

Best practice case study summary

Charter for Elected Member Development

Essex County Council

Introduction

This local government best practice case study is part of a series highlighting the value of Member development where enabled by the Charter for Elected Member Development.

We have explored the stories of those organisations leading the way. We aim to raise the profile of Charter-enabled Member development as a highly-effective approach to improvement, drive its consideration as a strategic priority and celebrate the progress that has been made, whilst identifying and sharing best practice for the benefit of current and prospective practitioners.

We have conducted a programme of interviews with key stakeholders from each participating council, seeking real insights and experience. From Essex County Council, we are grateful for the opportunity to speak with:

- Councillor David Finch, Leader of the Council
- Councillor Malcolm Maddocks, Chairman of the Member Development Steering Group
- Councillor Lesley Wagland, Deputy Cabinet Member for Infrastructure
- Joanna Boaler, Head of Democracy and Transparency
- Mark Godson, Head of Communications, Essex Highways

Background

In November 2011, Essex County Council made its first commitment to the Elected Member Development Charter, 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 (as opposed to the standard three-year allowance), 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.

Key drivers for Charter-enabled Member development

1. To demonstrate and enable delivery of a refreshed commitment to the Nolan Principles.
2. To improve the quality and take-up of Member development and drive greater value from it.
3. Recognition of the benefits as demonstrated by other councils.

Specific value of Charter as a framework for implementation and improvement

1. Enables public demonstration of commitment and secures external recognition of achievement.
2. Provides a nationally proven and prestigious path to excellence.
3. The accreditation process is continuously improving.



**Councillor
Malcolm
Maddocks**

“The role and expectations of an elected Member are changing more quickly than ever before. We face difficult challenges ahead and 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.

This requires a proactive Member development plan to enable Members to understand the key issues facing the Council and respond positively to ongoing change.

Members have a vital role to play in the changing landscape of local democracy and delivering value for money services for our residents. It is essential that they all have the knowledge, skills and resources required to undertake a leading role in their communities and play their part in realising the ambitions of the Council as a whole.”



Councillor David Finch

“The value of a national standard is that it helps you avoid localised and introspective solutions.

We benefited from a wealth of specialist knowledge and experience that would not have been available to us.

Members are more capable of fulfilling their responsibilities for Council and community. It facilitates better interaction with the public. It creates a level playing field for all our Members.

The framework develops Members who can better understand and respond more carefully to the issues we face...exactly what we need in our decision makers.

Our training sets a clear, firm standard for how we conduct Council business, what we expect of them and what they can expect from us.

Discipline and engagement around development is far better today than in the past.”



Councillor Malcolm Maddocks

“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.

Our Members can competently handle questions they might never have been able to answer before.

It’s creating better dialogue between the council and residents. It’s changing the relationship.

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

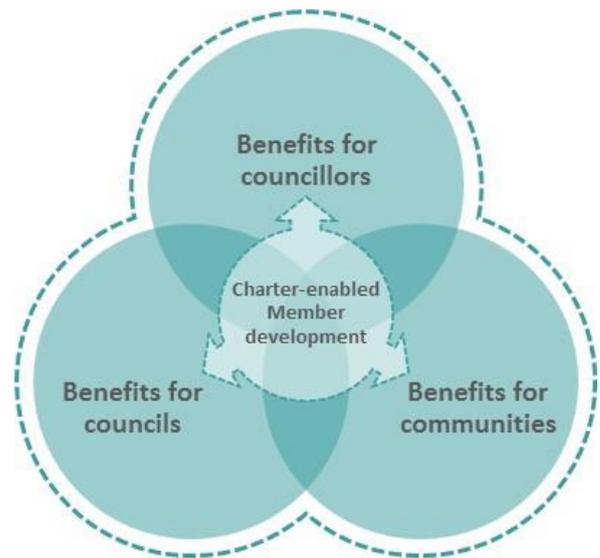
Charter is absolutely enabling our vision to be a learning organisation. It’s stimulating a new culture around learning and helping us to remove barriers to development.

Mature, transparent collaboration between officers, staff and Members...That kind of interaction didn’t happen before.

We’ve become bolder; more willing to innovate and explore...We’re making smarter investments and our education assets are working harder for the Council.

It’s keeping Member development vibrant and dynamic, and enabling the Council to better reflect and keep pace with society.”

Benefits at a glance



Benefits for councillors

- Accelerates councillor integration into the Council and alignment to policy and strategy whilst enabling them to serve communities more effectively and consistently, building trust and better relationships.
- Engages, empowers and enables councillors and councillor diversity by levelling the playing field and democratising knowledge.
- Provides a more consistent and supportive platform for enhancing individual performance, conducive to development that is more appropriate, accessible and beneficial.

Benefits for councils

- Enables councillors to add greater strategic value, shifting their impact away from diversion of resources to improved problem solving and decision making.
- Supports succession planning by helping to prepare councillors for future roles.
- Drives compliance with behavioural standards, mitigating the risk of misconduct.
- Contributes to operational efficiency by improving collaboration and procedural adherence.
- Enables the evolution of the Council into a learning organisation.

Benefits for communities

- Communities and the challenges affecting them are more effectively understood, represented and provided for.
- Feedback and enquiries from residents are addressed and actioned more effectively and efficiently.
- Communities better understand the Council and Council policy, strategy and service delivery.

Member development at Essex County Council today

Member development is owned by all councillors through the Member Development Steering Group. The Group comprises councillors and officers who champion Member development and receives dedicated officer support from the Council's Democratic Services department. The Steering Group is responsible for the Member Development Strategy, which aims to:

- ensure all councillors are enabled to develop the knowledge and skills to support their communities and achieve their potential;
- clearly define councillor and officer responsibilities regarding Member development;
- ensure the Member Development programme is adequately resourced; and
- secure the Council's Charter Plus status.

The core principles of the Member Development Strategy include:

- involving councillors in their own development;
- recognising individual Member development needs whilst valuing existing skills and experience;
- ensuring the objectives of the programme are aligned to the aims of the Council and the roles and functions of councillors; and
- maximising available resources through innovation.

An action plan to deliver the strategy is refreshed biannually by the Steering Group.

The Member Development Programme focuses on:

- Induction training for new councillors
- Frontline Member development (e.g. community engagement and leadership)
- Strategic Member development (e.g. legislation and service development)
- Development for Council roles (e.g. Cabinet Member, Committee Member)
- Practical skills development (e.g. use of information technology)
- Personal development (including provision for future aspirations as well as current positions)



**Councillor
Lesley
Wagland**

"Our Charter status is enormously beneficial and a huge source of pride.

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.

The induction here is intellectually rigorous and a great way of getting to grips with complex topics.

It's enabled me to think about and articulate the high-level concepts far more clearly.

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.

Charter and the Member Development Programme play an important role in uniting us all in common purpose.

In the programme we have a shared foundation that enables our diversity to flourish.

Knowledge is no longer hoarded but made freely available, which empowers us all.

This is what effective training looks like; this is how we want to be taught.

A tailored range of optional and mandatory elements helps to keep it meaningful and manageable whilst enabling better teaching, better pace and a better learning atmosphere.

Without appropriate induction training... misconception and misalignment creep in and create behavioural and procedural challenges.

We've transformed perceptions of training from 'necessary evil' to 'mission critical'."



**Mark
Godson**

"It's helping Members to understand particularly painful issues and relay that understanding to residents.

We need Members to be well educated about everything they influence... Education enables focused debate and valuable discussion... We can then identify the real issues and prioritise effectively.

This is a far more effective and efficient route to meaningful service improvement. Without that capability, valuable resources can be unnecessarily diverted.

The Member Development Programme is a critical engagement channel, helping to build better relationships between Members, officers and partners.

Members are realising they don't need to resort to the tactics of the past in order to stay on top of a situation.

Teaching them the 'why' as well as the 'what' is helping us to overcome these kinds of challenges."

The Council has adopted a blended approach to learning and development, utilising a range of channels and formats, including:

- In-house briefings, workshops and seminars run by senior managers and specialist officers
- Skills training
- External conferences and seminars
- Peer coaching and mentoring
- Engagement with other authorities
- E-learning
- Books, workbooks and information guides
- Training with partner organisations and agencies
- Personal development planning



Joanna Boaler

“The framework helped us to identify a lot of gaps we wanted to fill.

Achieving so much in such a short space of time was only possible because of our leadership commitment and the support of our Members.

Better training is a critical success factor in genuinely and visibly strengthening ethical governance.

It enabled us to make a public statement of commitment to improvement...helping us win support and drive a powerful sense of accountability within the Council.

Charter pays careful attention to enabling its signatories...it now feels much smarter and sensitive to our limited time and resources.

Our induction programme helps Members to become ready more quickly.

We trust our Members to manage those situations and relationships well and professionally because we know they can.

It helps to ensure the community understands the Council better as well.

We can engage our Members in a positive and constructive way...We've earned their trust and that puts us in the best position to understand and support them.

Everything we can do to develop capability in advance is a great advantage to everyone involved.

It enables us to provide better succession intelligence.

We're able to provide Members with an immersive understanding of our communities, their issues and their circumstances.

Communities and the challenges affecting them are more effectively represented and provided for.”