

Benefits for councillors

Charter for Elected Member Development

Best practice study

During 2018, South East Employers engaged with representatives of three local authorities in the South East, East of England and London to conduct a programme of research and in-depth interviews.

We explored the stories of those organisations leading the way with councillor development, and how they have engaged the Charter for Elected Member Development and 'Charter Plus' (Charter) to enable their ambitions.

Essex County Council made its first commitment to the Elected Member Development Charter in November 2011, aiming to achieve Charter status before the County Elections in April 2013. Not only did the Council realise its goal within this ambitious 16-month timeframe, the strength of their submission enabled them to upgrade to Charter Plus status one year later. In March 2018 the Council successfully reassessed for continued Charter Plus status.

The London Borough of Brent was the first authority in London to achieve the Charter Plus standard for Elected Member Development, doing so in 2015. Brent originally achieved Charter recognition in October 2010 and reaccredited in January 2014 before applying for Charter Plus status, which was awarded in September 2015. Brent recommitted to the Charter in January 2018 and successfully reassessed for Charter Plus status in December.

East Hampshire District Council was awarded Charter status in December 2017. The Council has always recognised Councillor development to be important but placed a greater emphasis on it from 2012. The evolution of Councillor development gathered pace through 2013-14 and a Councillor Development Strategy and Competency Framework launched in 2015. The decision to seek Charter accreditation was agreed the following year.

In this document we focus on the benefits for councillors as recognised and explained by councillors themselves.

Unanimously, Charter-enabled councillor development is considered to deliver significant benefits for councillors and, by extension, their communities.



Councillor Malcolm Maddocks
Chairman of the Member Development Steering Group
Essex County Council

"The role and expectations of an elected Member are changing more quickly than ever before. We...believe that the personal development of all Members is critical to the successful delivery of our strategic priorities on behalf of the people we represent and serve. It is essential that they all have the knowledge, skills and resources required to undertake a leading role in their communities."



Councillor Muhammed Butt
Leader of the Council and Chair of the Member Development Steering Group
The London Borough of Brent

"Supporting and developing our Members as community leaders is critical. All councillors...have a duty to themselves, their fellow councillors and their electorate to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to carry out their wide range of roles as effectively as possible. For this, they need access to high quality learning and development."



Councillor Richard Millard
Leader of the Council
East Hampshire District Council

"New and emerging pressures and complexities are having a profound impact on the Councillor role. Natural leadership competencies need to be continuously developed and built upon to help us understand and respond to new challenges, opportunities and risks...whilst providing genuine local leadership of place."

1. The quality of councillor development is improved

“The quality of our training needed to be addressed. It was not good enough. Charter has helped us take real and effective control of understanding and meeting our development needs. It’s given us a clear focus and much better structure.”

Councillor Malcolm Maddocks



Councillor Lesley Wagland
Deputy Cabinet Member for Infrastructure
Essex County Council

“My experience here has changed how I look at training. We believe in the value of learning and development because we’re experiencing the benefits. Member development has evolved from something abstract and ambiguous into something tangible and admirable. Charter has helped to bring it to life in a way I’ve not seen anywhere else.”

2. New councillors are better prepared for their roles and responsibilities

“You can feel disoriented as a newly-elected councillor, regardless of your background. You need a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding and you need it quickly. The induction here is intellectually rigorous and a great way of getting to grips with complex topics. We all found it invaluable.”

Councillor Lesley Wagland



Councillor Sandra Kabir
Majority Group Chief Whip
The London Borough of Brent

“It can be daunting. If you don’t have knowledge and confidence, you’ll find it extremely difficult to contribute. Our new councillors have a great advantage over their predecessors in the structured development programme at their disposal. Everything is available, everything is accessible [and] everyone is supported.”



Councillor Promise Knight
The London Borough of Brent

“[Our induction training] provided a strong understanding of our role, helped us navigate all the systems and processes, and enabled us to hit the ground running. I don’t see how new councillors could function without it.”



Councillor Ingrid Thomas
East Hampshire District Council

“A strong training programme for councillors is essential. You need a comprehensive foundation of knowledge about a great many things you won’t have encountered previously. It takes a lot of training to become truly knowledgeable. And then there’s the constant change. It would be impossible to keep up without training.”

3. Councillor development needs are better understood and supported

“Our new approach is far more in tune with our Members and far more sympathetic to their needs.”

Councillor Malcolm Maddocks

“We are treated with kindness and empathy, which is far more conducive to learning and development. This is what effective training looks like; this is how we want to be taught. Fair, respectful and supportive challenge.”

Councillor Lesley Wagland

“It has all felt very supportive and welcoming – focused on our needs, rather than the Council’s.”

Councillor Promise Knight

“We focus on ensuring our councillors are fit for purpose, and they recognise that we’re doing it for them rather than the Council. We are forthright but supportive, because we have a duty of care to protect them.”

Councillor Richard Millard



Councillor Sally Pond
Chairman of the Councillor Development Panel
East Hampshire District Council

“It’s very important that councillors are supported through their own development. The sharing of information is an invitation to get involved and a demonstration that our views and questions are important.”

“Good training...gives us confidence we can transfer to our residents.”

Councillor Sally Pond

5. Councillor diversity is improved and empowered

“Our training helps to create a level playing field for all our Members, regardless of party and background...”

Councillor David Finch

“We represent a tremendous mix of people, as individuals and as a reflection of the communities we serve, with the potential to contribute diverse perspectives and alternative ideas. [Our training gives us] a shared foundation that enables our diversity to flourish. Everyone has value to add [and] knowledge is no longer hoarded but made freely available, which empowers us all.”

Councillor Lesley Wagland

“The strength of our development programme is encouraging richer diversity at every level of our councillor population...from multiple perspectives, including gender, age, ethnicity and economic background.”

Councillor Sandra Kabir

“Nobody’s opinion is worth more than anybody else’s and we all have a right to be there, to contribute and to challenge appropriately. Sharing knowledge is the key. Training makes Council knowledge and dialogue open and accessible to all, giving everyone the tools they need to get involved and make a difference.”

Councillor Sally Pond

6. Councillor progression is better enabled

“For an individual wanting to promote their political career, our development offer is invaluable.”

Councillor Sandra Kabir

“We invest time and effort identifying members’ needs and listening to what they want and where they want to go. They set the targets and we take them to the level they want to achieve.”

Councillor Richard Millard

4. Relationships with residents are strengthened



Councillor David Finch
Leader of the Council
Essex County Council

“It undoubtedly facilitates better interaction with the public. The Council receives feedback from Members about how their ability to manage a situation has improved and helped them achieve better outcomes.”

“You cannot overestimate how important it is to be able to respond effectively to questions from the public. It’s creating better dialogue between the council and residents. It’s changing the relationship. Some of our residents are making a point of attending Member’s surgeries just so they can say ‘thank you’.”

Councillor Malcolm Maddocks

“Our audience is far more wary than ever before. Being able to share our learning with residents, and tell them we have had this training, is helping us to create a bedrock of trust.”

Councillor Lesley Wagland

“The role of the councillor is more challenging today. Residents are more demanding. The questions they ask are more complex...We need to be able to respond with the right information, we need to know our wards inside-out and we need to be more prominent and involved in the community.”

Councillor Sandra Kabir

