

Appendix 3 – Outline Report: New Unitary Roles

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1. Purpose and Background

1.1. The IDeA has commissioned a project to review the role of new unitary councillors. The aim of this project is to produce a tool-kit that can be used by members and officers in authorities moving towards new unitary status. As part of this we have been talking with members and officers in Wiltshire County Council and District Councils to begin the process of drafting a role description for new unitary councillors. It is hoped that this will enable individuals to make an informed decision about whether or not to stand for the new role and provide a base for identifying what support is likely to be needed before and after the elections in May 2009.

1.2. So far, twelve councillors and five officers from the county council and the district councils have been interviewed. The purpose of this report is to feedback key findings from these interviews, which explored what interviewees said they would most like to know about the role, why that information was important to them, and what they believed (rightly or wrongly) that the role might involve.

1.3. Rather than scope a detailed role description at this stage the key areas of the role have been outlined together with decisions that will need to be made in order to clarify the scope and demands of the role in Wiltshire. Some of these decisions will inevitably depend on decisions regarding the structure and processes of the new authority, governance arrangements and officer support.

2. What people think the new role will involve

2.1. Many of those interviewed believed that the demands of the new unitary role would be so great that it would require a full-time commitment from councillors. While this may or may not be the case, it was identified as a significant deterrent to many standing.

2.2. There was a common belief that (with the exception of “twin hatters”) a key challenge for District Councillors taking on the role would be to develop knowledge and skills relevant to a much broader portfolio of areas (e.g. education, social services, and highways). It was also believed that unitary councillors with a district background would need to become more strategic in their focus, particularly in understanding how issues interrelated across geographical and service areas. Some interviewees commented that these new unitary councillors would have to switch from a micro focus (e.g., specific issues for a particular group) to a macro perspective.

2.3. The main challenges for County Councillors without district experience were perceived to centre on a need to become more closely involved with members of the public (e.g. in front-line roles) and the need to develop greater mediation skills to deal with the potentially confrontational aspects of planning and development control.

2.4. Most interviewees recognised that there would be substantial training needs for all councillors taking on the new roles. Some of this training would be relevant for all unitary councillors (i.e. an understanding of the structure of the new authority, the roles and responsibilities of officers, key aims of the authority, and where to go to for help). A number of interviewees said that it should be made clear that all unitary councillors would be expected to attend induction and on-going training events.

3. What people wanted to know about the new role

3.1. Interviewees were asked to list the top four things that they most wanted to know about the new role. Almost without exception members cited the following:

- What meetings will I need to attend?
- Where will these meetings be held?
- When in the day will they occur?
- What allowances will there be?

3.2. These issues all relate to role demands and individuals' decisions about whether or not they have the capacity to take on the role. A variety of people had valid concerns relating to these issues. For example several were genuinely worried that they would not be able to perform the role well, particularly if they were juggling other responsibilities such as work or caring for their family. One individual commented that because she knows when the meetings are in her current council role she can be flexible by planning her other responsibilities around them. Without knowing how often she would need to attend meetings and when and where these were likely to be held she simply could not say whether she had the capacity to take on the role. Similar comments were made by employed and self-employed members.

3.3. Overall, most interviewees accepted that there was a need for compromise with regard to meetings, and that it was likely that some would be in the evening, some in the day and some at different locations. They felt that they could accommodate this provided early agreement is reached about the practicalities of meeting arrangements.

3.4. The question of allowances also related to meetings, but was more complex in that for some the level of allowances impacted upon their ability to free themselves from other responsibilities. There were different assumptions about whether allowances represented a reward for services given, whether they compensate individuals for potential lack of earnings, or whether they constitute a means by which some members can buy additional support.

4. How the new role will be structured

4.1. Interviewees were clear about how the cabinet structure would work in the new unitary authority and the need for cabinet member roles to include broad ranging portfolios. They were also comparatively clear about the need for unitary councillors to be part of area boards. However, there was less understanding about the specific responsibilities of unitary councillors in

relation to these boards, how often they would need to meet and how information would flow between these and cabinet members.

4.2. In general different interviewees had different views, but it was broadly assumed that planning and development control would need to occur locally, possibly centred on the areas currently covered by the districts. There was also an assumption that more would be expected of town and parish councillors and that these roles could possibly expand to support unitary councillors. Some interviewees who said that they were less likely to stand for the new role welcomed the possibility of taking on or expanding their town or parish role. As town and parish councillors were not interviewed who were not involved in either the District or County Council, it was not possible to ascertain whether they too hold this view.

4.3. Interviewees were not clear about the decision powers councillors in Area Boards would have or whether they would have budgetary responsibilities. They were also not clear how meetings would be structured and whether these would include surgeries, meetings with local service providers and planning.

5. What interviewees did not discuss

5.1. For the most part interviewees did not discuss the political aspect of their role and how this might be structured. One would expect that there will be political responsibilities; therefore time demands associated with meeting with their political groups should be accommodated within a role description.

5.2 Another important issue, albeit raised by only a few interviewees, was the extent to which new unitary councillors would be expected to attend meetings or sit on committees for bodies with external partners or community groups. It is difficult to determine the number and type of meetings that councillors currently attend across the county and districts. It is also difficult to work out which of these meetings and relationships are likely to be ones that it will be important to maintain in the new unitary authority. However, without a review of this load, and a clear steer in relation to expectations, it is very difficult to be precise about the number of hours a unitary councillor would be expected to undertake. Given a reduction in the total number of councillors decisions will presumably also need to be made as to which of these should be prioritised and how councillor involvement can be supported and maintained. The outcome of this process and an understanding of what meetings will need to be serviced within the authority should provide important information about the likely load expected of the new unitary councillor.

6. Opportunities

6.1. When asked most interviewees said that the most important opportunities afforded by the new role included being able to provide a full and joined-up service for members of the public. District and County Councillors said that they would appreciate not having to say that some issues raised by members of the public were not within their control and having to pass them on. Some councillors and officers also felt that the unitary role meant that there was less

chance for issues to slip between two areas and that there would be more joined up thinking. It was also commented that there would be less opportunity for a blame culture to arise.

6.2. Another opportunity was seen to be the introduction of Area Boards as a way of engaging more fully with community leadership and the place-shaping agenda.

6.3. Other interviewees considered the new role to be a way of bringing in new blood, new ideas and new talent (both on the side of officers and members). Although there was also recognition that unless the role and likely support was clarified and communicated, there was a risk that people would be put off standing.

7. A broad overview of the new unitary role

7.1. Building on these interviews and the work WCC has already undertaken and looking at role descriptions for new unitary councillors, four broad role areas and associated responsibilities were identified:

7.1.1. The Community Role: This role involves engaging with the needs of local people and groups and taking a leadership role in visioning and shaping a vibrant and cohesive local community. The unitary councillor will be expected to:

- Represent their constituents at the Area Board and unitary authority
- Act as a conduit for information from the council and back to the council from the community
- Listen and keep up to date with local concerns and undertake casework with individuals and groups
- Help to resolve issues including those of hard to reach groups
- Mediate fairly and constructively between people with conflicting needs
- Create effective partnerships with all sections of the community
- Work with partners to vision and build strong, cohesive communities
- Communicate regularly with the community via newsletters, surgeries, phone, email or local media.

7.1.2. The Corporate Role: This aspect of a councillor's work focuses on his or her contribution to decision-making and responsibilities for the corporate aspects of the unitary authority. They will be expected to:

- Contribute to and inform debate at Council meetings
- Work with officers and cabinet members to ensure local needs are understood and accounted for in unitary-wide services
- Provide information about local successes and needs to relevant cabinet members and officers
- Understand and participate in Overview and Scrutiny
- Participate in service-specific roles or committees as agreed with the Leader and Executive
- Show commitment to continual learning and excellence by engaging in self-development and being a critical friend to others
- Act as a corporate parent to children in the care of the local authority

- Comply with the Council Code of Conduct.

7.1.3. The Partnership Role: The partnership role recognises those aspects of the unitary councillor's work that will involve working with external partner organisations to deliver and shape services for local communities. Councillors will need to:

- Contribute to effective working between the unitary authority and its partners (e.g., PCT, police, regional development agencies)
- Act as the authority's representative on external partner meetings (e.g. with LSP)
- Build a shared understanding of the needs of the authority and those of the partners in relation to co-operative working
- Act as the conduit for information flow between partners and relevant officers and members within the authority
- Facilitate a shared commitment to excellence among partners by encouraging an openness to evaluation and learning.

7.1.4. The Political Role*: Councillors also have an important political dimension to their role that involves communicating their values to the wider community. Political working is therefore a legitimate aspect of their role that will require time and effort:

- Contribute to the political group's vision and manifesto
- Engage in constructive opposition
- Communicate their political values and vision
- Canvass support from the electorate
- Engage in cross-party working where necessary for public good
- Build an understanding of political working among officers.

**While we recognise that some councillors do not align themselves with a particular political party, the public will see elected representatives as politicians even if they do not see themselves as politicians. Independent councillors will still need to understand how to work in a political environment and how to communicate their personal values and vision for the Council.*

7.2. All new unitary councillors will also need to know:

- How the new authority is structured (services, officers and roles)
- What Area Boards there will be and how these will work
- Council meetings and committees (when these are held and where)
- Who the authority's external partners are and which associated meetings they will need to attend
- The core services of the new authority and how these interlink
- Quasi-judicial responsibilities
- What support they can expect from officers and democratic services i.e. for:
 - Case work
 - In committee roles
 - In their role as representing the council
 - Professional and technical advice
- What allowances they will receive

- How overview and scrutiny works
- How the political groups work

7.3. In addition, each individual councillor will need to understand his or her personal responsibilities in taking on responsibility for specific areas as agreed with the Leader of the Council or their political group leader. This may include responsibility for a cabinet portfolio or representing the Council at meetings with an external partner.