

MJ Awards 2011

submission details

Submission title: Empowering county councillors to take an active role in their communities

Award category: Councillor Development Achievement of the Year

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Summary

A "Think Councillor" culture at the County Council is an essential element of our improved support to councillors in their leadership, scrutiny and community champion roles. By working closely with our councillors we have supported them to work in different ways - including investing in technology. We have cut bureaucracy and costs, saved both them and the public' time and have increased their opportunities to engage with the public. All councillors are now far better equipped to fulfil their role as community champions and this has already had a positive and very visible impact on our resident's lives and improved services.

Empowering county councillors to take an active role in their communities

Introduction

As an authority we have a good record of supporting our county councillors through the work we do in the Localities & Partnerships Team, Democratic Services, Member Development and Directorate Support to councillors. We have now enhanced this through a wider review of how we "Think Councillor", supporting the work of all our councillors, including work at a local level, strengthening the support that we give to local county councillors to help them carry out their role as community leaders.

Imagination and ambition

We are creating a set of principles around '**Think Councillor**' that will provide the bedrock for us to promote how we engage and involve councillors when undertaking the day to day work of the County Council. This will include training for officers through induction to existing leadership programmes; to embed the philosophy across the organisation. A series of political awareness sessions for different levels of officers has begun to raise understanding of working with councillors and their role amongst staff.

We are creating a role definition for our councillors as Community Champions which will give greater clarity within the County Council, with partners and in communities about the roles and responsibilities of county councillors. Additionally this will be used to identify individual and general training and development needs. This includes a specific project with the LGiU to develop a bespoke workshop around councillors as community leaders.

Local county councillors have a vital community leadership role working alongside local service managers, partners and citizens to deliver clear outcomes for their communities. This concept is woven through the new approach to integrated locality. A report outlining this was presented at Full Council on 20 May 2010 by the Leader of the County Council. A strand of this is 'Empowering county councillors to take an active role in their communities – Supporting Local County Councillors'.

"The County Council and its District Council partners exist to serve one set of tax payers. The approach enables decisions on what really matter to local people to be made at a local level whilst still taking advantage of the economies of scale available to the County Council."

CC Geoff Driver

Leader of the County Council

In addition a new scrutiny structure was agreed in 2010, placing heavy emphasis on the scrutiny members to lead and deliver. Strong support structures from both dedicated scrutiny officers and service based teams and officers from across the county council have allowed this to be delivered. Regular liaison meetings between the chairs of the committees involving the most senior staff in the authority have created positive relationships and allowed scrutiny to develop its influence.

Innovation

Community Development Foundation (CDF)

Lancashire County Council is one of three authorities nationally working with the Community Development Foundation (CDF) on a project exploring the community leadership role of county councillors. Working with a small group of councillors from across the three main political parties, the project is looking at challenges they face in undertaking their community leadership role, helping to unpick problems and identify solutions. Findings from this project are being used to inform further development of our support arrangements for the role of county councillors.

This has been a development opportunity for our councillors, as they are working jointly with officers to identify the issues and solutions. These issues include;

- **Communication across the three tiers:** Ensuring that councillors have the right information at the right time to respond effectively to community concerns.
- **Employee's knowledge of the councillor role:** Ensuring that officers truly understand the county councillors' role to further improve information exchange and communication.
- **Opportunities to meet officers:** Exploring opportunities to provide more 'informal' opportunities to meet with officers to raise issues and discuss community concerns.

Tools and resources

Currently we have worked to develop an enhanced suite of tools and resources to support councillors in all their roles and to enable them, where appropriate, to 'self help'. These include;

- Re-developing the councillors intranet portal (this is a one-stop shop for all information delivered to councillors) so that it is the first port of call for up-to-date and relevant councillor information;

"As a new councillor we need as much support as possible and this is an excellent way. It is a useful tool in organising my duties as a councillor."

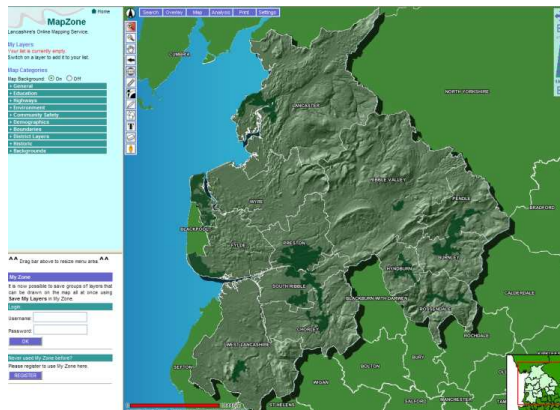
Lancashire County Councillor -councillor survey



- improving access to divisional demographic profiling information, through a series of Divisional Profile workshops to ascertain the divisional information needs of councillors;

"It's a tool that I can refer to when asked awkward questions. It's also a mass of information that you can source anytime."

Lancashire County Councillor -councillor survey



- equipping councillors with relevant IT skills to develop their own web pages, through workshops and 1:1 support. All county councillors have been provided with a personal website as a means to; promote the work of the council, improve access to councillors and inform and educate on the role of the councillor.

"I have found my website invaluable for keeping residents I represent informed of the latest news, local events, planning applications, local organisations services and activities as well as what I've been doing on their behalf. It's been really popular and very much appreciated by the feedback I have received."

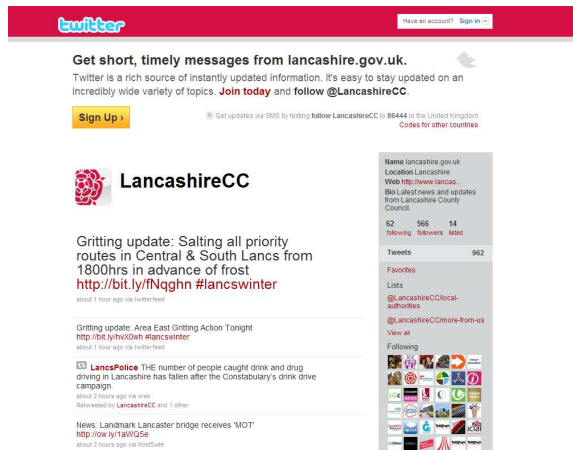
CC Mark Perks



- exploring opportunities to use social media tools to support councillors in their local leadership role. A councillor task group has been established to lead on this

"As a young councillor I am keen to use all forms of media to communicate with residents. I use 'Twitter' to inform residents about dates of my surgeries. You'll be surprised just how effective social media can be!"

CC Ciaran Wells



- implementation of a new decision management system (Modern.gov) enabling councillors greater and improved access to the information/issues that matter to them quickly online. Full integration



with webcasting and online expenses systems which enables councillors to avoid the need for excessive travel across a large county, whilst keeping up to date with the latest developments. County councillors lead busy lives and want to get the bureaucratic side of being a councillor out of the way as efficiently as possible.



"As Lead Councillor for Member Development, I am impressed by the progress that has and is being made by Officers in developing the new system. Not just because it is new technology, but because the Officers are working with Councillors to make sure that the system delivers what Councillors want and need rather than the other way round. I am keen to work with Officers to explore the future opportunities that will be available to provide even better services to Councillors that will save time, improve effectiveness, and save money for the County."

CC Mike France

- a new approach to scrutiny, which has placed an emphasis on scrutiny members to lead and deliver. By developing the scrutiny function, county councillors are now working more effectively with service directorate officers to realise 'real benefits' to the community and to understand the needs of communities at a local level. An example of this has been the review of winter services following on from the extreme weather conditions in 2009/10. This has led to a more responsive service in 2010/11, including partner input at a local level, with councillors feeling more able to influence on issues like siting grit bins using their local knowledge, and has also ensured that the process has been much more open to public scrutiny and engagement.

- devolving powers to all county councillors to approve individual grants to grass roots organisations. Our Local Member grants Scheme gives each county councillor £1,250 to allocate to voluntary and community groups within their division. They are supported in this by officers across the organisation. We will also be piloting online decision making, which will be cost effective and more efficient for people submitting applications as it reduces bureaucracy.

Cash Boost for life saving Rawtenstall Scheme



County Councillor Tony Winder said: ***"This equipment has the potential to save many lives in the local area. It will have huge benefits for the community and I'm pleased to fund this worthwhile project."***

County Councillor Jimmy Eaton said: "Dawn and Clair are doing a superb job raising money for the defibrillators. There's a definite need for this type of equipment in Rawtenstall and throughout the valley and I hope this funding will be a great boost"

Clare Mulderring, chair of Rawtenstall Community Defibrillator Scheme, said: "The more funding we raise for this scheme, the more lives we can save and the funding from County Councillors Eaton and Winder is crucial for helping us achieve our aim.

£753 awarded to Rawtenstall Community Defib Scheme towards the purchase, installation, maintenance and training of two 'Community Public Access Defibrillators (CAPD) for Rawtenstall Town.

These additional tools and resources complement the existing Member Development Programme which also includes IT training, committee specific training, councillor led tours of the districts, and a Bite Size Briefing programme of short officer briefing sessions. To acknowledge that our councillors work across a wide geographical area, we have developed our bite size briefings by creating a 'View and Review' initiative, which allows the facility to view briefings online at a time that suits.

Project, strategy and management

Overall responsibility for this work sits with the Locality Review Strategy Group, which is chaired by the Executive Director of Policy. This group has commissioned a number of officers from various teams to lead on the detailed work needed to make empowering local county councillors a reality.

It was recognised that there was a need to have a reference group including county councillors. It was decided to make use of the existing Member Development Working Group (MDWG) which is a working group of the main Scrutiny committee. This means that there is a strong voice from the front line councillors in the development of this work.

Once work has been developed, it is reported back through the appropriate mechanisms to the deputy and/or Leader of the County Council.

Communications to staff and other stakeholders

The issue of communicating to councillors, staff and other stakeholders is an essential and ongoing part of the project plan. A communications strategy is being developed to launch 'Think Councillor'. The Steering Group and other officers supporting the work meet regularly to report progress against the project plan.

Value for money

The project is delivered in-house within existing budgets and staffing resources. There is an emphasis for councillors to 'self help' through new and existing ICT systems. Councillors' websites are used to promote the role of councillors as community champions and council services through individual councillor websites.

By devolving decision making powers to local county councillors through the Local Member Grants Scheme, this offers value for money for communities in that decisions are made by county councillors who understand their issues at a local level without having to go through an expensive and bureaucratic centralised system.

Impact on customers

Evidence to support the difference these initiatives have made includes;

- Communities have benefited from being awarded local member grants totalling approximately £49,000 which had been spent as of 31st December 2010. Feedback from county councillors and constituents has indicated that the Local Member Grants scheme have made a real difference to local communities.
- For the period January to December 2010, county councillors attracted 1.35 million visits to their websites, demonstrating how valuable and cost effective a medium of communications councillor websites can be.
- As a result of the communications strategy developed around our 2010/11 Winter Service, which included stake holder relations, public information and media relations, initial results show a significant fall in the number of customer calls relating to this issue down from 4246 in 2009 to 1922 in 2010.

We have developed practical tools and resources to further support councillors in their leadership, scrutiny and community champion roles. We continue to work very closely with councillors and key stakeholders, to better serve the people of Lancashire.