



London Charter Plus for Elected Member Development

Brent Council

Assessment Date: 10 September 2015



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Recommendation of the Assessment Team

Brent Council has achieved the Charter Plus standard of the London Charter for Elected Member Development and is the first authority in London to do so. The council has been awarded Charter Plus status for three years from 10 September 2015. The council has also committed to a process of continuous improvement over the next three years.

The council will be required to present evidence of continuing progress as part of the direction of travel in eighteen months' time and will be re-assessed in full against the Charter Plus standard in three years.

Assessment team

- Councillor Darren Rodwell, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham
- Mark Palmer, Development Director, SEE (Lead Assessor)
- Ann Moore, Head of Democratic & Registration Services, Bracknell Forest Council

Charter standards

- Commitment to councillor development
- Strategic approach to councillor development
- Learning and development is effective in building capacity
- Supporting councillors in their role as leaders of their local communities

Assessment

The assessment against the Charter Plus standard took place on 10 September 2015. The purpose of the assessment visit was to determine whether or not the authority met the Charter Plus standard.

The assessment was based on an analysis of a portfolio of evidence submitted in advance by the council, plus a number of interviews with key councillors, officers and partner organisations. The evidence presented in the portfolio was drawn from a wide range of sources and gave a good overview of the council's member development activities. The self-assessment was linked to the four Charter standards, with each section having some introductory text to set the context, before highlighting specific examples of where different elements of the Charter Plus standard were met.

The assessment team was satisfied that the portfolio met the Charter Plus criteria and sought examples of how the information provided could be validated and brought to life through a number of interviews.

During the assessment visit, interviews were held with the following:

- ◆ Councillors
 - Councillor Amer Agha, PDP Pilot Group
 - Councillor Muhammed Butt, Leader of the Council & Member Development Steering Group Chair
 - Councillor Reg Colwill, Conservative Group Deputy Leader (telephone interview)
 - Councillor Liz Dixon, PDP Pilot Group
 - Councillor Patricia Harrison, PDP Pilot Group
 - Councillor Sandra Kabir, Member Development Steering Group and Chief Whip
 - Councillor Arshad Mahmood, PDP Pilot Group
 - Councillor Michael Pavey, PDP Pilot Group

- ◆ Officers
 - Tom Cattermole, Head of Executive & Member Services
 - Peter Goss, Democratic Services Manager
 - Rhiannon Leary, Mayor's Office & Member Development Manager
 - Christine Gilbert, Chief Executive

- ◆ Partner Organisations
 - Tessa Awe, Council for Voluntary Service Brent (CVS Brent)
 - Peta Caine, Brent Housing Partnership
 - Dr Melanie Smith, Director of Public Health

Rhiannon Leary, Mayor's Office & Member Development Manager, managed the Charter Plus project in addition to supporting the Member Development Steering

Group. Arrangements for the assessment day were good and the assessment visit was well structured, enabling the assessment team to acquire the information needed for the assessment to be thorough and representative. Everyone interviewed demonstrated a clear commitment to elected member development and were open in the sharing of information. All councillors interviewed as part of the assessment process spoke of how much they recognised and valued the officer support available to them.

Background

Brent Council originally achieved Charter recognition in October 2010. The council was re-accredited on 8 January 2014 and committed to a process of continuous improvement over the next three years. Subsequent to achieving Charter standard re-accreditation, the council undertook to apply for Charter Plus status.

The report from the assessment team in 2014 contained a preliminary indication of additional evidence that the council needed to put in place in order to achieve Charter Plus status. These are set out below.

Commitment to councillor development:

- Examples can be provided of how learning is shared with other authorities across the tiers of local government.
- Member development / support staff have access to their own ongoing professional development.
- Member development and support staff are involved in regional and national learning networks.

Strategic approach to councillor development:

- Robust evaluation process is in place and can be evidenced.
- Evidence that evaluation feedback contributes to review and further development of strategy.
- Evidence that a review and discussion takes place with Executive and CMT at least once per year (to ensure ongoing linkage to corporate plan).
- Member role descriptions exist and are maintained for all key roles including ward councillor, and those role descriptions are used to help identify development needs.
- Evidence that members are clear about the role of partner bodies (e.g. LSPs), other stakeholder bodies (e.g. Primary Care Trust), their own role on partner bodies and their own role in relation to other stakeholder bodies.
- Council has successfully piloted a 360° diagnostic and 60% of Member's have a Personal Development Plan in place that is regularly reviewed.
- Evidence that briefing sessions and materials are provided and publicised on emerging issues (e.g. legislative changes, government white papers).
- At least 90% of all councillors feel they have adequate access to development opportunities.
- External partners are involved in relevant development sessions.
- Evidence of a programme to develop the next generation of leaders and to support succession planning.
- Some form of impact assessment at the community level exists and is used (e.g. by asking for feedback from partners).

Learning and development is effective in building capacity:

- Clear process showing how end of event evaluation feeds into impact evaluation and to review development of the training programme.
- Evidence of post event follow-up evaluation to assess performance change (e.g. through PDP process).
- Members report back to group on conferences and external development opportunities.

Supporting Councillors:

- Evidence that council reviews its arrangements and timings of meetings and the way it conducts its business to take account of cultural, faith, travel needs and family commitments of Councillors and open up the role to as many people as possible including those in employment.
- Council is building links with local businesses and employers to promote the role of councillor.
- Council is building links with young people's groups to promote the role of Councillor.
- Councillors are a source of knowledge, both internally and externally, and share their perspectives on new initiatives and Government policies to update others.

The portfolio of evidence supported the council's self-assessment, documenting the work that had been undertaken in response to the previous assessment, and demonstrated that the principles of the Charter Plus standard had been met.

Evidence presented and demonstrated to support the application

▪ **Commitment to councillor development**

The assessment team was pleased to see that there continued to be strong political and organisational support for member development.

At the elections in May 2014, 50% of the council were newly elected and it was recognised that learning and development needed to be effectively prioritised. A comprehensive induction programme was put in place, supported by the corporate management team. A key strength of the programme was the establishment of a panel of experienced cross party councillors who provided practical advice and guidance to new members. The Chief Executive set the tone for the importance placed on member support by writing to all elected councillors immediately after the election to invite them to early induction sessions.

Comments that we heard:

“We have redesigned how we work with councillors and have a high commitment to member development since 2010.”

“**Now we must work to keep the momentum going until 2018.**”

“The budget for member development is not huge but it is used well.”

▪ **Strategic approach to councillor development**

A more strategic approach was used to develop the induction programme for new councillors, which sought input from more stakeholders and took account of the changing council environment to provide a programme that would equip members with the knowledge and skills for the 2014-18 council term. The induction programme was supported by Corporate Management Team, and the Member Development Steering Group shaped and agreed both the induction and wider member development programmes.

Since the previous assessment visit, work has been undertaken to raise the profile of the Steering Group and member development in general. However the council is not complacent and realises that there are still a number of councillors who do not engage. The Labour Group Chief Whip actively works to address this issue and to embed a culture of development and continuous improvement within the Labour Group. However there is a challenge in channelling group activity into a more corporate approach.

Members clearly valued the induction programme highly and felt well equipped to hit the ground running in their new roles. They were particularly pleased to

receive appropriate ICT access to the council's network immediately after the election in the form of iPads and iPhones.

The council has maintained its approach to identifying councillors' learning needs through a voluntary individual Personal Development Planning process. The Charter assessment team felt that a 70% completion rate would be a realistic target following the May 2014 elections. Whilst evidence was not produced to demonstrate that this target had been achieved, there had been significant take-up, particularly within the Labour Group. This was driven by the Leader and Chief Whip.

Members have a strong understanding of their roles and articulated the value of collecting information from their casework, and work within their community, to inform the council's policies and priorities. There is an expectation that the introduction of Community Action Groups will provide a vehicle to achieve this.

The council previously recognised that members needed to be more outward looking and to take networking opportunities when they arose. The Leader of the Council actively supports this approach and encourages members to engage with colleagues in other authorities. The council is also part of the pan London member development network.

Comments that we heard:

"The PDP process was fantastic and supported me as a new member."

"The elections were a catalyst for change as we had so many new members."

"The Member Development Steering Group has a high profile, including group leaders, the Chief Executive and Labour Chief Whip."

▪ **Learning and development is effective in building capacity**

The demands placed on councillors continue to increase and the need for robust support for member development is vital. The council's officers and members are clear that member development has improved the performance of individual members and functions.

The representatives from partner organisations told the assessment team that they had seen an improvement in the skills and knowledge of Brent councillors and could link this clearly to the development programme. They felt that the programme was effectively tailored and targeted to the community's needs and were pleased to report that the council was receptive to their input and ideas.

The council had refocused their evaluation of development activities. The opinions of attendees are sought on the sessions they attend and an effective response is provided. This was evidenced by moving the emphasis away from a PowerPoint slide delivery model to a more interactive approach.

Comments that we heard:

“I can see the level of improved member understanding from the questions they ask me.”

“We seek feedback from sessions and feed this into the Member Development Steering Group.”

“We are evaluating and adapting all the time.”

“We encourage attendance at external seminars to better understand the national picture and maximise opportunities to engage with councillors from other authorities.”

“We identify and use the skills that members already have.”

“All members should understand legislative changes that impact the council’s work.”

▪ **Supporting councillors in their role as leaders of their local communities**

The council recognises the importance of supporting councillors in their role as community leaders. The council’s approach ensures that there is effective support to the members responsible for promoting and leading improvement in member development.

Comments that we heard:

“The focus is on community leadership.”

“We support a systematic approach to casework.”

“The Area Forums had become stale so we are introducing Community Action Groups.”

“We must ensure that councillors are empowered to deliver key messages and that they have the tools to engage with their communities to take things forward.”

“We must have the information we need to do our job – forewarned is forearmed.”

“Members need to understand how to engage more effectively with residents and how to help residents to become more engaged themselves.”

Continuous improvement and direction of travel

Brent Council has been successful in achieving the Charter Plus standard and is well placed to demonstrate continuous improvement over the next three years.

Strengths identified by the assessors

The following areas were felt by the assessors to be particular strengths:

- There is top political and management commitment to member development. The Leader clearly demonstrated an enthusiasm for and commitment to member development, which was echoed by all the members we met. The Member Development Steering Group continues to show the strength of its commitment to and enthusiasm for member development, and to enjoy a high level of influence as a result.
- The comments from partner organisations that they see a positive difference in partnership working were particularly impressive.
- There was a high quality, comprehensive and structured induction programme developed for new Councillors following the May 2014 elections.
- There is a Personal Development Plan (PDP) process in place which helps to identify and prioritise member development needs. This is supported by a comprehensive member development programme which responds to individual needs and demonstrates clear links to strategic priorities.
- Focus on community leadership has increased, evidenced by the development of Community Action Groups.
- The council has a group mentoring programme in place.

Assessors' suggested improvement areas

The following were identified by the assessors as areas that the council should work on over the next three years. They will act as a focus for the direction of travel to take forward member development.

- The council should have a process in place to review PDPs mid-term and to set new individual development priorities for councillors. The council should continue to work towards a target of 70% participation in the PDP process.

- The development of Community Action Groups will be key to delivering some areas of improvement that were raised during the assessment. The Council should ensure that councillors are provided with the support and development to realise the potential of the Community Action Groups
- The council should ensure that it continues to support and build on, leadership development both for Cabinet members and for all councillors as community leaders, so that they can enhance engagement with their communities.
- The Council should continue to seek opportunities to learn from good practice from other authorities and external organisations. This could include encouraging members to take on some peer to peer mentoring or assessor roles.
- The Member Development Steering Group is encouraged to draw together examples of best practice and provide a vehicle to share this learning with all councillors.

The council may identify further key areas for improvement as a consequence of this assessment or any ongoing review of the development programme as a whole.

South East Employers would like to meet with the council in eighteen months to evaluate the programme of continuous improvement and direction of travel; and in three years for a reassessment.

The assessment process may be subject to a quality assurance review by the Local Government Association.

We look forward to the council supporting South East Employers in promoting the benefits of Charter Plus to councils across the London region.

The Council may now use the national elected member development Charter Plus logo.

Congratulations in achieving the London Charter Plus standard!

**Mark Palmer
Development Director
South East Employers for and on behalf of the Assessment Team**

30th September 2015