

ELECTED MEMBER INDUCTION NOTEBOOK

Navigating the New Council: a
Consideration of Opportunities
and Challenges

About this notebook

This is a short notebook for returning elected members, to help you to navigate the new term of office, reflect on what changes have happened as a result of the election, and prompt you to consider what this means for your roles, responsibilities and working relationships in the council.

This notebook has been developed by the Improvement Service (IS) and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) in consultation with councils, and complements the five core induction notebooks that have been developed to support newly elected members.

The five core induction notebooks cover the following:

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)

This notebook summarises key points from those induction notebooks, but prompts you to reflect and consider matters from the perspective you have as a returning member and what this means for you in a new term of office. Should you wish to access any of the five core induction notebooks, you can do so on the [IS website](#).

As a returning member, you have a role to play in supporting the induction of newly elected members to the council. Please encourage them to read the core induction notebooks and take part in your council's induction programme.

As an experienced elected member, you should also consider whether you can provide mentoring support for newly elected members. The IS has developed a [Political Mentoring Handbook](#) to help you in this endeavour.

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

Congratulations on your successful re-election to the council. As you will be aware, being an elected member is a rewarding form of public service that puts you in a privileged position to serve the public.

You will also be at the heart of the public service reform agenda that has been ongoing in Scotland over the past decade which 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 COVID-19 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.

All of this will continue to make demands on your time on top of your own personal responsibilities to family, friends and others. However, you have chosen to stand for re-election and will be well aware of how being an elected member allows you to make a positive contribution to local communities and to the lives of people in the local area.

This will continue to make it all worthwhile.



Governance context

Each local authority in Scotland is governed by a council, which consists of you and your fellow elected members. Almost all the powers and duties of the council lie with you and your fellow elected members, bar those which lie with statutory officers.

This means you and your fellow members have a collective responsibility to govern effectively and ensure officers run the day-to-day operations successfully and in line with the vision and direction provided by the members.

While nearly all the powers and duties of the council lie with members, you'll be well aware of the checks, balances and limitations of these powers, including as individual members.

Your re-election means you continue to have a seat at the table and the opportunity to influence the activity of the council in ways ordinary citizens cannot. Your people skills, along with the political awareness which you will have developed over your time as a member, will help you read the power dynamics at play within the council and understand how to operate to bring about change that can make a real difference to people's lives.

You have a big part to play in helping newly elected members understand how the council works and the role they have in ensuring the council is effectively governed. Equally, you should be open to new ways of thinking and a fresh perspective that new members bring on the strategic direction of the council, its policies and how it conducts its business.

Conducting council business

Your council is a large organisation, employing staff that must adhere to set rules and procedures to help them function effectively and legitimately. These are set out in your council's constitutional documents which provide the framework within which the council conducts its business and makes decisions.

They describe the council's democratic decision-making structure, who is responsible for making decisions, how decisions are taken, how contracts are awarded and money spent. They vary from council to council as each has the power to make and change these constitutional documents.

Your council's constitutional documents typically provide details of:

- ▶ the committees that the council appoints, their functions and delegated powers and their relationships with council meetings and each other;

- ▶ the timing and frequency of council and committee meetings;
- ▶ the quorum required (i.e. the minimum number of elected members needed to constitute a meeting which has the authority to make decisions);
- ▶ the rules of debate (e.g. how many times an elected member may speak, the right of reply, the power of the chair, procedures to move or withdraw motions, voting etc.);
- ▶ procedures to deal with tenders and contracts;
- ▶ the functions which the council has asked the Chief Executive, Directors, Heads of Service and other relevant staff to undertake on its behalf, and the conditions with which they must comply when doing so; and
- ▶ Financial Regulations that describe the arrangements the council has made for the proper administration of its financial affairs. These deal with accounting arrangements, financial reporting, budgets, audit, income, insurance and other related matters.

You and your fellow members are not passive recipients of these constitutional documents. They are yours and it is up to you and your fellow members, while listening to the expertise of officers and following the appropriate procedures, to make changes to them should you wish the council to conduct its business differently. As a returning member, you may have views of changes you would like to make as to how the council conducts its business and any proposals for change should be taken forward through the appropriate channels in the council.

What changes, if any, would you like to make to the arrangements your council has in place for conducting its business? How will you support new members to understand how the council works?

What changes, if any, are other members likely to want to make to how your council conducts its business? What opportunities and challenges might this bring?



Your working relationships with officers

As a returning member, it's likely you will understand the boundaries between members' and officers' roles and responsibilities. If you'd like a refresh, the [Developing your Working Relationships with Officers notebook](#) covers this topic in more detail, but for the purposes of this notebook we define the relationship as:

Elected members, drawing upon the legal, technical and professional advice of officers, have the responsibility of setting the broad direction for the council and for setting its key goals. Elected members can then expect the support of officers to make sure that the work of the council—its finances, professional knowledge, time, effort and creativity—is directed towards accomplishing these goals through both longer-term strategic planning and the management of day-to-day activities.

You should reflect on the factors which impact on your working relationships with officers, and consider what actions you want to take to ensure you have appropriate working relationships with officers in this new term.

The exact nature of your own relationships with officers will be determined by several factors:

- ▶ Whether you are in the Administration or Opposition (if your council operates this way);
- ▶ Whether you have a senior position within the council or your group;
- ▶ The committees you sit on;
- ▶ The size of the council and number of elected members; and
- ▶ The culture of the council and the legacy relationships between elected members and officers.

Have any of the factors above changed? How might this affect how you will need to work with officers?

Some of these factors may have changed from the previous term of office and, if so, which officers you work most closely with and the nature of those relationships will also have changed. Indeed these factors can change throughout this term and therefore the exact nature of your relationships with officers can change too. However, what is certain is the more effort you put into establishing effective working relationships with officers now, based on a proper understanding of your respective roles and responsibilities, the more likely the council and the communities it serves will reap the benefits of those relationships in the months and years to come.

The Accounts Commission, the public spending watchdog for local government in Scotland, states that

“good working relationships, and members and officers being clear about their respective roles and responsibilities ... has a significant bearing on how well councils perform in delivering vital public services for local people and communities, and ensuring that public money is used wisely.”

(Roles and working relationships in councils - Are you still getting it right?, Accounts Commission)

The [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#) states:

“Councillors and employees should work in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, with neither party seeking to take unfair advantage of their position or influence.”

You should complete a [relationship map for officers](#), which is a graphic representation of all the officers that you need to constructively work with to achieve the best outcomes for the people you serve. This will help you to identify any new relationships you need to develop over the coming weeks and months of your new term of office.

What actions do you want to take to build more effective working relationships with officers in your council? What new relationships do you need to develop?



Your working relationships with other elected members

Now a new council has been elected, you will need to make choices about which members you need to work most effectively with, the type of working relationships you have with other elected members and to what extent those relationships are collegiate or adversarial.

It should be acknowledged that, regardless of how collegiate or adversarial relationships are, the [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#) makes it clear you should always treat other elected members with courtesy and respect. This applies to you when you are communicating in person, in writing, at meetings, online and using social media. The code also makes clear that conduct which could amount to bullying and harassment (including sexual harassment) is completely unacceptable. The Standards Commission have produced an [Advice Note on Bullying and Harassment](#) which you should familiarise yourself with.

You have a responsibility to comply with the Code, and importantly, by doing so, you will be choosing to act in a way that meets the public's expectations for how elected members should conduct themselves while undertaking their duties.

It's also worth noting that the Accounts Commission have found 'professional and constructive relationships' between elected members to be a common feature in successful councils. In contrast, poor working relationships, heightened political tensions and a lack of trust and mutual respect among members, were contributing factors for councils struggling to achieve best value for the public pound ([Accounts Commission - How council's work: Roles and working relationships: are you getting it right?, 2010](#)).

There are factors that will influence the types of working relationships you want to have with other elected members, including:

- ▶ The political composition of the council
- ▶ Legacy relationships with returning members

You should reflect on these two factors and what they mean for your working relationships with other elected members in this new term.

Has there been a change to the political composition of the council? How might this affect your working relationships with other elected members?

What legacy relationships do you have with other returning members? How might these legacy relationships impact on the new relationships you might want to develop with newly elected members?

A factor which will affect your ability to build working relationships with newly elected members is the extent to which the council is working remotely. This is also a consideration for your relationships with officers.

Councils in Scotland had to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, putting in place new ways of working that included remote council meetings. Councils can choose to use technology to hold formal meetings remotely. Some have also provided an option for hybrid meetings.

Your council will need to make choices about how to conduct its business. Research conducted by the Improvement Service (IS) and the University of St. Andrews into [governance arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), found that remote meetings constrained the ability of members to build coalitions, defuse conflict, broker decisions, or gather political intelligence, but had typically made it easier for members to attend meetings and generally improved behaviour at meetings where these were webcast to the public.

The use of technology has significantly impacted the routines and practices of political life, but there are examples where elected members have adapted and are using technology to mitigate having fewer opportunities to meet with fellow members informally.

Although public health restrictions for COVID-19 have significantly eased, allowing a return to working more in person, the advancement in the use of remote working technology means there are likely to be fewer opportunities for informal interactions with other elected members, which we know are crucial for building relationships. You may find it more challenging to establish new relationships with other elected members than in previous councils, so you'll need to think about how you are going to do this.

You may also find it helpful to complete a [Relationship Map for Members](#), which is a graphic representation of all elected members that you need to constructively work with to achieve the best outcomes for the people you serve. This will help you to identify which relationships you need to develop over the coming weeks and months.

What actions do you want to take to build more effective working relationships with other elected members in your council? What new relationships do you need to develop?



Roles and responsibilities

In the same way it was likely challenging when you first had to learn how to become an effective elected member, it can be just as challenging to learn how to carry out those roles and responsibilities differently. There is more than one way to carry out your roles and responsibilities and make a positive difference and you may wish to carry them out in ways that differ from other elected members in your council, and from how you carried them out before.

Broadly speaking, the main roles of an elected member 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

Please note, senior posts such as Leader of the Council, Convener/Chair or Group Leader aren't covered here, but if you have found yourself in a senior post, you will experience the above roles differently from members that aren't senior post holders.

You may find yourself in a situation where previous roles which weren't so prominent, are now much more important for you. The political composition of your council will have an impact on this. 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 now 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.

Indeed the opposite is true, if you now find yourself as part of the administration, having previously been in opposition (or a non-administration member) it's likely you'll have a bigger role to play, and have more influence in the development of strategy and policy, whilst not taking as prominent a role in scrutiny.

The governance arrangements your council chooses for conducting its business will have an impact on which roles and responsibilities are more prominent for you. As a returning member, you may have views as to how the council could conduct its business differently and it'll be up to you to articulate this to your fellow members to get their support for such changes.

You will also have different skills and areas of expertise or interest from fellow members, and you should have been building your knowledge and skillset throughout your time as an elected member. You should be better placed to make choices about how you take up your roles as an elected member than when you were first elected, and have a greater understanding of what skills are needed for you to be effective.

What roles do you think will be most prominent for you in this council? What roles might be less prominent for you than in the previous council?

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 should 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.

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

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*The 'go to' organisation for Local
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The logo for Improvement Service, featuring the lowercase letters 'is' in a dark blue font. The letter 'i' has a red dot above it, and the letter 's' has a red dot at the bottom right. Below the 'is' is the word 'improvement' in a dark blue font, and the word 'service' in a red font.
improvement **service**