

## Appendix C

### Role of councillors in reinvigorating democracy in Brent

**What are the main issues?** *What is the policy background, how does it link to the council's corporate priorities?*

Politicians from all parties are concerned about the high level of disengagement among the public towards mainstream politics in the UK. Research has highlighted that almost three quarters of the population have little or no trust in politicians. Furthermore there is a great schism between citizens and the state with many people feeling that they have limited or no influence in political decisions.

In 2007, the government set up the Councillors Commission, an independent review, to look at the role of councillors and consider the incentives or barriers that encourage or deter people from standing for election.

Research by the commission highlights that many people do not understand the role of local councillors or local government, which makes them less likely to get involved. Furthermore, while individual engagement with councillors was found to be positive, there are high levels of scepticism about party politics. Similarly there are low levels of approval for councils but satisfaction with the services that local government provide is increasing.

The report reaffirms that elected representatives are the indispensable link between the local community and the formal decision making process of the council. Councillors often have in-depth knowledge of the local communities that they serve and are best placed to ensure that the concerns of local people are translated into council priorities.

The commission's report calls for local councils to play a greater role in supporting local democracy by assisting councillors to be more visible and accessible to the community.

It also argues that councils need to improve the way they communicate their role and remit to local people. People are unlikely to feel a sense of engagement with something they do not understand and councils need to be experts at explaining; what they do, which services are the responsibilities of other agencies and how do they relate to each other, where accountabilities lie and how people can have influence and get involved.

Looking at new ways to engage citizens in mainstream politics has become a central government focus. Most recently the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act sets out a 'duty to inform, consult and Involve' which places a legal obligation on councils to involve citizens in the design and delivery of services and not just consult them.

Brent council is already addressing this through its flagship neighbourhood working initiative. This was introduced in 2007 and sees every ward in Brent given an annual budget of £20,000 to spend on local issues. Projects are prioritised by ward councillors to tackle issues raised by local residents. A key element of the initiative is supporting councillors to engage with residents in their wards to hear directly what their concerns are and what changes they

would like to see in their local area.

Also, the Brent Youth Parliament was established in 2007. It is comprised of 63 members who are elected from local schools including special schools and youth groups. The parliament is an important forum for young people across the borough to identify their own priorities and influence the work of the council.

**Why are we looking at this area?** Have there been recent legislation/policy changes? Are there any performance or budgetary issues?

Under the Comprehensive Area Assessment, which is the new assessment framework for councils, we will need to demonstrate how we are carrying out the duty to inform, consult and involve and empowering our residents. This review can usefully look at the role of local councillors in helping to meet this requirement.

Outcomes from this review can also feed into the member development strategy.

**What should the review cover?** Give brief outline of what members could focus on, which partners to engage with, how residents/public can be involved.

The review could cover two main areas:

- How to raise and enhance the profile of councillors in Brent
- How to improve understanding of the role and remit of the council among residents

A task group could look at the following areas:

- How the council can further support councillors in their engagement with local residents
- How to make councillors more accessible through digital and social networking technologies
- What more the council should be doing to communicate its role and responsibilities to local people
- Ask residents what stops them engaging with local democracy in Brent
- Look at good practice from other authorities

**What could the review achieve?** influence policy change?, improvement to service delivery?, budget savings?, develop partnerships?.

- Improve the understanding and reputation of the council
- Improve the profile of local councillors in Brent
- Engage more local residents in influencing the work of the council