



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Revisiting the 21st Century Councillor

Summary report

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Illustrations by Laura Brodrick,
thinkbigpicture.co.uk

We advance
We activate

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About the research

This research builds on the findings of the 2016 University of Birmingham report on the 21st Century Councillor. That project identified the need to pay attention to the changing roles undertaken by councillors and the associated support and development needs. Nine years on, we have built on and updated that piece of work to take into account the changes of the last decade.

The research was carried out by a team of researchers from the University of Birmingham and North West Employers. We interviewed 50 councillors across 22 councils including 18 councillors in an executive role as well as 10 councillors with a formal scrutiny position. Our sample is made up primarily of councillors from unitary councils, centred in the North West of England.

This was an opportunistic sample, which (based on previous research) we felt was the best way to get councillors to take part in the research. Most interviewees were identified through our partners at North West Employers, who used their regional networks to ask for volunteers. We also interviewed councillors in other regions who contacted us at events or by email expressing an interest in contributing to the research.



This research is intended to complement the updated 21st Century Public Servant research which was published in 2024. Many of same themes were evident in the councillor work and together they highlight the intensity of the pressures on local government along with the creativity and resilience of the sector's response. You can find that report at: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

We are grateful to all the participants who gave their time to speak with us and to the University of Birmingham for funding the research.

Executive summary

Local authority councillors have been at the forefront of significant changes to our communities and ways of life over the past decade. A new round of local government reorganisation is yet another example of how the context in which councillors are working continues to shift at pace.

It is essential for local democracy that our councillors can survive and thrive in these challenging times. But what does this mean in practice? And what can councils and other public bodies do to support councillors in their role?

In our research we address these questions in the context of what one councillor told us was 'the best, worst-paid job in the world'. We highlight the impact of recent challenges and identify ten characteristics of the 21st Century Councillor.

It's not easy being a councillor and our research is underpinned with a deep admiration for councillors, and the public service they provide. Despite the challenges, we heard how being a councillor can be a fulfilling occupation. The positive aspects of the councillor role, however, come at a personal cost for many and councillors are deeply aware that public perceptions of party politics are negative.

Councillors could be viewed as public servants alongside the paid officers who are traditionally considered as such. We have structured this report to fit with our recent refresh of the 21st Century Public Servant to help bring councillors into the conversation whilst, at the same time, recognising the uniqueness of their role and of the context in which they operate.

Contextual challenges

The context in which councillors are working is a rapidly changing one. Since we published the initial research in 2016 several distinctive challenges have emerged:

- **Perma-austerity** has deepened with sustained underfunding of public services
- **Complexity of place** has intensified, through combined authorities and integrated care systems, alongside local government reorganisation
- **Communities are in distress**, moving from the pandemic straight into the cost-of-living crisis
- **Incivility in public life** has grown with rising issues of abuse and harassment for councillors in particular
- The rising profile of **equality, diversity and inclusion** has drawn attention to how public services systematically fail some workers and citizens
- **Remote and hybrid working** can enhance individual flexibility but can make it more difficult for councillors to build the relationships they need to function effectively

See overleaf for the 10 new characteristics of the 21st Century Councillor.

Next steps

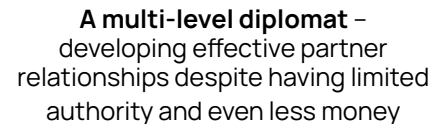
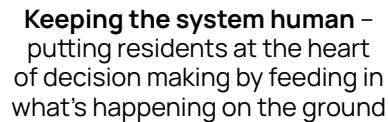
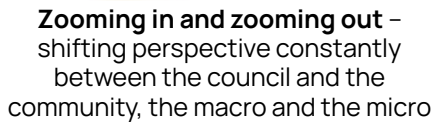
The characteristics set out here aim to be useful for councillors in individual and organisational development:

- **Individual skills development** – councillors can use these to work out which they are already good at, and where they might want to develop. These can be used in mentoring, coaching and appraisals

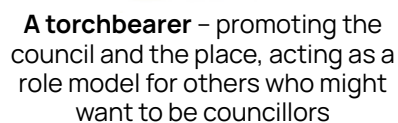
- **Member development** programmes – the characteristics might be used to help structure programmes, as the focus for individual sessions, or to inform questions for research and surveys

The full report and further resources are available on our website: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

Theme 1 – Working with complexity



A trusted listener – a contact point for residents in distress



A hybrid connector - building relationships on and offline

