

SIGOMA

*Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities
(Outside London) within the L.G.A.*

Response to Consultation by the Councillors Commission

SIGOMA is a special interest group of 45 Municipal Authorities located outside London and is a recognised special interest group within the LGA. Its membership comprises 33 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 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 Councillors Commission Inquiry into the barriers and incentives of becoming a councillor. 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.

Motivation and Perception

- How can the image of councillors be improved?

There is an increasing problem of disengagement with local politics particularly in relation to those groups that are under-represented on local councils. This results in a shortage of candidates from these groups putting themselves forward for selection.

Improving the image of local government is crucial if more people are to be encouraged to stand for election – a change in this perception will only be brought about by decentralisation and a return of more powers to local government.

There needs to be some efforts to create a more balanced community representation, so that elected representatives reflect the communities they are serving, there should be a definite move away from the image of the councillor being that of a white middle aged man.

Role, support and Remuneration

- What is the role of councillors? How does this differ between frontline and executive councillors? How does it differ between different tiers and types of authority?

Public perception of the councillor role is weak, this needs to be clarified to both local government and the community so people know what to expect. In our evidence to the Lyons Inquiry, SIGOMA highlighted the importance of providing local democracy and leadership through three main elected member roles. In terms of the local ward councillor, SIGOMA sees the role as one that ensures services are delivered at the local level – acting as a voice for local people to ensure that decisions are tailored to local needs. There needs to be a clear model role description issued by local government organisations after consultation with councils and political parties.

- **How can councillors time be most effectively used?**

The 2006 Councillor Census states that on average councillors spend 21.9 hours per week on council / political business. This could have implications for someone wishing to stand as a councillor who already has a full time job – the time commitment is too big and in many cases not possible to sustain. To prevent this becoming a barrier to standing, both councillors and local authorities need to ensure that the time commitment of councillors is clearly defined and used as effectively as possible. To ensure this, local government organisations should have responsibility for outlining the duties councillors are expected to carry out, what services they are responsible for and providing information on council / political meetings within an adequate time scale so councillors are able to plan and utilise their time.

- **What support would be most helpful?**

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 as described in the Local Government White Paper, they will need financial and practical administrative support to succeed and work to professional standards. Devolved budgets would enable councillors to have a greater influence over how money is spent locally.

Increased officer support is vital, as the sophistication of 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 which relates to policy development support, ward based research support, community engagement support and better coordination of meetings and development sessions to maximise opportunities for councillors to attend.

- **How can councillors and prospective councillors be best supported to develop the skills needed to do their job?**

To support councillors to develop the skills needed to carry out the role, there should be a defined minimum level of training entitlement, especially for newly elected members where councils should have a comprehensive induction process to “bed in” newly elected members.

For existing councillors, the individual skills of each should be developed in a personalised training and development programme, supported through devolved budgets. For prospective councillors local authorities should promote the role of the councillor through a national campaign to make people aware of what is required to carry out the councillor role – this should be followed up with pre-training after election, followed by continued professional development.

- **What do employers need to encourage them to support people to be and remain councillors?**

The difficulty councillors face in getting time off work has been identified as one of the major barriers to becoming a councillor and is recognised as an increasingly difficult problem to address. To encourage employers to support people to remain and stand as ward councillors there should be changes to the legal framework for time off for public duties- an approach similar to that of employers of those taking part in jury service. SIGOMA areas have a higher number of small to medium enterprises (SME) rather than larger employers and so there is concern that allowing employee's time off work for council duties could have implications for the running of a business – in this instance SIGOMA would support some form of reward paid to employers, especially SME, to allow employees to carry out local duties.

- **How can the remuneration package best support people to be and remain councillors?**

SIGOMA does not believe that any form of remuneration package would attract a person to want become a councillor. The 2006 Councillor Census states that the main reasons for people standing in local elections relates to wanting to serve the community (86.9%) and fulfilling political beliefs (51.5%). However, there needs to be greater recognition of the financial and professional cost of becoming a councillor. It cannot be expected that young professionals 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 in order to encourage people to stand for election.

SIGOMA believes that the remuneration package may encourage people to remain as a councillor as they are prevented from suffering ongoing financial loss. It is important that this is emphasised and recognised that many councillors may lose out financially, for example missing career development opportunities due to their commitment to being a councillor.

There is much speculation about whether or not the role of the councillor should become a full time job with a remuneration package to match. SIGOMA does not have any particular view in this area but would emphasise that there should be a national standard of remuneration for councillors taking account of the different roles and tiers of local government. Any nationally agreed package should take fairness into account.

Routes to becoming a councillor

- **What could local authorities and others do to raise awareness of the routes to becoming a 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 both a national and local level. 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.

Other ways a local authority could raise awareness would be through open community forums, newsletters of local events and issues with details of the local councillor who is responsible for local public services – this would encourage greater awareness of the role the councillor takes in the community.

- **Are there other ways in which political parties or others could be encouraged to undertake actions to promote a broader spectrum of candidates and councillors?**

There must be a significant effort to reshape public perceptions of the councillor role at a national level, to encourage more people to want to stand as councillors. This can be achieved better councillor recruitment; the LGIU have suggested inviting the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights to lead a review to setting a series of national standards for 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. SIGOMA would support the LGIU's suggestions and would urge the Commission to consider these proposals.