

# **S.I.G.O.M.A.**

*The Special Interest Group  
of Municipal Authorities (Outside London)  
Within the LGA*

## **All Party Parliamentary Group on Local Government Inquiry into the Role of Councillors**

SIGOMA is a special interest group of 46 Municipal Authorities located outside London and is a recognised special interest group within the LGA. Its membership comprises 34 metropolitan districts and 12 major unitary authorities with similar characteristics. The combined population of SIGOMA authorities amounts to over a quarter of the population of England. Its member authorities account for over 25% of English local government expenditure and SIGOMA members comprise most of the largest housing authorities in England.

SIGOMA is pleased to have the opportunity to set out its views in relation to the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry on the role of Councillors. These views are the result of consultation with our members, and aim to address the major challenges both local and national government face in the future with respect to the role of the councillor.

### **What are the powers that ward councillors need to be effective and make a difference to the areas they represent?**

The Government wishes to see greater opportunity everywhere for people to be able to influence what happens in their area. To enable this to happen it is crucial that the ward councillor takes the lead as advocate for the communities they serve. There are a number of powers that ward councillors need to ensure that they are effective and make a difference to the area they represent. A challenge for local authorities is to establish where some ward councillors are more effective than others and then develop the interventions to ensure that all ward councillors are equally effective in their roles.

The Local Government White Paper goes some way to giving front line councillors extended powers through the Community Call for Action, making councillors the main link between local people, community groups and public service providers with a particular focus on ensuring that the views of vulnerable people and those least able to speak out are taken into account when making decisions about local life.

The White Paper makes further proposals to strengthen the ward councillor role through removing the Secretary of States power to confirm byelaws, leaving councillors with the ability to champion the concerns of local people and tackle problems. These new powers are welcomed by councillors and local authorities however, it is important to acknowledge that providing councillors with additional responsibilities will require new

skills, knowledge and support systems if the benefits of the changes are to have the maximum effect.

SIGOMA agrees with the LGIU that frontline councillors must have enhanced powers to provide greater accountability for mayors, leaders and executives with greater freedom to offer leadership in their neighbourhoods. Frontline councillors must build upon their accountability and representativeness by continuous recruitment, the revitalisation of local elections and by drawing upon more effective support to carry out robust community engagement in their wards.

### **What needs to change to ensure that councillors have these powers?**

Public perception of the role of the councillor is weak. The 2004 Councillor Census revealed that women and ethnic minorities are under represented in the councillor role, for example 70.3% of councillors were male compared to 29.1% female, and 96.5% of councillors were white while only 3.5% came from an ethnic minority background. This leads some to the view that the community is not being fully represented, as residents could feel that they have no rapport with their ward councillor.

A number of things need to change to ensure that councillors have the powers to better represent and make a difference in their community. Firstly, the role of the councillor needs to be clearly defined both to local government and the community so people know what to expect. This will help to build the confidence of citizens and the trust of local and national partners.

In light of the findings of the Councillor Census, there needs to be some efforts to create a more balanced community representation, so that elected representatives reflect the communities being served. The Government's Councillors Commission is looking at the barriers to becoming a councillor and SIGOMA greatly welcomes the inquiry and hopes that the commission takes a holistic view of and revisits issues around remuneration, work life balance and the role of employers.

In addition to fuller community representation, there needs to be more resources for individual ward councillors so that they can manage the work load and issues that are generated. For example, office or clerical support as well as research and statistics about local demographics, performance data about local service provision or financial information about public spending in neighbourhoods.

### **What are the changes needed in the activities that councillors carry out, to enhance effectiveness and respond to social change, for example in local representation or using new forms of communication.**

The Government's Best Value User Satisfaction Survey states that there is a clear link between satisfaction with the local authority and the opportunities to participate in local

decision making. To enable people to feel that they are able to make a difference to their community there needs to be a number of changes put in place in the activities that ward councillors carry out.

There needs to be better information passed to citizens, with the ward councillor ensuring that relevant details on access to services and how local authorities are performing are passed on through effective and accessible means. More information could be made available via newsletter drops, through the use of technology and the local media to ensure that councillors communicate their achievements more effectively.

Both the White Paper and the Lyons Inquiry place great emphasis on consultation and community engagement as a means of understanding community needs and preferences to inform service delivery – councillors will have a central role to play in this. There needs to be better consultation with citizens and communities about the shape of local services and policies using focus groups, area forums and neighbourhood plans. This could be supported by a focus on participatory approaches to community engagement with the frontline councillor acting as a citizens champion particularly in relation to those services and partnerships outside direct control of the local authority.

More work needs to take place to provide councillors with the time, capacity and resources to do this effectively, particularly in terms of feeding back outcomes and influencing change as a result of consultation / engagement.

In terms of local representation, there is a developing notion of councillor “teams” working within or between two or three wards. A team approach may enable task sharing and role sharing.

### **What types of support can councils provide to enhance the effectiveness of the ward councillor?**

The main support SIGOMA sees as vital to the role of the councillor is financial support and officer support. If councillors are to carry out new and enhanced roles they will need financial and practical administrative support to succeed and work to professional standards.

Increased officer support is vital; as the sophistication of the service delivery, civic leadership and democratic context increases, councillors will become more dependent on locally based officers to work with them to support their complex roles. In this context, councils should ensure that every councillor has at least one named officer to provide direct support to their local role. This support could relate to:

- Policy development support
- Ward based research support
- Community engagement support
- Better coordination of meetings, development sessions and briefings to maximise opportunities for councillors to attend

**How can we address public attitudes to political officeholders and seek to make the role more attractive and encourage active citizens to stand for election or remain as councillor?**

It is very important that local people understand the difference councillors can make if they are to be interested in running for local elections in the future. There must be a significant effort to reshape public perceptions of the councillor role at the national and local level. On a national level this can be achieved through better councillor recruitment; the LGIU have suggested inviting the Commission on Equalities and Human Rights to lead a review of the practice of political parties from national level to local level with a view to setting a series of national standards for political parties with local discretion to decide what works best.

At a local level, there should be greater effort to raise the profile of citizenship within schools, with the local councillor having a key role in supporting this through visiting schools, colleges and universities.

Specific areas that should be examined to make the councillor role more attractive and encouraging are:

- **Remuneration:** there needs to be greater recognition of the financial and professional cost of becoming a councillor. It cannot be expected that young professionals in particular will give up a career and face unemployment if they fail to be re-elected. Experience from Europe suggests that a solution can be found. For example, the German Government provides a financial “cushion” in the event of electoral failure (up to twelve months) in order to encourage people to stand for election to local authorities.
- **Work life balance:** there needs to be consideration of flexible approaches to employment with regards to the councillor role. Issues such as childcare, flexible working hours, times of meeting are all areas that should be addressed.

SIGOMA feels that addressing the points made in this response will ensure that there is an improvement in the recruitment and retention of ward councillors.