



## Councillor Alison King

leader of Norfolk county council

**'half a dozen council meetings  
each year, a few committees,  
some casework'**

When I was standing 16 years ago, I asked what the job involved. 'Oh,' I was told, 'Half a dozen council meetings each year, a few committees, some casework.' Even then it was a completely inaccurate description of the responsibilities of being a councillor, and very soon I found myself spending nearly three days a week, just representing my ward. I would have welcomed some of the initiatives that we now have in place for new councillors in Norfolk, such as induction programmes and new member mentoring, where we link every new member to a chief officer who acts as their guide to the council and how it operates.

It would also have been useful to have a clear idea of what the job involves and I think we owe it to new councillors to let them know the degree of involvement and professional behaviour expected of them. That's why this analysis of the political skills needed to be a councillor is going to be so helpful. It's not a job description – because being a councillor is not a job, even though it takes on the nature of the job at times. But it does lay on the line what a councillor's role involves.

That is good for people who want to be councillors to know what they will be expected to do, but it is also good for the status of councillors. People in local government are held in such low esteem, that letting the public know just how many skills are needed to be a councillor, and what a councillor has to do will, I believe raise people's opinion of the role. That in turn will raise the calibre of the kind of people attracted to become councillors – the beginnings of a virtuous circle, I think.



## Councillor Pauleen Lane

Metropolitan Borough of Trafford,  
Greater Manchester

**‘you don’t need to be  
extraordinary to be a councillor’**

Setting out the core skills required of a position is standard HR practice, but for some reason no-one has ever done approached the role of councillor in a systematic way before. What’s amazing is that once you start to analyse exactly what being a councillor entails, you realise what a complex task we all perform, and the enormously high standards we set ourselves.

Even as a non-executive councillor, the skills needed equate to those of senior manager in a large organisation, and it is often a difficult job, making complex judgements and bringing together conflicting aims.

So I’m really behind this framework because it shows just what can be achieved. Actually, most councillors I know already meet most of the criteria, but I think it serves two purposes. Firstly it shows new councillors the range of skills and qualities they will need to do the job well. For instance, some people become councillors because they were community activists and being a councillor is a logical next step. They need to be aware that you can’t be single issue councillor, and they have to consider what happens when their favourite issue collides with other interests.

Secondly, this framework is a useful evaluation tool for people at all stages of their careers. It’s a kind of John Harvey-Jones approach to leadership – that even in senior positions, local politicians cannot forget the basics. Alongside the difficult job they do as managers of the political process, they still have to do the grassroots stuff of listening to the community and representing their views. As you’ll notice, the skills of being an executive member and a leader are those of the non-executive member plus the additional skills needed as you become more senior.

It’s also been helpful for reflecting mid-career. Over the years I’ve become a technocrat: serving on committees and getting things done. The framework has made me look at all aspects of the job and reconnect with some of the other parts of the job – the community stuff, for instance – that it is easy to lose sight of.

You don’t need to be extraordinary to be a councillor – you just need to understand all the different aspects involved, and this framework makes them crystal clear.