

National census of local authority councillors 2010

Executive summary





Foreword

Every day, councillors are in the front line, leading their places, people and partners through times of unprecedented change and challenge. It is therefore essential that they receive the best possible support to help them to serve their communities effectively. So, it is crucial that the Local Government Group (LG Group) knows who councillors are and understands what drives them, and that councils and political parties are better equipped to understand their elected colleagues.

The responsiveness and capacity of councils to provide locally-representative leadership is likely to be tested in the years to come and the LG Group needs to ensure that councils are equipped to meet the challenges ahead. This is particularly important in the changing context in which local government works, with economic and social pressures, alongside increasing levels of public expectation.

The 2010 Councillors' Census explored these issues. The findings show that councillors as individuals are dedicated people, who devote a great deal of their own time to serving their communities. The census shows that councillors are increasingly confident in their role but that further support could help them deliver more.

The Councillors' Census is commissioned to ensure the sector, including the political parties, has accurate information on councillors' age, gender and background, and how they carry out their work. Accurate data of this nature is key if councils are to continue to develop their community leadership and place-shaping roles.

The LG Group presents in this document its own perspective on the findings of the Census, and will explore and develop its messages to help support our members in these challenging times. The messages aim to draw out the value, energy and experience that councillors bring to local government and how the sector can support them to reach their full potential.

Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell is the chairman of the LGA.

Background

The LG Group has carried out the sixth Census of Local Authority Councillors in England. The Census provides a 'snapshot' of local government representation and, with previous years' data, analysis of trends over time.

Councillors are in the front line as both community advocates and as political leaders. It is therefore essential that they receive the best possible support to enable them to serve their communities effectively. The survey findings assist the LG Group to better understand the needs of councillors.

The 2010 Census collected data over November 2010–February 2011 and updates the previous Censuses in 1997, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2008.

Thanks to the support from councillors and member support officers, replies were received from 6,082 (33.4 per cent) councillors in office in England.

The full report, and further analyses, can be found on the LG Group's website (www.local.gov.uk). For further information about the Census please contact Stephen Richards at the LG Group's Research and Information team (stephen.richards@local.gov.uk, 020 7664 3256).

Main findings

The following are the main findings from the 2010 Councillors' Census, which was conducted in the winter of 2010/2011.

Work as a councillor

- Councillors had, on average, been members of their authority for 9.4 years in 2010, slightly longer than reported in 2008 (8.3 years).
- 57.4 per cent of councillors held one or more positions of leading responsibility within the council and 52.5 per cent of all councillors received a special responsibility allowance in addition to their basic allowance.
- Councillors spent, on average, 23 hours per week on council/political business, similar to 2006 and 2008.
- 91.3 per cent of councillors had been in receipt of one or more training and development opportunities in the last 12 months and 41.5 per cent would welcome the opportunity to gain a more formal qualification or recognition of their work as a councillor.
- From a list of eight resources or learning opportunities, councillors ranked IT support (21.0 per cent) and administrative support (20.5 per cent) as those that would be most beneficial to their role.
- 88.1 per cent of councillors indicated that a council email address was made available to them and 74.8 per cent used one. Just under half of those who used it felt this was one of the most useful resources available to them (49.1 per cent). A PC or laptop was available to 87.0 per cent of councillors, and 72.3 per cent used one, the majority of whom thought it one of the most useful resources (70.8 per cent). Broadband was available to 75.7 per cent of councillors, and 64.5 per cent used this, over a half of whom (56.5 per cent) indicated that it was one of the most useful resources.



Issues and views of councillors

- 91.1 per cent considered themselves to be effective or very effective in their role as councillors, which was a slightly higher proportion than was the case in 2008 (88.0 per cent).
- 88.2 per cent of councillors cited a desire to serve the community as their reason for wanting to become a councillor.
- 93.8 per cent thought that listening to local views was the most important thing for councillors to do, while 91.1 per cent said that supporting the local community was the most important thing for them to do.
- Around half (50.6 per cent) said that their council was fully committed to allowing people to have a say on services provided locally through consultation and feedback. Nearly two-fifths felt that their council was fully committed to enabling people and communities to have an influence locally through active programmes of engagement, to providing better support for elected members and to having mechanisms to organise inquiries about contentious issues.
- 67.3 per cent of councillors intend to stand for re-election at the end of their term in office and 83.4 per cent would recommend taking on the role to others.

Personal background of councillors

- Most councillors (68.5 per cent) were male, 30.6 per cent were female in 2010. The proportion of female councillors had increased from 27.8 per cent in 1997, although the proportion is still considerably lower than the adult population (51.2 per cent).
- The average age of councillors has increased from 55.4 years in 1997 to 59.7 years in 2010. In 2010, 88.2 per cent of councillors were aged 45 and over, compared to 52.6 per cent of the adult population.
- 96.3 per cent of councillors were white and 3.7 per cent came from an ethnic minority background in 2010. A higher proportion of the adult population was from an ethnic minority background (11.1 per cent).
- The proportion of councillors who were retired has increased from 34.1 per cent in 1997 to 47.2 per cent in 2010, compared to 19.1 per cent of the adult population.
- 55.9 per cent of councillors in 2010 held a qualification equivalent to NVQ level 4 and above, compared to 31.2 per cent of the adult population.

The LG Group's perspective

The LG Group's Councillors' Census provides us with a unique insight into the councillors we represent. It paints a picture of engaged and driven individuals who want to improve their communities and build better lives for the people they represent. At the LG Group we believe that councillors should be supported to deliver their maximum potential and to realise the benefits that localism can deliver. Below we set out our key messages from the Census findings that we will use to promote the role of councillor, as well as highlighting how the LG Group and the sector can support councillors to go even further.

Councillors give great value to their communities

When we talk about the Big Society and the army of volunteers who could serve their communities, we often forget that there are around 20,000 councillors in England who give a great deal of time and energy to the places they represent. They become councillors to serve their communities and to achieve this will look to the views of the local people and communities they represent. This drive and determination is also reflected in the great deal of time councillors give to their role.

88 per cent of respondents became a councillor to serve their community.

More than 9 out of 10 respondents agreed that listening to the views of local people and supporting the local community are the most important roles of the councillor.

On average, councillors spend 23 hours per week on council and political business. 15 per cent of councillors spend more than 35 hours per week on council and political business.

Councillors can give a fresh perspective to councils

At a time when councils are being asked to work in new and innovative ways, councillors can offer a fresh insight into the challenges facing councils. Now more than ever, that resource of experience and knowledge shouldn't be overlooked. Whether it is from other forms of voluntary work or through their professional skills – which are increasingly from a professional, managerial and private sector background – the value that this extra expertise and experience can give should not be underestimated.

42 per cent of councillors are school governors and 56 per cent do other unpaid voluntary work, and almost a quarter have one or more caring responsibilities.

15 per cent are self-employed, and of those who are employed or self-employed, 69 per cent work in the private sector.

37 per cent of employed or self-employed councillors described themselves as having a managerial background and 33 per cent as professional, compared with 33 per cent and 28 per cent respectively in 1997.

More than half of councillors have NVQ level 4 or equivalent and above.

Councillors are more confident and willing to talk about their role

To step up to the challenges, make the most of opportunities and work together with the local community, residents and other partners, councillors need to have the confidence and support to lead their place. The LG Group supports councillors to develop themselves and to take pride in the valuable work that they do, and it is encouraging to see that councillors are more willing to talk about the work they do, including recommending the role to others. This is also made manifest in their intention to stand again at the next set of local elections.

22 per cent of councillors reported that they often talked about being a councillor with work colleagues.

37 per cent often talked about it at community events.

29 per cent talked about it at social gatherings, and 38 per cent within the family.

They are also more likely to recommend being a councillor to others (83 per cent in 2010, compared to 76 per cent in 2006).

67 per cent intend to stand for re-election – up from 55 per cent in 2008.



The LG Group's response

1. Councillor support offer

The LG Group is committed to delivering high-quality political support to councillors to help them meet the challenges of today and to help them grow the confidence and skills to lead their places. To do this, programmes of support must adapt to councillors' needs. The Census found a range of key areas in which councillors said they needed support – media training, IT support, administrative support and political skills training.

The LG Group's political support programmes will reassess their content to make sure that the media and political skills elements meet the needs of councillors on our programmes. We will also explore with the sector how other support needs could be better met. (Details of support programmes, such as the Leadership Academy, can be found at www.local.gov.uk.)

35 per cent reported that media training would be beneficial to their work as councillors, 31 per cent IT support, 27 per cent administrative support and 25 per cent political skills training.

2. Councillors as talent spotters

The LG Group's *Be a councillor* campaign is based on the argument that one of the most important things that local authorities and local parties must do is ensure they each represent their place. This is not just a case of encouraging more diversity, although harnessing the talents of the young, professionals, women and people from ethnic communities will certainly make councils more vibrant. We also want to have the best quality councillors. We need different kinds of people willing to put themselves up for election, so that parties get a choice of quality candidates from which to select. To do that, parties have to go out and find new talent: people who are ordinary enough to be representative, but extraordinary enough to be representatives.

Be a councillor encourages councillors to take the role of 'talent spotter'. This is because there is one very easy way to encourage and support these people to become councillors – ask them! The Census shows us that over a quarter of councillors say that they became a councillor because they had been asked. And it is encouraging to see that a growing proportion of councillors are recommending the role as well.

For support and advice about how to take on the 'talent spotter' role you can download *Finding the X factor: the premier guide to recruiting local government talent in your area* from the *Be a councillor* website www.beacouncillor.org.uk

83 per cent in 2010 would recommend being a councillor to others, compared to 76 per cent in 2006. 28 per cent became a councillor because they had been asked to.

3. Social Media

At the LG Group we are aware of the important part that social media plays, and will continue to play, in the role of local councillors. Through initiatives like *21st Century Councillor*, the soon-to-be-launched Knowledge Hub, and practical guidance through *Connected councillors: a guide to using social media to support local leadership* <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/28632240> we are supporting councillors as they dive into this new world.

The recently revitalised Tweety Hall website (www.tweetyhall.co.uk), supported by the LG Group, uses Twitter to connect constituents with local politicians – acting as a home for conversations between councils, councillors and their constituents, with visitors to the site easily able to search for their own local representative by name.

8 per cent of census respondents use social network sites such as Facebook or Twitter.

Further information

For more information about this report visit www.local.gov.uk or email stephen.richards@local.gov.uk



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