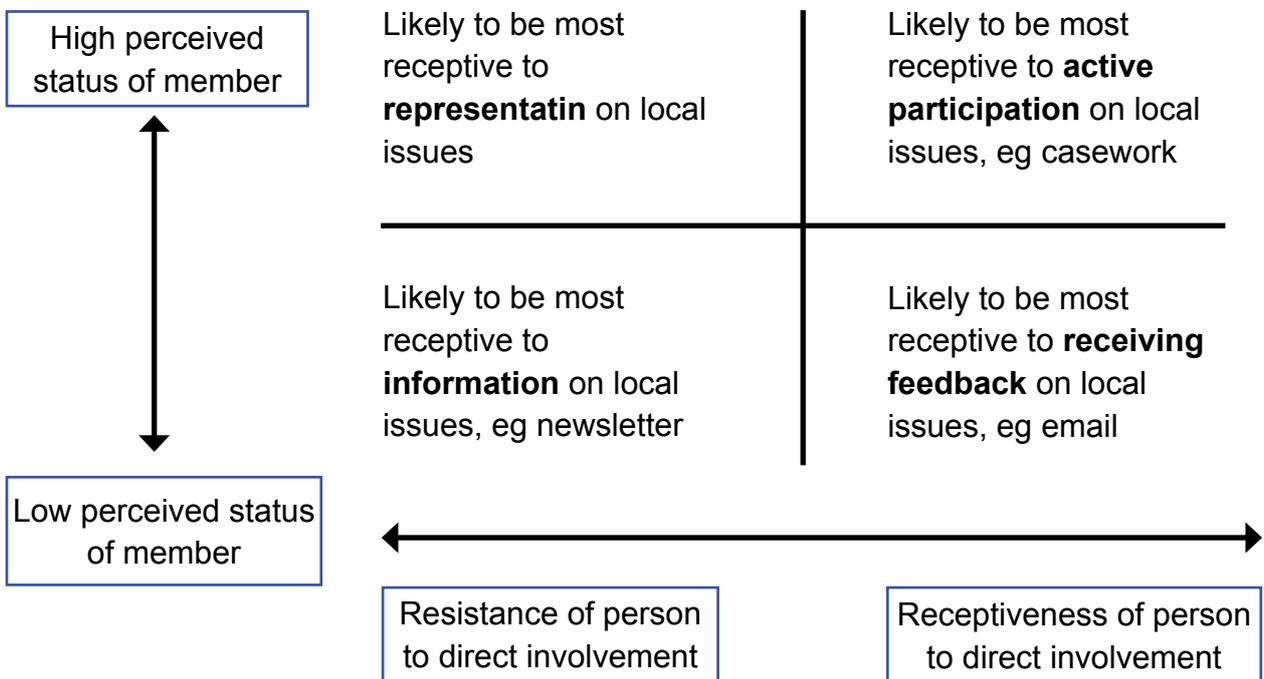
As community leaders, ward members must do what they can to represent the voices of all sections of the community. This may include championing the interests of people who often find it difficult or uncomfortable to articulate their issues or concerns, eg some younger, older or disabled citizens or some people from minority ethnic groups. A proportion of your casework is therefore likely to be concerned with 'speaking for the unheard.'

But don't imagine that everyone will want to come to you with their casework queries. While some people will want to engage with you and actively participate in a dialogue about their issues and concerns, others will be content to let you represent their interests or just keep them informed about what is going on locally. Much of this will depend on each person's perception of 'authority' figures generally, and their receptiveness to direct engagement.

The participation matrix on the next page shows levels of participation that constituents like. For example, if one constituent has a high opinion of the member but is resistant to direct involvement then they will prefer to receive information about local issues rather than direct feedback. It is worth considering this when you are in your ward.



The participation matrix



Exercise 2 – responding to local voices

Imagine that a particular community of people in your ward has been very hostile about some plans to regenerate the area, fearing that their homes will be demolished as part of the process. You know this not to be the case, but cannot begin to convince them of the benefits of the regeneration plans because you are perceived to be 'part of the council'. Given that the community is reluctant to engage with you directly, what ideas do you have for raising the matter locally and trying to begin a dialogue on the pros and cons of the regeneration plans?

Look at the answers you have given. Do you have all of the contact details for these organisations/individuals? If not, what can you do to get hold of this information?

Dealing effectively with the casework you generate

Dealing with casework will require you to develop your own simple, but effective, ways of managing both the information and paper flow. If you have been a member for some time, you have probably developed systems for doing this by default, ie finding out, by trial and error, what works well for you and what doesn't.

Some councils have begun to explore the use of technology-based solutions to help members – so-called e-Casework systems. But a sensible use of the equipment you already have available in your home or office and an efficient paper-based record system will serve just as well. Good note-keeping and diary management are essential, as well as a good filing system.

For those members that like to make use of technology, spreadsheets and databases can help to store, search and retrieve details of individual cases, alongside the use of e-mail as an essential communication tool. It is also worth noting that many electoral rolls are now available electronically, offering you the possibility of being able to merge this information with a proprietary data management system to cut down on the time required to search for people's names and addresses.

Whatever your preferred approach and regardless of the systems you employ, there will be a number of general steps that you will need to take in handling the casework you generate. These are discussed in the sections below:



Three tips for dealing with casework

Install a dedicated telephone line - use an answering machine or service for calls outside of normal hours.

Use a simple form to capture the key facts about each case, ie names, addresses, contact details, casework history, others involved etc.

Make a record of all calls, conversations and action taken – it doesn't have to be onerous, a simple diary 'log' is usually sufficient.



Exercise 3 – the casework challenge

Think about the systems you employ for handling casework. Write down how you would find out the following information about the cases you have dealt with in the past year:

The proportion of cases successfully resolved?

The number of people under 30 that have contacted you with casework queries?

Look again at what you have written. Could you make any changes to the systems you employ to enable you to extract this and other useful information more readily?

Identify what the problem is

You will need to establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. This will include identifying whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past. It is worth approaching each case with a degree of humility – some constituents with evidence of failure by ‘the council’ may see you as their last resort and some may be angry about the way they have been treated.

Avoid promising to sort out every problem, but do offer a sympathetic ear. While you can use your knowledge, contacts and advocacy skills to assist people, it is best to try and get people to help themselves. And keep the discussion focused on solutions and what can be done, rather than looking for scapegoats and people to blame.

Your constituents will be looking for support, but they’ll be looking for answers and solutions even more.

Understanding the nature and scale of the problem presented will often require you to use your judgement. Some people may try to use you or may avoid telling you everything you need to know. Before you can assist, you need to get all of the relevant facts and information.



Casework – dealing with anger

People who approach members about serious or intractable problems can often be stressed or angry. Remember:

- be polite and assertive but never aggressive - this will only increase the tension
- don't promise more than you can deliver - this will create problems in the long run
- avoid taking personal responsibility for a problem - the blame and hostility may shift on to you
- approach the council if you need help or training in dealing with awkward customers
- don't respond to racist, sexist or offensive remarks - draw the discussion to a close.

Refer the problem to the appropriate council department

Having identified what the problem is, you should communicate with the council officers who handle members' enquiries or relevant service officers, if that is how your council operates. You may want to put your concerns or questions in writing, although most members find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or e-mail is quicker and easier in sorting out casework problems.

Remember also to give clear instructions to the council officers, either to write to your constituent with a copy for you, or to work through you. Don't leave them to decide which approach you favour. And remember to copy the constituent in on what you have sent to officers unless it is confidential.

Get in the habit of taking copies of all correspondence and treat your constituents' affairs with appropriate confidentiality, ie always ask permission before sharing their information or views with a third party and take steps to protect the information you store about them. If you are in any doubt about your legal responsibilities regarding data protection, speak to your council's legal department.



Exercise 4 – getting the whole story

Consider the following casework example. Write down the steps you might take to tackle the issues presented:

The Oaks is a council estate in your ward. It was built in the 1960s and is made up of three streets arranged in a horseshoe, down the centre of which run some old garages which were originally designed for residents' use. The estate gets its name from the woodland which once covered the site.

You have been approached by Mrs Dyer, an elderly constituent on the estate, who wants the council to take some action to tackle her concerns. You already know that parts of the estate are run down and can look untidy. You are now being told that the garages on The Oaks have become a 'no go' area for local people. Cars are apparently being abandoned on a regular basis and the empty garages have become a haven for groups of teenagers who create noise and havoc into the night. She also tells you that the buildings are being used for drug dealing and storing stolen cars.

Look again at the ideas you have written down. To what extent have you rushed into a list of possible 'solutions' to the problems presented before checking out the relevant facts? If the problems presented are widespread, you might expect to have received comments or complaints from other residents. Could you speak to others on the estate, of different ages, to get a more balanced view? If the alleged cases of noise, drug taking and vehicle abandonment are a reality, isn't it likely that the council or other partner agencies (eg the police) will have some evidence for this? It may be that Mrs Dyer is correct in her assessment and that action is needed to tackle a growing community problem, but some early legwork and a few reality checks might help to strengthen your understanding of what is really going on.



Data protection – some considerations

The **Data Protection Act** gives people rights regarding personal information that others hold about them and imposes controls on individuals and organisations that use personal information.

The act applies to members in the same way that it does to council employees and covers paper records and computerised systems using equipment owned by members or provided by the council.

Members are regarded as data controllers if they process personal data and are required to notify the information commissioner of the reasons why they hold and process personal data. Members using personal data must keep it secure and misuse of data is a punishable offence.

This is a complex subject and members seeking more information should visit the LGA's website or go to Her Majesty's Stationery Office website at www.hmsso.gov.uk/acts to read the act in full.



Exercise 5 – helping people to help themselves

Consider the following examples of casework. Write down the steps you would take in helping people to resolve the issues presented:

Two older residents who have complained to you about the 'inappropriate language' used by staff in their local library.

A single mother, with literacy problems, who has come to you asking if you can help her to fill out various benefit claim forms from the council.

An elderly resident who says he cannot afford to continue with his council tax payments and wants you to let the council know that 'he would rather go to prison than pay up'.

Reflect on your answers to the cases above. Is there a risk that you are taking on too much personal responsibility in seeking to resolve these matters? To what extent are some of the issues raised outside of your control or influence?

Provide feedback

After you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.

Consider the wider issues

Reflect on the issues raised by the casework and let your co-members know. A number of similar concerns raised with members may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. Where you have had a success, it is worth letting your fellow ward members know in case they face a similar situation. And always try and publicise your success to local residents through leaflets and newsletters.

Some of your casework queries should prompt you to think about ‘the bigger picture’, ie why problems have occurred in the first place, whether the issues presented by your constituents are just the ‘tip of the iceberg’ in terms of wider community concerns or whether the case is likely to affect other local people.

A good example might be a sudden increase in the numbers of people coming to you with complaints about housing benefits payments. It is possible that the four or five people you find yourself talking to have isolated and unrelated problems. But equally the cases may be symptomatic of a wider concern – the introduction of a new computer system perhaps, or a change in the rules surrounding benefit entitlement. Your efforts may be focused on tackling the symptoms of the difficulty, when you really need to be speaking to officers about the cause of the problem.

Monitoring your effectiveness

Periodically, it is always sensible to review your approach to casework and consider whether what you do could be improved. For example:

- Ask your member colleagues how they tackle the information and paper flow and whether they have any good tips you haven’t thought of.
- Ask your constituents for feedback on what they felt you did well in responding to their queries and anything you could do to improve.
- Look up the websites of other councils or individual members’ blogs to see what others are doing to improve their response to casework.
- Monitor a number of key facts and statistics about your casework to ensure that you are targeting the people that need the most help and are being effective in resolving as many queries as you can.

It may be that your periodic reviews will highlight weaknesses in your systems for recording and storing information which you can address. Perhaps it will flag concerns about the volume of cases you are dealing with, which should prompt you to think about ways of getting other members or officers to help you with some of the burden. Equally, the exercise might demonstrate how much of a difference you have made to people’s lives through your casework interventions and underline the importance of being visible and accessible to local people as a ward member.



Exercise 6 – seeing the bigger picture

Look at the individual cases presented below and write down some of the potential 'big picture' issues that might underlie each:

Four separate cases reported to you of wheeled bins not being emptied on one estate.

A number of complaints about the long queue in the council's main reception area.

A rise in the number of queries you have received about on-street parking by people commuting in from areas outside of the ward.

Look again at the examples above. How often do you think about the potential 'big picture' issues when you are dealing with your real casework queries?



Monitoring your performance

How many people contacted you with problems in the last year?

Who were these people – gender, ethnicity, age, class, employment status?

How did people contact you?

How many cases were you able to resolve satisfactorily?

How does this compare with previous years?

What was the profile of the problem, eg housing, social services, benefits etc.?

How does your casework load and type compare to that of other members?

Final summary

Casework can be both rewarding and frustrating in equal measure. Each case will be different and each must be handled with a degree of humility as constituents with evidence of failure by 'the council' may see their ward member as a last resort. The reasons for any real or perceived failures by the council can be many and varied, eg the unhelpfulness of staff, some of the jargon in council literature or the unavailability of services at hours that suit people's busy lives.

In presenting their issues to you, constituents may have multiple problems or deprivations: illiteracy, lack of numeracy, illness or fear of authority. In providing casework support you should act as a 'one-stop shop', wherever possible, in listening to and responding to their concerns. This ability to make a difference to the lives of local people sits at the very heart of your community leadership role.



Conversations not communications

"Councillors want their residents to be as informed and involved as possible in the decisions that make a difference in their lives. They have already developed innovative ways to help local people influence decisions, and hear from a wider range of residents..."

'Doing something big: Building a better society together', Local Government Group, 2011



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

(a) What key action points can you identify to improve your effectiveness as a ward member in dealing with casework, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

(b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing, etc.

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

'Councillor's Guide', Local Government Association.

'Doing Something Big: Building a Better Society Together', Local Government Group, 2011.

Useful websites

www.local.gov.uk

The LGA's website is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government and contains guidance and case studies on the community leadership role of members.

www.upmystreet.com

Type in the relevant postcode for a wealth of social and economic information by neighbourhood.



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