



East Hampshire District Council

# councillor competency framework

**East  
Hampshire**  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

*Improving  
People's Lives*

# Introduction

Councillors by their very nature have strong leadership instincts and we must continuously develop those skills to ensure that we are able to meet the challenges, opportunities and risks that come with the Localism agenda.

The landscape is far more complex than it was a decade ago and local government has a democratic right to provide leadership across a geographic area, not confined to local government services, but a right to influence every aspect of services provided locally.

Developing new leadership skills to meet this challenge is vital and it is through shared learning that Councillors can and will maximise the opportunity to provide genuine local leadership of place.

At East Hampshire District Council our vision is to be financially independent of all government funding. This will be achieved through revolutionary change to deliver new services in proactive and radically different ways that add value to our customers' lives.

To achieve this we need highly skilled Councillors who can embrace change, show strong leadership and lobby for support.

Councillors play a key leadership role in making this vision a reality. At the heart of this is ensuring Councillors have the right knowledge and skills to achieve this.

## What is the Councillor Competency Framework?

To be effective in any job you need to know what is required of you and have the knowledge and skills to achieve it. Teachers, doctors, plumbers and chief executives are not born with the knowledge and skills they need

for their jobs – these are learned, practised and improved over time.

This framework is based on the LGA Political Skills Framework which was originally drafted in 2004 and revised again in 2007 in recognition of the substantial culture change in attitudes towards political roles and how they should be carried out. This included the growing recognition of the need for training and development amongst councillors themselves.

The Councillor Competency framework sets out the key knowledge and skills needed to support new and experienced councillors in their efforts to develop the knowledge and skills to be effective in their role.

The framework reflects the fact that whilst councillors' responsibilities may remain largely unaltered, they have evolved over time and the political and social environment in which they carry out these responsibilities has changed fundamentally. New council structures, vastly increased use of new technology and social media, public sector spending cuts, and rising public expectations (to name but a few) are all having a profound effect on how councillors undertake their role.

## Six core skills for councillors

There are six core skill areas for all councillors which are detailed in this framework. These are:

### Local leadership

This refers to the need for councillors to engage with members of their community in order to learn about issues of local concern and help to facilitate a vision for the locality. It involves encouraging trust and respect between individuals and groups by mediating fairly and constructively between different organisations and sections of the community.

### **Partnership working**

This aspect of the councillor role focuses on the need to build good relationships with others (i.e. colleagues, officers, community groups and other organisations) by identifying and working collaboratively to achieve shared goals. It recognises the need for councillors to recognise and value different contributions, delegate or provide support as required, and to take a long-term view in developing partnerships.

### **Communication skills**

This skill area recognises the need for councillors to demonstrate excellent communication skills across many different settings, including the ability to listen sensitively and use appropriate language with different groups. Councillors must also communicate regularly and effectively with all parts of their community using different forms of media.

### **Political understanding**

This skill set recognises the need for councillors to develop a range of political skills in order to communicate their values, promote a political vision, and encourage democratic processes and public engagement. It recognises that councillors need to work across group boundaries at times, yet still be able to maintain their own political integrity.

### **Policy Development/assurance**

Policy development/assurance is an important day-to-day aspect of the councillor role. Councillors need to act as a critical friend by identifying opportunities for constructive challenge inside and outside the organisation and provide feedback to others. To be effective in this role, councillors need to analyse information quickly and present arguments that are concise, meaningful and easily understood.

### **Regulating and monitoring**

This skill set relates to the more judicial aspects of the role that require councillors to understand their legal responsibilities and follow protocol when evaluating arguments and making decisions. Not only do councillors need to balance public needs and local policy, they

must also monitor progress and seek feedback on their own learning needs.

## **Positive and negative indicators**

Each of the skill set definitions describe what is expected of councillors if they are to be effective and influential in their role.

It is recognised that there is no 'one best way' to be a councillor. Each member will approach their role as a community leader in a very different way from their colleagues, but by discussion with over 350 members and officers the indicators contained within the Political Skills Framework and incorporated into the Councillor Competency Framework reflect commonly held views about what might be considered excellent and poor councillor behaviour.

Positive (desirable) behaviours and negative (undesirable) behaviours are included for each of the skill sets. No councillor could be expected to demonstrate excellent levels of positive behaviour all of the time, and never demonstrate any negative behaviour, but excellent councillors generally demonstrate far more positive than negative characteristics.

These behaviours are described as positive and negative indicators because they provide an indication of the types of behaviour that councillors associate with excellent and poor performance. They are not meant to be prescriptive – but rather to help councillors and those who work with them reflect on how they perform their role and how what they do fits with each of the skill areas. They also provide a way to foster a shared understanding of what constitutes excellent councillor performance among the wider community.

## Local leadership

This refers to the need for councillors to engage with members of their community in order to learn about issues of local concern and help to facilitate a vision for the locality. It involves encouraging trust and respect between individuals and groups by mediating fairly and constructively between different organisations and sections of the community.

## Positive

- ✓ Engages with their community, canvasses opinion and looks for new ways of representing people
- ✓ Keeps up-to-date with local concerns by drawing information from diverse sources, including hard to reach groups
- ✓ Encourages trust and respect by being approachable, empathising and finding new ways to engage with others
- ✓ Creates partnerships with different sections and groups in the community and ensures their involvement in decision-making
- ✓ Mediates fairly and constructively between people and groups with conflicting needs
- ✓ Works with others to develop and champion a shared local vision

## Negative

- ✗ Doesn't engage with their community, waits to be approached and is difficult to contact
- ✗ Maintains a low public profile, not easily recognised in their community
- ✗ Treats groups or people unequally, fails to build integration or cohesion
- ✗ Has a poor understanding of local concerns and how these might be addressed
- ✗ Concentrates on council processes rather than people
- ✗ Is unrealistic about what they can achieve and fails to deliver on promises

## Self reflective learning

### How do I see myself as a ward member?

What do you think are your particular strengths? (e.g., what do you bring to the role of councillor that you think is particularly good?)

#### Prompts...

How is my role changing and what is driving that change

What sections of my community have I engaged with and canvassed opinion?

How have I looked for new ways of representing people?

How up-to-date am I on local concerns?

Would others see me as approachable?

Who have I built partnerships with?

When did I last act as a mediator?

How do I champion others' needs?

Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done well over the past year?

In which of these areas would you like to improve and how?

## Partnership Working

This aspect of the councillor role focuses on the need to build good relationships with others (i.e. colleagues, officers, community groups and other organisations) by identifying and working collaboratively to achieve shared goals. It recognises the need for councillors to recognise and value different contributions, delegate or provide support as required, and to take a long-term view in developing partnerships.

### Positive

- ✓ Works proactively to build good relationships with colleagues, officers, community groups and other organisations
- ✓ Emphasis on achieving shared goals by maintaining focus and mobilising others
- ✓ Knows when to delegate, provide support or empower others to take responsibility
- ✓ Makes people from all backgrounds feel valued, trusted and included (e.g., says 'thank you')
- ✓ Understands and acts on their role in building and shaping key partnerships at local, regional and national levels
- ✓ Understands how and when to assert authority to resolve conflict or deadlock effectively

### Negative

- ✗ Prefers to exert control and impose solutions by using status rather than through persuasion and involving others
- ✗ Fails to recognise or make use of others' skills and ideas
- ✗ Typically avoids working with people with different views or political values
- ✗ Prefers to act alone and fails to engage or network with others
- ✗ Often uses divisive tactics to upset relationships within their group, or council policies and decisions
- ✗ Defensive when criticised, blames others and doesn't admit to being wrong

## Self reflective learning

How am I working in partnership?	
<p>What do you think are your particular strengths? (e.g., what do you bring to the role of councillor that you think is particularly good?)</p>	<p><b>Prompts...</b></p> <p>Do I have good relationships with colleagues and officers?</p> <p>How do I help others build partnerships?</p> <p>How do I support and empower others?</p> <p>Do I value and include people from different backgrounds?</p> <p>What networks and partnerships have I developed?</p> <p>Do I stay calm and focused under pressure?</p> <p>Am I engaging with all relevant groups within my ward?</p>
<p>Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done well over the past year?</p>	
<p>In which of these areas would you like to improve and how?</p>	

## Communication skills

This skill area recognises the need for councillors need to demonstrate excellent communication skills across many different settings, including the ability to listen sensitively and use appropriate language with different groups. Councillors must also communicate regularly and effectively with all parts of their community using different forms of media.

### Positive

- ✓ Provides regular feedback to people, making sure they are kept informed and manages expectations
- ✓ Regularly informs and communicates with their community using all available media (e.g., internet newsletters and email)
- ✓ Listens to others, checks for understanding and adapts their own communication style as required
- ✓ Creates opportunities to communicate with different sectors, including vulnerable and hard to reach groups
- ✓ Speaks confidently in public settings (e.g., in council and community meetings, and the media)
- ✓ Communicates clearly in spoken and written forms (e.g., uses appropriate language and avoids jargon or 'council speak')

### Negative

- ✗ Slow to respond to others; tends to communicate only when necessary
- ✗ Doesn't listen when people are speaking and uses inappropriate or insensitive language
- ✗ Communicates in a dogmatic and inflexible way
- ✗ Unwilling to deliver unpopular messages, uses information dishonestly to discredit others
- ✗ Tends not to participate in meetings and lacks confidence when speaking in public
- ✗ Presents confused arguments using poor language and style



## Self reflective learning

### How am I communicating with others?

What do you think are your particular strengths? (e.g., what do you bring to the role of councillor that you think is particularly good?)

#### Prompts...

How regularly do I communicate with different sections of the community?

What different methods do I use to communicate?

How well do I listen and adapt to others?

Do I feel comfortable using technology to communicate with people?

Am I confident when speaking in public?

Do I feedback regularly to others to keep them informed?

Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done well over the past year?

In which of these areas would you like to improve and how?

## Political understanding

This skill set recognises the need for councillors to develop a range of political skills in order to communicate their values, promote a political vision, and encourage democratic processes and public engagement. It recognises that councillors need to work across group boundaries at times, yet still be able to maintain their own political integrity.

### Positive

- ✓ Demonstrates a consistency in views and values through their decisions and actions
- ✓ Helps to develop cohesion within and between different groups and also between different groups and the council
- ✓ Clearly communicates political values through canvassing and campaigning
- ✓ Actively develops their own political intelligence (e.g., understanding local and national political landscapes)
- ✓ Looks for ways to promote democracy and increase public engagement
- ✓ Is able to put party politics aside and work across political boundaries when required, without compromising political values

### Negative

- ✗ Lacks integrity, has inconsistent political values and tends to say what others want to hear
- ✗ Puts personal motives first or changes beliefs to match those in power
- ✗ Has poor knowledge of group manifesto, values and objectives
- ✗ Fails to support political colleagues in public
- ✗ Doesn't translate group values into ways of helping the community
- ✗ Lacks a clear political vision of what they would like to achieve

## Self reflective learning

### How am I at political understanding?

What do you think are your particular strengths?  
(e.g., what do you bring to the role of councillor  
that you think is particularly good?)

#### Prompts ...

How have I promoted democracy and  
increased public engagement?

Are my values clear and reflected in what I  
do?

How do I build cohesion between members  
of my own group?

Can I work effectively in other political  
environments (e.g., outside council)?

How have I developed my political  
intelligence?

How well do I work with people with different  
views and values?

Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done  
well over the past year?

In which of these areas would you like to improve and how?

## Policy Development and Assurance

Policy development and assurance are important day-to-day aspects of the councillor role. Councillors need to act as a critical friend by identifying opportunities for constructive challenge inside and outside the organisation and provide feedback to others. To be effective in this role, councillors need to analyse information quickly and present arguments that are concise, meaningful and easily understood.

### Positive

- ✓ Identifies areas suitable for development and challenge ensuring that citizens and communities are involved in the process
- ✓ Quickly understands and analyses complex information
- ✓ Presents concise arguments that are meaningful and easily understood
- ✓ Understands the policy development and assurance processes, asks for explanations and checks that recommendations have been implemented
- ✓ Objective and rigorous when challenging process, decisions and people
- ✓ Asks challenging but constructive questions

### Negative

- ✗ Doesn't prepare well or check facts and draws biased conclusions
- ✗ Too reliant on officers, tends to back down when challenged
- ✗ Fails to see this aspect as part of their role
- ✗ Too focused on detail, doesn't distinguish between good, poor and irrelevant information
- ✗ Uses resources inappropriately (e.g. on issues over which they have no influence)
- ✗ Overly aggressive: prefers political 'blood sports' to collaboration and uses challenge for political gain

## Self reflective learning

### How am I at political development/assurance?

What do you think are your particular strengths? (e.g., what do you bring to the role of councillor that you think is particularly good?)

#### Prompts ...

What new areas have I identified for development?

How do I deal with new information?

Are my arguments always concise, meaningful and easily understood?

Am I constructive in my criticism?

Am I fair, objective and rigorous when challenging processes or people?

Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done well over the past year?

In which of these areas would you like to improve and how?

## Regulating and monitoring

This skill set relates to the more judicial aspects of the role that require councillors to understand their legal responsibilities and follow protocol when evaluating arguments and making decisions. Not only do councillors need to balance public needs and local policy, they must also monitor progress and seek feedback on their own learning needs.

### Positive

- ✓ Understands and acts on their judicial role in meeting legal responsibilities (e.g., duty of care, corporate parenting)
- ✓ Uses evidence to evaluate arguments and make independent, impartial judgements
- ✓ Chairs meetings effectively, follows protocol to make sure all views are explored and keeps process on track
- ✓ Follows legal process, balances public needs and local policy
- ✓ Monitors others' performance and intervenes when necessary to ensure progress
- ✓ Is committed to self-development, seeks feedback and looks for opportunities to learn
- ✓ Understands and abides by the councillor's code of conduct

### Negative

- ✗ Doesn't declare personal interests, makes decisions for personal gain
- ✗ Fails to check facts or consider all sides and makes subjective or uninformed judgements
- ✗ Leaves monitoring and checks on progress to others
- ✗ Makes decisions without taking advice, considering regulations or taking account of wider issues
- ✗ Misses deadlines, leaves business unfinished and lacks balance between council and other commitments

## Self Reflective Learning

How am I at regulating and monitoring?	
What do you think are your particular strengths? (e.g., what do you bring to the role of councillor that you think is particularly good?)	<b>Prompts ...</b>  How well do I understand and act on my judicial role? (e.g., corporate parenting)  How effectively do I chair meetings?  Do I know enough about legal process?  Are my judgements based on evidence?  Do I monitor others to ensure progress?  When have I sought feedback or looked for opportunities to learn?
Can you illustrate these strengths by writing down examples of things you think you have done well over the past year?	
In which of these areas would you like to improve and how?	

## Some questions and answers

### **All these behaviours look very daunting, aren't they a little unrealistic?**

There are many different ways in which local councillors can perform their roles well, and no two councillors are likely to perform their roles in exactly the same way. Every member has their unique areas of strength as well as areas they would like to improve.

The framework provides a starting point for individual councillors to reflect on their own skill profile, before deciding what they want to develop and how. Some councillors might decide that they want to be excellent in all areas, whereas others might prefer to focus on one or two key areas.

### **Why is political understanding included?**

Most councillors are affiliated to a political party. Even if standing as an Independent, values form an important guide for the electorate in deciding how to vote. Political systems are at the heart of local government and to be successful, councillors must be able to understand the processes by which decisions are taken and how influence is exerted.

However, there is also an ongoing need for political skill with a small 'p'. Political skill means being able to influence and persuade others, and the ability to mobilise support to achieve objectives. Members must be able to work in political environments inside and outside the council.

### **What learning resources are available to me?**

There is a growing array of learning resources available to councillors. However, learning and development should be based on a needs analysis and the learning objectives clearly described. The framework provides a basis for conducting individual and organisational learning needs analyses. Once the needs have been identified the types of development



opportunities available might include:

- member handbooks
- new councillor handbook
- induction training
- officer briefings
- guidance notes
- e-learning resource packs
- workshops/seminars
- external training and know-how
- work shadowing
- visits to other councils
- mentoring and coaching
- training
- learning needs analysis
- 360-degree review.

Please speak to Democratic Services in the first instance for development support.