A.U.D.I.T
COMMISSION

MANAGEMENT PAPERS

WE CAN'T GO ON MEETING LIKE THIS

THE CHANGING ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITY MEMBERS

The Audit Commission for Local Authorities in England and Wales

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S U M M A R Y

There are approximately 21,000 councillors in England and Wales. The authorities on which they serve vary significantly, with sharp contrasts in political balance, spending, council size, and electoral representation. (Exhibits 1 & 2). The time members devote to council business also varies widely between authorities. There is no typical council, or identikit councillor.

But the elected members of every local authority have three important, and very different, jobs. In the first place as politicians (whether or not they wear a party label) they represent electors as citizens of the local community, reflecting party differences.

At the same time, they represent the interests of those who pay for, and those who receive the services the council delivers. Finally, they are responsible, like the directors of a company board, for the organisation of the council they control.

Though individual members can, and should, put the emphasis on different aspects of their role, every authority needs some members who can do all three jobs well.
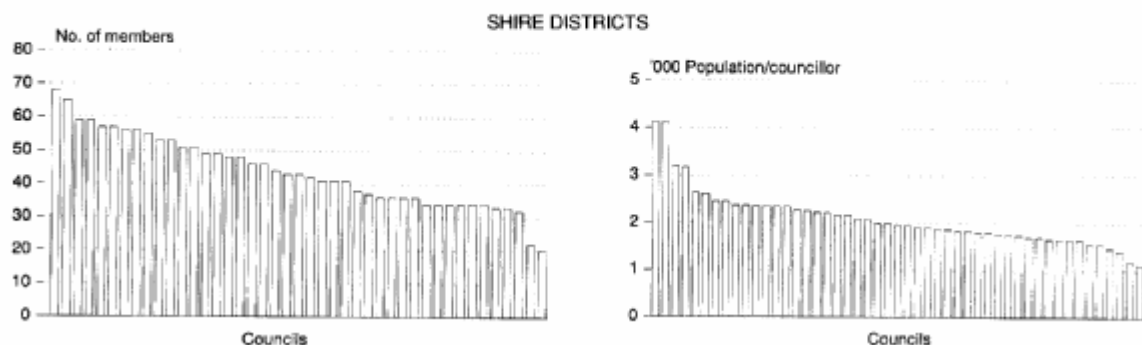
As each of their jobs has become more demanding, many members have found it increasingly difficult to maintain the right balance. Constitutions and procedures which were established in easier times and designed to deal with simpler issues do not always help councillors match their political and

Exhibit 1

POLITICAL CONTROL IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES (MAY 1990)

Councils vary significantly in political composition...

LBCs and Mets

Shire Counties

No overall control
Con
Lab
SLD
Other
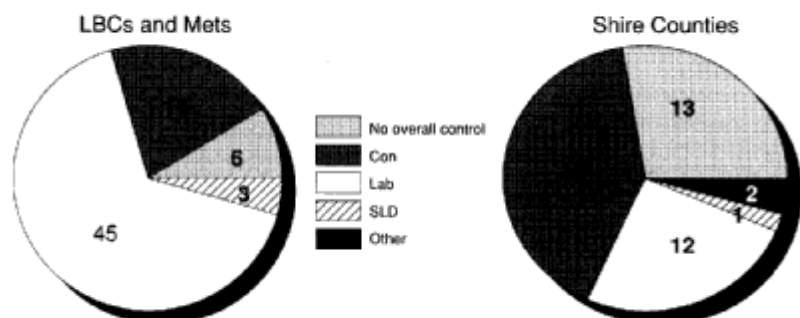
Source: Plymouth Polytechnic

COUNCIL SIZE AND REPRESENTATION
... and in size and representation

SHIRE DISTRICTS

No. of members

'000 Population/councillor

Councils

Councils

service aims to the managerial needs of a complex organisation. And the processes of local authority management, which are seen most clearly in the committee system, can tend to focus on day to day problems rather than on policy, strategy and results.

The need to make the best use of councillors' energies is made all the more pressing by the changes described in the Commission's first Management Paper *'The Competitive Council'*. The authorities of the 1990s will be judged by their success in identifying changing community needs and deciding how they are to be met. This will require a clearer definition of standards, an emphasis on results, and a readiness to make difficult choices on priorities, within tight financial limits.

Many people say that these changes will only be possible if the structure of local government is radically changed. But that is unlikely to happen in the near future. In the mean time there is much that can be done to make the existing system work better.

Some councils are making good progress. They are streamlining committee structures and agendas,

providing members with better information on performance, and training and developing their councillors, to give them a more meaningful and important role. But many could benefit from reviewing what their members do, and how useful and effective it is.

Recognising and realising the member contribution will require effort and imagination from both members and Chief Officers. New initiatives may need to come from members, but in every authority the Chief Executive will have a crucial role in ensuring that management systems and attitudes help members to be fully involved in those key processes to which only they can make a contribution.

INTRODUCTION

1 Elected members are expected to provide a sense of political direction, based on a view of how their communities should develop in the future. It is their task to decide what their authorities do - what level of service is provided, at what cost. They bear ultimate responsibility for their council's performance, and they are required to ensure that effective organisations are in place to deliver these services.

2 That does not mean that they should try to manage every aspect of a council's activity themselves. Some members have attempted this in the past. They have stepped with enthusiasm into managers' roles without fully considering what they have to contribute, and which things are best left to others with more relevant skills.

3 There is an important managerial side to the job. But it is about selecting and directing the council's management, not replacing or 'second-guessing' it. This may not come easy to those councillors who think of managers as people who prevent, rather than make possible, the very things they want to see. And all members may sometimes feel tempted to blame 'the management' when the organisation fails to deliver results, while taking credit as policy-makers when it succeeds.

4 These problems are not new. Many councils recognise them, and some have already taken steps to help members do their job better. The Local Government Training Board (soon to be merged into The Local Government Management Board) has highlighted examples of good practice, and is developing member training. Other research has drawn attention to

the other roles of the councillor as advocate for the citizen and for the area in general. And the political parties work hard to promote awareness of party policy and how it may be integrated locally.

5 This paper is more narrowly focused. Its aim is to suggest ways in which members could encourage better management and obtain better results. But though the aim is modest, the consequences can be extensive. To achieve it many authorities would need to change the way council business is organised and they would actively need to develop relevant skills in elected members.

6 The paper is in three sections. Section 1 analyses what members, in their managerial capacity, actually do and how their role has developed. Section 2 summarises the pressures on members to change their existing patterns of behaviour. Section 3 looks at some of the steps that can be, and are being, taken to enhance members' effectiveness.

1. ELECTED MEMBERS TODAY

THREE TYPES OF ROLE

7 The role of members is complex, and unlike that of their counterparts in any other type of organisation. They are required to act simultaneously in three capacities as:-

- Politicians,

- Representatives

- Board Members.

8 The decisions members take as Representatives, or Board Members, may often have political implications, but as *Politicians*, they are concerned

not only with public services but also with social change. Electors look to them to express political values, generally (though not necessarily) those associated with a particular party. Elections are generally organised along party political lines, and parties select candidates for their ability to put forward a view of society as well as their service priorities. It is this role that distinguishes local government from local administration, it is here that local differences in style and priorities are expressed. The existing system allows room for local political differences and local solutions: that is its principal justification.

9 Local authorities are not sovereign states, and the influence of local politicians is constrained by the powers entrusted to them by central government. Nevertheless, members are able, within these limits, to develop their own vision of the direction the local community should take, and to exercise both their legal powers (as in planning) and the power of example (deriving from the prominence of the local authority within its area) to influence change in society at the local level.

10 But as well as being Politicians, elected members are also *Representatives*. Local electorates pay taxes or charges for the services local authorities provide and under the community charge regime bear the full burden of extra spending. As taxpayers and customers they seek to obtain good value from the organisation, and look to their councillors to see that their requirements are met.

11 It is principally by members acting as Representatives that the organisa-

tion is held to account for service priorities, allocation of resources and ultimate performance. The Representative role, like the organisational one, is exercised largely within the structure of committees, working parties and informal groups. Here members express the wishes of the electorate as to the quantity and quality of services to be provided, and the level of local taxation to pay for them; here they determine employment or service contracts so as to obtain the best value for money; and here they take the crucial decisions on the balance between services and levels of taxes.

12 The role of *Board Member* reflects the constitutional position of members. They share collective responsibility for the local authority organisation and its activities, similar to that of company directors or appointed board members of other public authorities. Like any board they need to appoint senior staff and ensure that adequate management arrangements are in place; to develop plans for the use of the authority's physical, financial and human resources; and to concern themselves with the performance, development, continuity, and overall well-being of their organisations.

13 But unlike the board members of other bodies, councillors have other obligations that may sometimes quite rightly conflict with these duties. Unlike directors of companies in the private sector, they are not appointed by the owners of the organisation, they are elected. And electors do not hold them to account solely for how well the 'business is managed', but also for what services are provided. They must

attempt to balance the competing demands on them. Political parties, electors, users of services, staff, suppliers, central government and interest groups in the wider community all want something from the local authority: councillors seek to ensure that, so far as possible, all are satisfied.

14 In exercising these three roles and in reconciling the various demands on them, members operate both 'inside', as an integral part of the local authority organisation, and 'outside' the organisation in the wider community, using their position and status as local authority members (Exhibit 3).

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE THE ORGANISATION

15 Thus the role of *Politician* can be played independently of the management of the authority. The council can provide an excellent platform for gaining publicity for political campaigns, some of which may reflect community concerns, while others may be largely unrelated to the purposes of the local authority organisation. Councillors attract

media attention, and the public nature of council and committee debates, though not always conducive to good management, enables alternative views of society to be promoted and criticised.

16 Outside the Council, the political groups can exercise considerable influence by holding the leadership politically accountable. Even if back-bench members see themselves primarily as Representatives they do have the crucial task of selecting the leadership, so endorsing a particular political direction and confirming arrangements for the distribution of power within or between political parties. Political parties themselves may wish to influence the decisions of the political group on the Council, while some local members may see service on the local council as a step towards national politics. Gaining or holding power at local level can of itself add to a party's or an individual's influence nationally.
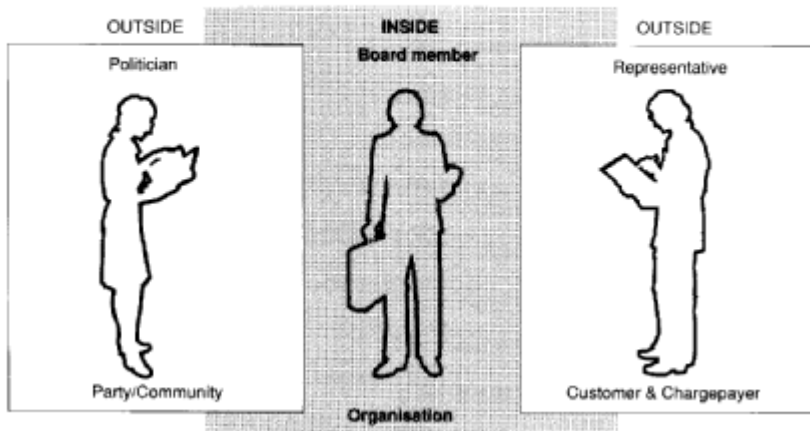
17 But this role must be played inside as well as outside the organisation.

Local politics are irrelevant to local government if they do not involve explicit choices of social objectives and the use of the authority's regulatory and persuasive powers to achieve them. Within a framework set by Parliament, the management processes of the local authority organisation provide the opportunity to debate alternative views of society at the local level and to monitor success in realising them. It is in this role that opposition members are able to criticise and question the decisions taken by majority parties, and on hung councils, where political compromises need to be struck.

18 As Representatives members are not only concerned with service priorities and how services are delivered. Local councillors are often called on to assist with matters outside the local authority's control as advisers and advocates for their constituents. Even where the authority is involved, members sometimes take up cases with officers almost as if they were outsiders with no say in the way the organisation is managed. In authorities where there is a recognised group of 'leading members' who determine direction and broad policy, the outside role of Representative can be an important function of members.

19 But this is an important job within the organisation too. No local authority can be accountable to its electorate unless the representative role is integrated with the management processes. This can only happen if local members apply their understanding of customer needs and their views of the authority's performance to the setting of service standards and service priorities.

Exhibit 3
INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS
In exercising their three roles members operate both 'inside and outside' the Council organisation

OUTSIDE — Politician — Party/Community

INSIDE — Board member — Organisation

OUTSIDE — Representative — Customer & Chargepayer

20 As *Board Members*, Councillors work within, and are part of, the local authority organisation. Together with the Chief Executive and Chief Officers they should provide leadership, both through the formal decision-making processes of council and committee meetings and as Leaders or Committee Chairs in other, more informal ways. They may find different ways of sharing these duties between themselves, and with the officers, but the Board Member's role remains exclusively concerned with the efficiency and effectiveness of the local authority.

21 Elected members can make an important contribution to management in each of their three roles. And within the organisation, each of the roles can be played at two levels policy and operations. (Exhibit 4).

POLICY

22 Some aspects of management are clearly about major policy issues. They are concerned with direction, purpose and values - with what the organisation does or could do, rather than the detailed means by which those results are achieved. Purpose and direction should always be the concern of members. In its recent management paper on performance review the Commission has emphasised the importance of member involvement in setting standards and monitoring results. Policy aims may be expressed in terms of the services to be delivered - their quality and success in meeting user needs - or of general community satisfaction. Or they may be of a more political nature - greater equality, wider choice in employment, a safer environment, lower taxation.

Exhibit 4
POLICY MAKING/OPERATIONS
Each of the roles can be played at two levels – policy and operations
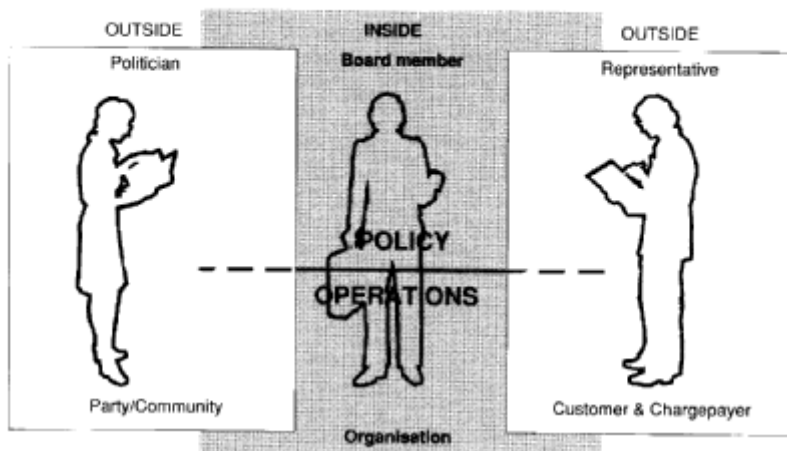
Some will relate to the development of the local authority organisation itself its skills, its flexibility, its capacity to add value.

23 Making these aims explicit is difficult. The clearer the objectives, the greater the risk that some of them will be seen not to have been met, which can be an unattractive prospect where local politics are volatile. But the alternative is to have no means of measuring ultimate success or failure, and no accountability for results. Short-term electoral success is only one measure of the effectiveness of a local authority and - because of national politics, or the timing of elections - by no means always a reliable one.

24 These policy aims can only be realised if values and purposes are expressed in terms of specific tasks. If this does not happen, it is very difficult to assign responsibility for achievement to officers and to review their success. In those circumstances, members have little control over what the organisation does, however much time they put in.

25 This is particularly important in those service areas now subject to Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Whether the DSO or a private contractor wins the tender, they will thereafter be operating within the terms of a contract which members are not free to vary from month to month. Policy objectives must therefore be formulated at the pretender stage, and cast in the form of contractual commitments. Similar considerations apply to the local management of schools; formula funding and monitoring of results requires a different form of member involvement. This is a major change of approach.

OPERATIONS
26 It is easier to define the scope and purpose of operational management. Operational management includes the giving of detailed direction from day to day, and the carrying out of tasks that are primarily professional. It can also involve the exercise of discretion on particular staffing or financial issues or the management of property.

27 Most operational management issues should be delegated to officers,

subject to policy guidance and performance monitoring. But where responsibility for operational matters is delegated it is necessary for members to ensure that arrangements are in place to ensure officer accountability. That means that policy guidance and service standards need to be specific and capable of being translated into tasks or performance criteria that can be monitored.

28 The distinction between policy and operations is not always clear-cut: what appears as an operational question in one authority may have far-reaching implications in another. There will always be some particular decisions which members must take because the outcome is likely to have a major effect on electors and their families, on the wider community or on the local authority organisation itself; they may feel that their political values are not being expressed in service delivery or there may be a lack of trust in particular officers; and members' duties as representatives of electors sometimes require them to be seen to influence council decisions at the operational level, as (for example) when pursuing constituents' complaints. However, improving accountability and getting action means that members may need to review and be clearer about policies and delegation, with the officers being more conscious of and sensitive to Representative and Political elements of items that are delegated.
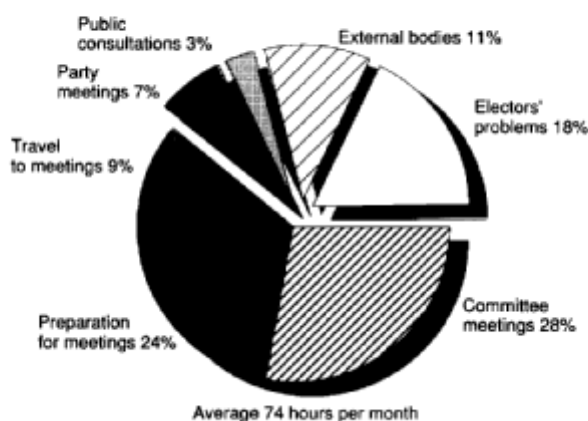

WHAT MEMBERS DO

29 According to the Widdicombe committee the average councillor spends 74 hours in a typical month on council duties (Exhibit 5). The average conceals a wide range. But however much time any individual councillor may put in, 60% of the average time - 45 hours - is accounted for by attending, preparing for and travelling to and from official meetings of the council and its committees and sub-committees. A further seven hours a month are spent in meetings of which the main purpose is to prepare for those formal meetings - party groups and consultation meetings with the public.

Exhibit 5

HOW MEMBERS SPEND THEIR TIME

60 per cent of members' time is taken up by the committee system

Public consultations 3%
Party meetings 7%
Travel to meetings 9%
Preparation for meetings 24%
External bodies 11%
Electors' problems 18%
Committee meetings 28%

Average 74 hours per month

30 Approximately one third of the time goes on activities less directly related to what goes on in committee: either dealing with the problems faced by electors or representing the council in meetings with external organisations. Some of this work is done outside the organisation. But much of it can be relevant to management, as members gain an improved understanding of the issues to be discussed at committee, in particular the impact of council activity on customers and others.

31 Leading members may spend a large amount of time directing the

council's business outside the formal committee setting. But their significant decisions are always subject to ratification by committee or council, and there is in any event a requirement to put before formally-constituted committees matters which might in the past have been determined by the process of 'chairman's action'.

32 So what committees do gives a fair impression of the issues in which members get involved. The Commis-sion and its auditors have reviewed committee processes at a range of authorities, and held discussions with members and officers at others, so as to gain a more detailed understanding of members' priorities as reflected by the way they spend the major portion of their time. While the picture varies greatly between authorities, some patterns emerge.
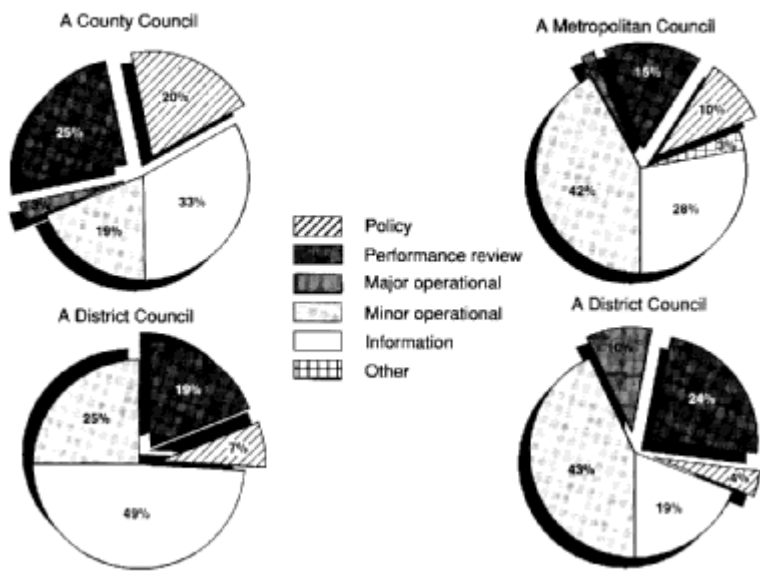
33 Generally less than a third of items are policy matters, and reviewing past performance accounts for an insignificant proportion of members' time (Exhibit 6). Operational questions, and papers tabled for information only,

HOW COMMITTEES DIRECT THEIR EFFORTS

In practice, a small proportion of members' time is spent on policy and reviewing performance

A County Council

A Metropolitan Council

A District Council

A District Council

Policy
Performance review
Major operational
Minor operational
Information
Other

tend to dominate in some cases to the exclusion of all else.

34 Members obviously need to take the lead in the key decisions on resource allocation as they happen: not all performance monitoring should be retrospective and some operational issues will have a representative or political dimension. But many service committees seem to focus almost exclusively on organisational issues and inputs - how much money is spent, the terms and conditions under which people are employed - rather than on the results achieved in terms of services delivered and, crucially, the quality of those services.

35 It is much easier to address questions of operational management than the larger, strategic issues. Sometimes the latter are hard to present in a concrete, comprehensible form. Sometimes leading members, or officers, prefer to limit debate about these issues, and encourage commit-

tees to concentrate on operational detail. In a few cases, members believe that close control over detail gives them control over the actions of the authority - the 'manage-as-you-go' approach; or officers are reluctant to accept responsibility for the implementation of agreed policies, or pass operational issues to members, which they should be dealing with themselves as managers.

2 . PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

36 Does it matter that so much attention is given to operational management? That has, after all, historically been the major part of what councillors do. Even in large authorities, members' representative obligations (for example in development control) or their desire to get political values accepted, push them in this direction. This operational bias may not matter if they are addressing

the strategic and important issues too. But there are a number of reasons which taken together suggest that members may need to review their priorities, and their methods of working.

37 They are coming under increased pressure in each of their three roles; in particular, the expanded and more complex Board Member role is leaving insufficient time for the other two roles, particularly the Representative role - perhaps isolating it from the processes of management. This pressure is demonstrated by the growing burden of operational management. Committees can become overloaded with detail, and the really important policy issues - the setting of objectives and monitoring of outcomes - get squeezed out.

38 Even if members can find the time to involve themselves closely in both policy issues and operational management, the cost of their involvement in activities which could be delegated to officers is very high. Expenditure on member allowances and member services may not be all that great, or even enough, but the diversion of scarce officer resources to servicing unnecessary committee meetings must be questioned, when such staff are in short supply, or have other pressing tasks.

39 Members too may, for various reasons, find aspects of the present role unsatisfactory. And in addition to this there are the major reforms being imposed on local authorities by current legislation.

GROWING DEMANDS

40 Councillors are now under more pressure as Politicians. The tendency

to organise on party lines has continued to grow, with 85% of members now elected on party tickets and a similar proportion of authorities dominated by party groups. The political polarisation identified by Widdicombe as affecting a significant minority of authorities has become more widespread. At some authorities Political Group meetings are where the crucial decisions are made, requiring the consideration of properly prepared briefings, if decisions are to be related to the organisation's capacity to deliver. And political organisations other than the group of party members on the council have increased their influence over councillor behaviour.

41 The Representative role has also become more demanding. Since local government re-organisation in the mid 1970s most councillors represent larger electorates in larger areas. Many of those electorates are diverse; and even stable populations have become more volatile in their tastes and more demanding in their preferences. Consumers of council services have become more expectant, less 'grateful', with increasing concerns about service quality, not merely quantity.

42 At the same time the duties of the councillor as Board Member have grown at an accelerating pace. Between the mid 1960s and mid 1970s the average member's time commitment rose by 50%. Local authority organisations may be little larger, in real-terms spending or employee numbers, than ten years ago, but they are undoubtedly more complex. And the task of managing them is made harder by the difficulty of recruiting high quality staff.

43 As a result of these pressures, members have tended to specialise in one or two aspects of the job, concentrating either on a particular range of services or on the functions of a central department. In making these choices, they are influenced both by their individual interests and by the particular issues that demand most attention in the areas they represent poor housing, large numbers of elderly people, pressure for development. Service or functional specialisation can assist the processes of getting consensus on policy matters where members are prepared to trust each other.

44 But in some places specialisation has developed in a way that hinders effective strategic management. This may be because leading members see themselves exclusively in a representative role and are reluctant to take responsibility for corporate direction, or because the political composition makes agreement on direction and priorities difficult, or because there is an unwillingness (or a perceived inability) to involve officers in the political decision making process.

There are also situations where leading members are so closely involved with the organisation, largely on operational matters, that they abandon their representative roles and become apologists for, rather than controllers of, whatever the organisation does. Many authorities have found that the space for considering purpose, direction and results has been squeezed out.

THE 'COST OF DEMOCRACY'

45 Member involvement in the direction and performance of the authority is an inherent part of the political and representative nature of local government that needs to be recognised and sustained. Equally there may be a need to question the extent of member involvement in operational management, which can be extensive. Some authorities convene significantly more committee meetings than others to run services on a similar scale. (Exhibit 7)

46 Member allowances are only a small part of this cost - indeed, member time, currently projected to cost an average £2,000 a year, for a 17 hour

Exhibit 7
COMMITTEE STRUCTURE
Some authorities convene significantly more committee meetings than others

AUTHORITY ONE:
BUDGET £230m MEETINGS 32

AUTHORITY TWO:
BUDGET £160m MEETINGS 302

week, is very cheap, and may be insufficiently rewarded. Approximately 90% of the so-called 'cost of democracy' is the time that officers spend arranging and attending meetings. And that does not include the cost of writing reports, some of which could be done away with or shortened substantially if members were less involved in details of administration.

47 The officers who are most closely involved in the committee process are also those who are under the greatest pressure to manage all the changes with which their organisations are faced - community charge, a new grant regime, local management of schools, community care and the rest. The preparation of specifications for competitive tendering requires a particularly large input from senior managers.

48 The Commission's recent paper on Retaining and Recruiting Professionals pointed out the importance of devolving the maximum degree of responsibility and recognising officers' achievements. Where members exercise too close a control over operational management, planning becomes difficult, responsibilities are blurred and officers may easily lose motivation.

SOME CONCERNS
49 The Widdicombe committee found that (in common with politics generally) there had been a decline in public confidence in local democracy over the preceding twenty years, with two thirds of respondents (compared to 56%) doubting the willingness or ability of local politicians to deliver what they promised and only 60% (compared to 77%) regarding council

elections as the main determinant of how things were run locally. And the hopes of 1970s proponents of local government re-organisation have been disappointed by election turn-outs that have remained stubbornly in the region of 40%. (The recent municipal elections, held against the background of the introduction of the community charge, attracted a higher turn-out. It is too early to say whether this presages a long-term upsurge of interest in local democracy.)

50 Not all members have been willing to give the extra time that has been found necessary; or they have felt that the difficulty of realising an effective representative role is overwhelming, however much time they commit. There is certainly plenty of anecdotal evidence that potential candidates see the time commitment required as a barrier to standing for the council. Whatever the reasons behind individual decisions, more and more members have stood down in recent years, some of them after quite short periods of council service. Recent elections have seen high levels of turnover unrelated to changes in party control of seats.

51 And within local government not only members have been affected by the growing difficulty of the member role. Officer turnover has also risen, most markedly among those groups of senior officers who need to work most closely with elected members.

52 Some local authority members would argue that central government has created some of these problems. That is as may be. Certainly wave after wave of local government legislation has made life more difficult,

though the Widdicombe committee and the changes which followed its report were attempts to correct abuse and create a better base for member involvement. However, this paper focusses on the future not the past.

LEGISLATION
53 On top of all these long-term trends comes the major reform programme imposed on local government over the last three years. This is not the place to review those reforms in detail. But what impact will they have collectively, on the environment within which elected members operate?

Five points stand out:

(i) The focus on quality of service and customer concerns will continue to grow.

(ii) There will be a clearer distinction between the purchaser, or client side of the council, and the contractors or service providers; CCT requires this. The Education Reform Act and the Community Care legislation push in that direction too.

(iii) Councils will be more varied organisations, with more services contracted out to the private or voluntary sectors, more joint ventures and partnerships between agencies.

(iv) Other legislative changes, for example the duties placed on certain Officers, the responsibilities attaching to the Head of Paid Service, the involvement of members in staff appointments, and the representation on committees will require changes to some member roles.

(v) The community charge will make spending decisions more politically sensitive, increasing the pressure on councils to deliver value for money, and perhaps to re-assess priorities.

54 These developments will increase the strains on the present structure. They will focus attention on the longer term, as more and more services are determined by contract or formula funding. Devolving management to schools, care managers and in-house contractors will mean an increasing emphasis on results and service delivery, less on the details of inputs, which again will be determined by formula funding or contracts. The future focus will be on what is being produced, not so much on how it is delivered. These changes seem likely to increase the Political policy role and to enhance the Representative role at the expense of the Board Member one. The totality of the changes make change to the member role inevitable; without it, the system will break down.

55 Some commentators and some politicians go even further. They think that recent legislation has not gone far enough, and suggest that radical changes in the structure of local government are required if members are to realise their three roles to the full. Proposals have included:

- the division of Board Member and Representative roles between different sets of councillors, perhaps with a directly elected mayor

- a restriction on the scope of member involvement

- a reduction in the number of councillors on each council

- appointed local boards

56 The Commission has not examined these options, or expressed any views on their merits or de-merits. But there appears little prospect that any of these proposals will be legislated into being in the near future. The emphasis must therefore be on how the existing structure might be made to work better. The task that confronts leading members - in minority as well as majority parties - and Chief Officers, is to integrate the three roles of members in the management processes of the authority, for the improved delivery of services, and better community government.

3. DEVELOPING THE MEMBER ROLE

57 The future of local democracy depends on the effectiveness of locally-elected members. Much can be done by The Chief Executive and Chief Officers, to help members exercise better control over the organisations for which they are responsible. But ultimately the task of making members more effective falls on members themselves, particularly leading members.

STRATEGY
58 The challenge, in each authority, is to resolve the tensions inherent in the three roles - Political, Representative and Organisational - and bring them together in a new and coherent way. The detailed solution to the problems will vary from place to place. But all elected councils should ensure that they have in place:

- A broad policy statement of the future direction and role for the authority

- A Performance Review and Reporting System

- A scheme of delegation to officers which keeps members out of day-to-day operational matters as far as possible, while retaining appropriate lines of accountability.

59 These need to be considered together. Increased freedom for officers on the detailed management of resources should carry with it increased responsibility for their decisions, and accountability for performance. Increased delegation requires improved monitoring and reporting arrangements. If members are to place more trust in officers, the latter must show sensitivity to Political and Representative issues.

POLICY
60 Setting clear political directions is difficult. It is often easier to make policy 'on the hoof' so that the authority's strategy is in effect defined by its reaction to crisis. But it is possible to do better than that, as some authorities of all political colours have shown.

61 A subsequent paper in this series will describe a framework for policy planning, and the way in which political aims can be translated into service objectives. But the political aims are for members to determine. The Commission's only point here is that there should be some. Without any clear statement of direction the authority will become becalmed, or even ship-wrecked, and little different from local administration.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

62 Management Paper 5 in this series *'Managing Services Effectively: Perfor*mance *Review'* explained how a performance review system can be put in place and integrated with the management of the authority. In addition the Commission will shortly be updating its performance indicators and, though the Quality Exchange launched earlier this year, is broadening the range of those indicators to encompass measures of service effectiveness and quality assurance processes.

63 Everything points to the need for an increased emphasis on Performance Review. It may be sensible for members to set some form of target for the time they devote to it (ie not less than 10% of their time) so that they can more properly and particularly discharge their Representative role under circumstances that will have radically changed. This may also result in greater accountability on officers for results in exchange for more delega-tion on the management of resources and the operational details of service delivery.

DELEGATION

64 The boundary between what members should decide and what should be delegated is not always clear. In marginal cases, the availability of members' time may be the limiting factor. If too much time is devoted to minor operational issues, there may not be enough time to deal with the matters that really demand member involvement.

65 Even if leading members of councils (or some of them) are currently willing and able to make a heavy commitment of time to enable them to be closely involved in operational management, this might not suit all members. And the impression, suggested by the Widdicombe analysis, that the job cannot be done in less than twenty hours a week may well put off some who might otherwise put themselves forward for election.
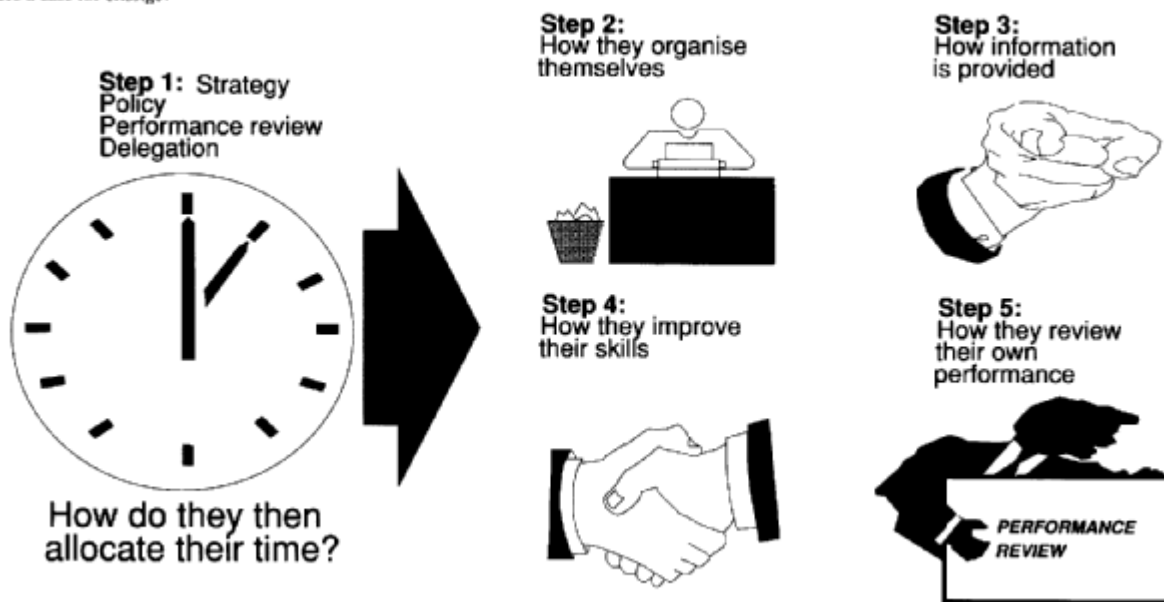
66 A number of councils have made good progress in these three directions. And there is a lot of activity under way, focusing mainly on reviews of committee structures, cycles and agendas, in an attempt to relate them more closely to the demands of the new legislative environment.

67 That is not a bad place to start. But the remainder of this section sets out a structured approach to reviewing the members' role, which some councils may find helpful as they move forward (Exhibit 8).

STEP ONE:
ASSESSING THE PROBLEMS
68 How much change is possible, or desirable, and how quickly it can be implemented, will vary from authority to authority. Much will depend on what progress has been made So far, the political balances and power structures necessary to deliver any change, member/officer trust, and the development of improved management processes.

Exhibit 8

EXAMINING THE MEMBERS' ROLE

Is there a case for change?

Step 1: Strategy
Policy
Performance review
Delegation

How do they then allocate their time?

Step 2:
How they organise themselves

Step 3:
How information is provided

Step 4:
How they improve their skills

Step 5:
How they review their own performance

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The first set of questions to answer focuses on the authority's current position, and aims to assess the extent to which there is a case for change.

QUESTIONS:

- Does the authority have clear and explicit objectives for the future of its area, its own future as an organisation, and its role (and other agencies) as effective service deliverers?

- Is progress towards those objectives subject to regular appraisal by members?

- Could the boundaries between member and officer responsibilities be made clearer?

- Is the cost of member involvement in operational management justified in every instance by the value members add? Could more issues be delegated, but accountability improved by a Performance Review system?

- Are officers burdening the committee process with issues they should be dealing with as managers?

- Is the time commitment required a discouragement to potentially valuable future councillors?

69 If there is a case for change, then the focus needs to shift to:

- the organisational framework within which members work

- their information needs

- their skills and support

- their own performance

STEP TWO
GETTING ORGANISED
70 The structure within which decisions are taken can do much to help members focus on policy issues. In most authorities, it is the committee structure which determines the whole network of formal and informal decision-making groups.

71 Committees which are solely concerned with the management of resources often occupy a high proportion of member time. And policy committees are frequently concerned with organisational detail rather than policy co-ordination. While there is clearly a need to centralise the strategic decisions on financial, physical and human resources that affect the whole of the authority, details of policy implementation and resource management should be delegated to service committees or departments. But even within service committees there is often a greater concern for inputs and staffing issues and less for the delivery of service.

QUESTIONS:

- Does the committee structure focus centrally on policy and strategy, delegating resource and service management where possible to service committees/departments?

- Do service committees need to focus more on performance and results and the impact of service delivery on customers?

72 Keeping down the numbers present at committee meetings can also help to improve their focus. Large committees take longer to conduct business than small ones. They are

also less representative than they look, since a smaller proportion of the membership can contribute. And formal committees are more suited to dealing with a variety of detailed issues rather than concentrating on a few matters of real importance.

73 A small number of main committees, each with a restricted membership and meeting at infrequent intervals, backed up by a larger number of sub-committees (or less formal working groups), is likely to be more effective at tackling the strategic issues, and more economical of both member and officer time, than a structure in which unwieldy main committees deal with both strategic and operational matters. More committees may not be undesirable, so long as all committees are clearly focused and avoid duplicating each other's work.

74 If sub-committees are set up, they should have clearly- defined purposes and specific delegated powers, which they should be expected to use. There is no point in setting up a sub-committee if its agenda is to be considered afresh at the parent committee meeting. Similar considerations should also apply to main committees in their relationships to the council.

QUESTIONS:

- Might a different structure reduce the total time spent by members in committee yet increase real involvement?

- Are some issues better considered by more informal working groups?

- Do committees and sub-committees have adequate authority?

75 With any given committee structure, the frequency of meetings is determined by the amount of business, and/or the requirement to make decisions within a specified time - as for example on planning applications. But a review of the powers delegated to Chief Officers or sub-committees could result in fewer main committee meetings being necessary. This in turn could bring into question the planned frequency of meetings and the length of the committee cycle.

QUESTION:

- Could the general committee cycle be extended?

76 The formal committee meeting is not the ideal setting for the explicit discussion of service aims and standards and development of policy issues. A number of authorities have experimented with informal working parties or panels, sometimes including both members and officers.

77 Even where a committee meeting is the most appropriate forum, unavoidable issues of operational management may dominate the agenda. An annual or semi-annual meeting is set aside in a number of authorities exclusively for performance review (or for a review of objectives), sometimes away from the restricting atmosphere of the committee suite at the Town Hall. This is a practice that others could usefully follow.

QUESTIONS:

- Does the form, the formality and the setting of each meeting match the issues to be considered?

- Should some committee meetings during the normal yearly cycle be mainly concerned with objective setting/performance review?

STEP THREE
KEEPING INFORMED

78 Delegating control over resources to service committees may help to change the focus of the committee structure. But clear signposting of agendas can also assist members to concentrate on the important matters, both in preparation and at the committee meeting.

Questions:

- Are agendas organised to give priority to the important questions?

- Are items differentiated according to the reason for their inclusion?

79 Not all reports are as clearly written as they might be. Bureaucratic language is avoidable; what is more difficult is to present policy options in concrete terms, so that members concentrate on the effects of what is proposed rather than the means of delivery. This requires both a high level of presentational skill and a good understanding by officers of the environment in which members perform their "outsider" roles.

80 In some authorities the amount of business (and paper) that members are

expected to assimilate before the committee and deal with at the meeting is just too much for effective decision making. This may occur because lack of delegation to officers or poor presentation by them, or both.

81 In other authorities the committee process bears the whole weight of keeping members informed. For information on what other committees a doing they have to rely on reports to council. And some committee agenda are more than half made up of item on which no decision is required, but which may still be the subject of (inconclusive) debate. This information could be better communicated - as it is in some authorities - though well presented members information bulletins.

QUESTIONS:

- What has been done to improve officers' skills at report-writing and presentation?

- Do committee papers and the information system recognise the local as well as the service interests of members?

- Are members given too much paper?

- Is there an information system for members outside the committee process?

STEP FOUR
DEVELOPING
SKILLS/PROVIDING SUPPORT

82 Members make the ultimate decisions about what is good for the authority. But to do so they need to understand how the authority works, in organisational as well as in technical terms. Few councillors will have

had experience of being responsible for an organisation as large as even a district council; even so, they may be reluctant to leave officers to manage unless they know what management is.

83 The principal source from which new members learn is the example presented by their established colleagues. But there is scope for this traditional form of learning to be supplemented by some more structured approaches, in which existing members, local authority officers and outside organisations could all play a part. The training and development of members needs to encompass all their three roles.

84 Even where there is strong mutual trust, member training cannot, and some members would strongly argue should not, be left to the local authority alone. There is an important part for the Local Government Management Board and the political parties to play, both in explaining the context of local government and in developing specific skills.

85 Within the local authority organisation, the Chief Executive is the person best able to ensure a consistent approach towards members, and a recognition of the needs of their various roles. Those involved in dealing with members need to be trained to recognise the conflicting pressures which members face in their different roles inside and outside the organisation. And in organising such training for officers it might be appropriate to obtain member views and/or member contributions.

QUESTIONS:

- Is there a member training programme?

- Does it include explanation of management processes?

- Are officers trained to understand the problems members face?

- Is there scope for more member involvement in training officers?

86 Members may need support also in carrying out their representative and political roles, indeed legislation recognises this. Some authorities provide clerical and typing support. A system for dealing with complaints is also important (since its absence might otherwise burden the committee system), and for giving feedback on how each complaint was handled. Equally important is the organisation's responsiveness to member requests. A guide to the organisation is also helpful particularly for those services where members may have to deal quite frequently with the public. Finally the members' role on important outside organisations is often inadequately supported and this Representative role in providing feed-back to the authority may be under-utilised.

87 Members are sometimes unnecessarily reluctant to request additional support, but a review of the committee processes might reduce the cost of committee administration and thus enable additional support services to members to be self, financing. In particular the Political leadership and Committee chairs are in most need of support, since these are the people who devote most time and are required to manage the three member roles well, balancing the needs of the organisation against external pressures.

QUESTION:

- Is there a need for a improved member support service?

STEP FIVE
REVIEWING MEMBER PERFORMANCE
88 Ultimately it is up to members to ensure that they have control of the authorities for which they are responsible, that their attention is focused on the strategic issues and that they are given the support necessary for them to play their three roles. Whatever arrangements an authority makes to assist its members should be subject to regular - probably annual - review, focusing on the areas for improvement described above.

89 A review of member performance might begin with a general consideration of whether the authority needs to change its focus and what issues merit respective member and officer attention and decision. From this would follow an examination of committee structure. Attention should then be paid to the member support services and how well they enable members to carry out their organisational and representative roles. Finally, an attempt should be made to identify improvements that could be made either to the management processes or to the skills of members which would enable them to do their job better.

QUESTION:

- Do members periodically review the effectiveness of their involvement in, and their control over, the management and other processes that support them?

90 There is, or should be, no conflict between politics and management in local government. But the structures and processes operated by many councils make it easy for conflict to develop. A sensitive review process on the lines described above should help defuse tensions where they exist, and allows both groups to achieve their objectives.

91 The changes required are most likely to take place where a strong Political Leadership and a Chief Executive committed to improved political management communicate to their respective colleagues an understanding of political priorities on the one hand, and management capabilities on the other. Only where politicians and managers understand each other will members' aspirations be translated into action.