



ELECTED MEMBER INDUCTION NOTEBOOK 1

# Getting Started with your Roles and Responsibilities

# About this notebook

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This is the first in a series of five elected member induction notebooks, developed by the Improvement Service (IS) and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) in consultation with councils, to provide you with information, support and guidance to help you effectively fulfil your role as an elected member.

1. **Getting Started with your Roles and Responsibilities** (20 minute read)
2. **Being a Community Leader** (23 minute read)
3. **Governing Effectively: Keeping your Eye on the Big Picture** (17 minute read)
4. **Developing your Working Relationships with Officers** (18 minute read)
5. **Developing your Working Relationships with Other Elected Members** (18 minute read)

You should have received copies of these notebooks or electronic access to them from your council as part of your council's induction programme.

These national induction resources are designed to complement your council's local induction programme, which you should attend. If you are unsure of anything, ask for clarification from your council officers.

As well as the core induction notebooks, other [induction resources](#) are available on the Improvement Service website which you can access freely.

## ABOUT THE IMPROVEMENT SERVICE AND COSLA

The [Improvement Service](#) (IS) is the improvement organisation for Local Government in Scotland, and has an impartial role to support the development of elected members with a range of [products and services](#).

The [Convention of Scottish Local Authorities](#) (COSLA) is the membership body for councils in Scotland.



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# Congratulations

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Congratulations on becoming an elected member, which is a rewarding form of public service that puts you in a privileged position to serve the public.

As an elected member you can make a difference to the quality of other people's lives and to the communities of which they are part. It equally requires a lot of commitment and hard work. Every day you will have to balance the needs and interests of voters, the broader community, interest groups and the council.

You will also be at the heart of the public service reform agenda that has been ongoing in Scotland over the past decade. The reform agenda has four key objectives ([Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, 2011](#)):

- ▶ public services that are built around people and communities;
- ▶ public service organisations that work together effectively to achieve outcomes;
- ▶ public services that constantly seek to improve performance and reduce costs; and
- ▶ public services that focus on reducing inequalities and prioritise the prevention of negative outcomes, rather than simply dealing with the consequences when they happen.

These objectives are set against a challenging financial picture for public services, even more so given the demands of the COVID19 pandemic and the additional pressures that has brought.

Councils were leading on front-line efforts to protect people and communities from the virus, as well as the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. Supporting communities to recover well from the pandemic and to deal with the aftermath of the changes to society, will remain priorities for your council and wider public services for some time to come.

The [Local Government in Scotland Overview](#) report from the Accounts Commission outlines the challenges facing councils.

All of this will make demands on your time on top of your own personal responsibilities to family, friends and others. However, being an elected member can be a very rewarding form of public service that allows you to make a positive contribution to local communities and to the lives of people in the local area.

This should make it all worthwhile.



# What is a council and how does it work?

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While this notebook will provide an overview of your roles and responsibilities as an elected member, it is important to understand the context in which you will be operating, as that impacts on how you will carry out your roles and responsibilities.

Councils perform a range of functions and services such as education, social care, waste collection, roads maintenance, planning, licensing, trading standards, environmental health, culture and leisure services. Some of these are mandatory, with Acts of Parliament laying down specific duties that councils must carry out, while others are permissive and adoptive functions which councils can do if they wish.

Councils have the scope to charge for many permissive and adoptive services, provided they are not prohibited by other legislation. The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 gave councils a general power to advance wellbeing, intended to allow them to do anything that they think appropriate as long as it promotes the economic, social or environmental wellbeing of their areas and its communities. The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 makes provisions and outlines functions and decision-making structures of local authorities in Scotland. While an awareness of these Acts can be helpful, you don't need to be an expert as your council employs professional experts who advise on any legislative requirements.

Legally and constitutionally, you and your fellow members are 'the Council'. Therefore, all powers and duties lie with you and your fellow elected members collectively. This power comes with the responsibility to adhere to ethical standards and you will be bound by the [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#) when undertaking your duties. The **Developing your Working Relationships with Other Elected Members** notebook will explore the importance of effective relationships between elected members in order for the council to be well governed and for these powers and duties to be used effectively.

The council employs staff (officers) in managerial, advisory and service delivery roles. These council officers are professionals and work to the vision, strategy, policies and budget set by the council. A helpful way to think about the separation of roles and responsibilities is to keep in mind your role is to govern the council and make strategic, policy and budgetary decisions, while officers run the council and implement those decisions. A fuller, more nuanced description of the differences between elected members and officers roles and responsibilities is provided in the **Developing your Working Relationships with Officers** notebook.

The Councillors' Code of Conduct outlines how you should behave towards officers.

The Standards Commission have an Advice Note on [Distinguishing between Strategic and Operational Management](#) that will help you to understand the differences between the roles and responsibilities of elected members and officers. The **Developing your Working Relationships with Officers** notebook will also explore the Member-Officer relationship in more detail.



# Your roles and responsibilities as an elected member

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As an elected member, you have a complex and challenging position. Being an elected member involves a wide variety of work, some of which can be challenging, but also hugely rewarding when you make a real difference to individuals' lives and to the area you represent.

Over the coming weeks and months, you will start to experience the breadth of roles and responsibilities you have as an elected member and understand which roles and responsibilities are more prominent for you than others. Broadly speaking, these can be broken down into the following:

1. Community Leadership
2. Strategy and Policy Development
3. Decision-making
4. Scrutiny
5. Partnership Working
6. Regulatory

If you have been elected as a party member, you will also have the following role:

7. Party Political / Group role

Over the coming months you'll start to learn and make choices about how you will carry out these roles and responsibilities. This notebook will aid the speed and quality of this 'on the job' learning by providing you with a broad overview of these roles and responsibilities and prompting you to reflect on what's important for you as an elected member. Please refer back to these induction notebooks regularly as they will aid your learning and development.

The other notebooks will cover the roles and responsibilities in more detail, as well as helping you to understand important context such as how councils work, what powers and duties they have, and how to navigate the relationships you have with other elected members and with officers.

# 1. Community Leadership

A key role you have as an elected member is to represent your ward and the people who live in it. This demands visibility, being a trusted point of contact and an effective advocate for local people.

This includes ensuring that the views of local communities are represented and fed into decisions taken by the council and partners.

Elected members also have a responsibility to communicate council policy and decisions to people in their ward. All elected members are advocates for their communities and support individual constituents to navigate the complex landscape of local public services.

Your role isn't simply representative. It should also involve facilitating local people to be actively participating in democratic processes so people feel that they can contribute to and participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. You might also want to support local people and groups to develop and build upon existing community assets to create healthier, more resilient communities. This makes your community leadership role 'facilitative' as well as 'representative'.

The Improvement Service (IS) Thought Leadership piece on [Participatory Democracy and the Role of Elected Members](#) is a useful starting point to understand this aspect of your community leadership role.

Whilst you will spend time in council meetings, a considerable amount of your time is likely to be spent within the communities in your ward, speaking and working with members of the public, community groups and fellow ward members.

The **Being a Community Leader** notebook covers your community leadership role in more depth.

# 2. Decision-making

Elected members, collectively, are responsible for ensuring the council has a clear direction, appropriate lines of accountability, resource allocation and effective working arrangements in place to ensure that it achieves what it sets out to do. You will play a part in the council's decision-making process, as one member of the council.

The council can delegate its powers and responsibilities for particular functions or areas of service provision to smaller groups of elected members given appropriate powers. All of these are committees or sub-committees although councils may give them different names ("cabinets", "executive committees", "policy committees", "scrutiny committees", etc.). It cannot delegate powers and responsibilities to individual elected members (e.g. the Leader of the Council). Councils will also delegate powers to officers and define how they can be used. The extent, nature and pattern of delegation is for individual councils to decide and they vary across Scotland.



Each council has their governance arrangements detailed in its constitutional documents, which will be outlined as part of your induction.

The decisions you will make should be on strategy, policy, priorities and resource, with officers taking the vast majority of the day-to-day decisions in the running of the council and its services.

The **Governing Effectively: Keeping your Eye on the Big Picture** notebook will help you to understand how the council makes decisions and what your decision-making role is.

### 3. Strategy and Policy Development

Your council will operate with policies and strategies made by elected members which guide and direct its activities with the aim of achieving or contributing positively to objectives and outcomes. Naturally, the council doesn't abandon all of its existing strategies and policies after each election and they continue until such time as the current group of elected members decide to change them.

You can contribute to the development of the council's strategies and policies at Full Council meetings, and through membership of committees or bodies with a remit for strategy and policy development. You may also be able to influence the development of strategy and policy through the work of your political group (if applicable) or through informal discussions with officers and with other elected members who sit on decision-making or policy development bodies. Your role in challenging and scrutinising the work of the council will also contribute to thinking on strategy and policy.

While getting strategies and policies right is important, you also need to ensure they are being implemented correctly and are having the intended positive effect.

### 4. Scrutiny

You have a key role to play in scrutinising and monitoring how well services are delivered by the council and its partners, whether public money is being well spent, and whether policies are making a positive difference and are being implemented as intended.

This may involve sitting on formal committees with a focused remit for scrutiny, designed to be a 'check' on the decision-making bodies of the council's governance structure.

However, your scrutiny role is also informal and cuts across everything that you do as an elected member. Regardless of whether you sit on formal scrutiny committees, you should be critically assessing, evaluating and questioning your council's strategy, policies, performance and activity to make sure it makes a positive contribution to the communities it serves.

The Improvement Service (IS) has a [notebook on scrutiny](#) that will help your understanding of your Scrutiny role.

## 5. Partnership Working

The council will be involved in a number of formal partnerships which aim to improve outcomes for people within communities by creating more joined-up accountability, decision-making and action across different partners. A prime example is the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) which is a statutory body for public services in a local authority area to work together along with the local community to plan for, resource and provide services which improve local outcomes in the local authority area, all with a view to reducing inequalities. Effective partnership working is crucial to improving outcomes for people, as individual public service organisations working on their own will not be able to deliver the type of services people need.

Every elected member has a role to work with local partners to find solutions to issues within communities and to maximise the potential of an area. All elected members have a role in scrutinising whether partnerships are effective, people and communities get the benefits from the partnership that are intended, and that partnerships are efficient in the way they deliver services and use resources. This can mean setting aside the interests of individual organisations and making sure the impact on people and communities is paramount when decisions are being taken and services delivered.

You'll also have a role in to ensure partnership arrangements are transparent to the public and there are clear lines of accountability and understanding of what the public can expect from partners.

You may be appointed to boards of local and national partnerships. If nominated to such bodies, you should ask officers to advise you on your roles and responsibilities when sitting as a member on that board.

The Improvement Service (IS) has a [notebook on effective board membership](#) that will help you if appointed to an external board.

## 6. Regulatory

Councils are not just service providers – they also play a regulatory role in issues such as planning, licensing, trading standards and environmental health. This involves elected members in quasi-judicial roles on special committees appointed directly by the council. These regulatory committees operate within a specific set of legislation and guidance, and should you sit on such a committee, you can only make decisions that are in accordance with legislation and which take account of guidance. Training will be given to you if appointed to such committees.

You must familiarise yourself with section 7 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct with regards to taking decisions on quasi-judicial or regulatory applications.

You may also find the [Introduction to the Planning System](#) guidance from the IS helpful in understanding your role in relation to Planning.

## 7. Party Political/Group Role

Many elected members stand for election on a party platform while others stand as independent candidates, without party affiliation. Parties and political groups are not decision-makers in councils. Elected members can only make decisions for the council at full council or through committees or sub-committees. You should make yourself familiar with the rules that officers must observe in working with political parties and groups and understand that they must be politically neutral.

If you chose to stand for a political party you will have additional duties in:

- ▶ Reporting back to your party;
- ▶ Engaging with your local party organisation;
- ▶ Meeting as a political group within the local authority; and
- ▶ Working within a national framework of policies, rules and responsibilities of your political party

Speak to your political group leader about how the group operates and what is expected of you as a member of the group. Also ask what you can expect from the group to help you carry out your roles and responsibilities.

If you stood as an Independent, you may decide to join with other Independents to form a group on your council as a strategy to gain more influence within the council. In this instance, you should also speak to group members to find out what is expected of you and what you can expect in return.

If you are not part of a political group but there are groups within your council, it would be worth trying to understand how each group operates and how you need to work with them should you wish to.

## What your role does not involve

It is worth highlighting what the role of an elected member does not involve. You are not expected:

**✗ To be an expert on all the services offered by the council.**

The council offers hundreds of different services to the public, and nobody – elected member, Chief Executive, Directors, and Heads of Service – could possibly know in detail the nature of all of those services. Council officers are experts in their own service areas and they will be able to advise and brief you on matters relating to their professional expertise.

**✘ To manage services and staff and get involved in the day-to-day running of services.**

The council employs people to do that on its behalf. You have to be satisfied that the right arrangements and resources are in place to make sure these services are delivered effectively and they are making a positive contribution to the lives of local people. You must also ensure that priorities have been set and that managers and employees understand these priorities. Your officers will take decisions on the day-to-day running of council services and this is right and proper.

The Councillors' Code of Conduct makes it clear that you should not instruct officers on operational issues. This may occasionally cause frustration, but is a necessary check and balance on your power and ensures officers work to the direction of the council, rather than individual elected members.

**✘ To solve and fix every issue raised by a constituent.**

The issues raised by constituents will be varied, with some requiring simple solutions (i.e. a stolen bin requiring an email to waste services to request a replacement), while others involve complex issues relating to social care, homelessness etc. You need to build up your knowledge of local services (council or others) to signpost constituents to when they need specialist professional help. You also learn when it is not possible or appropriate to help a constituent.

The Standards Commission have an [Assisting Constituents Card](#) you can give to constituents to manage their expectations of what you can and cannot help them with.

The Councillors' Code of Conduct and accompanying guidance sets out some parameters for how you will carry out your roles and responsibilities, particularly with regard to how you should work with officers, other elected members and the public in a way that is ethical. You must familiarise yourself with and comply with the code and guidance.



# Becoming an effective elected member

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“You need to work hard, work collaboratively and value the small wins. The councillors I see coming in who get most downhearted about things are the ones who thought they could change the world. It’s not one big victory, its lots of little wins that I believe makes a successful member.”

**Elected Member**

It can be challenging to learn how to become an effective elected member as there is more than one way to carry out your roles and responsibilities and make a positive difference. It will also take you some time to learn what the boundaries are between your role and that of officers.

You have choices to make in what roles you undertake and how you carry out your responsibilities. You may wish to carry them out in ways that differ from other elected members in your council.

The political composition of your council will also have an impact on which roles and responsibilities are more prominent for you compared to others. For example, if elected to a council that operates through an administration group (as most do), you may find you have a lesser role in ‘Strategy and Policy Development’ if you are not part of the administration. However, in situations such as this, a lesser ‘Strategy and Policy Development’ role will likely be offset with greater prominence in your ‘Scrutiny’ and ‘Community Leadership’ roles.

The governance arrangements your council chooses for conducting its business will have an impact on which roles and responsibilities are more prominent for you.

You will also have different skills and areas of expertise or interest than fellow members, and this can result in you choosing to exercise your roles and responsibilities differently. As well as making choices about how you take up your roles as an elected member, the development of new skills can let you see new opportunities to do things differently that you hadn’t considered before.

Your council will provide you with resources to ensure you are able to perform your role. Those will include computers or tablets, phones, office space and support officers. They will also offer training and development opportunities and should discuss your own training needs with you.

## Links between roles and responsibilities

Although the roles outlined in this notebook have been listed separately, there are clear links between them and they do relate to each other. At times, the roles will feel complementary, with one role naturally helping and strengthening another. At other times, one role will conflict with another and you will feel a natural tension between two or more roles you have.

### EXAMPLE OF LINKS BETWEEN ROLES

As a community leader, democratically elected by people in your ward, it is natural to scrutinise how a policy or decision would affect your ward when sitting on a policy development or decision-making committee. Done properly, you may be able to influence changes to proposed policies or the implementation of the policies that are better for individuals and communities in your ward. This can be a strength of local democracy, where your community leadership, scrutiny, strategy & policy development and decision-making roles work together to bring a better outcome for people and communities you serve.

However, you are expected to take a decision in the best interests of people across the whole council area and not just people in your ward. The reason for this is simple, if all elected members simply advocated and voted for what was best for their ward or a few vocal individuals, it could be very difficult to develop and agree on effective strategies and policies that use the council's powers, duties and resource effectively, ultimately resulting in poorer services for everyone.

There are natural links and tensions. To become an effective elected member you must learn to navigate situations such as this.

The ability to navigate these roles will have a big impact on how effective you are as an elected member. While you will learn more as you gain experience, it's also important for you to reflect on the links between roles, and consider how you will act in instances where roles complement and conflict with each other.

## Political skills development

The Improvement Service's (IS) [Political Skills Assessment](#) can help you to reflect on how you can become an even more effective elected member.

You can undertake this on your own, but first check with your council whether they offer this as part of a structured process for member development within the council.

You should engage with officers leading on your council's elected member development programme as this will help to shape what you are offered to better suit your needs.

You could also ask your political group, or other experienced elected members in the council, whether they can provide mentoring support for you.



# Questions and notes

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Please use this section to help you reflect on what you have learned from this notebook. You can revisit your answers over time and add or change them as you develop greater understanding of your roles and responsibilities.

You should also raise any questions you still have with officers during your local induction programme, or with other elected members.

**What questions do you still have about your roles and responsibilities? How will you find answers?**

**What roles do you feel best suit your strengths?**



**What complementary links do you see between the roles? How will you use one or more roles to complement another?**

**What tensions and conflicts might you encounter between the roles? How will you deal with these?**

**What knowledge and skills might you need to develop further to carry out your roles and responsibilities effectively?**

**Any additional notes**

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