

Evaluation of Rotherham Council's Member Development Programme

Executive Summary

Background: The Local Government Association (LGA) has carried out an evaluation of Rotherham Council's programme of training and support for its councillors. The results of the evaluation feed into an ongoing cycle of improvement work within the authority. This improvement work has included an induction programme for councillors who were newly-elected at the 2015 local elections; and a wider programme of support for members in leadership positions. The evaluation was carried out between June 2015 and November 2016.

Methodology: Training sessions and support events were offered to all 63 council members (including 16 who were newly-elected in 2015). Fifty-six of these councillors attended at least one training session. All were asked, immediately after attending the training and support events, to complete an evaluation sheet (207 sheets were completed and analysed). Ten to 12 months later, an online survey was sent to all 39 members who were re-elected in 2016 (completed by nine councillors). In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with 15 councillors who did not submit an online survey (12 to 15 months after their training), and an online survey of appraisers was also carried out (completed by four peer mentors and two councillor colleagues; all well-placed to give feedback on relevant councillors' skills and strengths).

Aims and expectations: Based on the evaluation sheets, Rotherham Council's training and support appears to have met most councillors' aims in terms of raising their general awareness of pertinent issues and developing their understanding of specific elements relevant to Rotherham.

Training design and content: Evidence from the evaluations sheets shows that the design and content of training sessions was, largely, well-received. Satisfaction with the training was high. Indeed, sessions had mostly met or exceeded expectations. The sessions attended were largely thought to cover issues relevant to councillors' roles, and most councillors thought the sessions ran for an appropriate length. Almost all of those who gave feedback described the training positively, using terms such as 'interesting', 'informative', 'valuable', 'though-provoking', 'worthwhile' and 'educational'.

Knowledge and skills: Most councillors, using the evaluation sheets, reported improvements in their knowledge and skills, as a result of the training and support provided

by Rotherham Council. The most beneficial aspects had been: the broad understanding gained, the 'plain-terms' presentation, the sharing of ideas and experiences, the quality of speakers, the Q&A sessions and the thought-provoking nature of the sessions. Asked via the evaluation sheets how they would put their learning into practice, or what they might do differently as a result of the training, councillors mentioned using improved questioning skills, greater collaboration and better information gathering and sharing.

Local leadership: Evidence from the survey and interviews suggests that Rotherham Council's training has positively impacted on councillors' leadership skills. Interviewees spoke about having greater clarity about what leadership involves (including corporate parenting) and having more confidence in asking questions and challenging others. Councillors spoke about feeling more confident in planning and budget-setting, and chairing meetings. Increased confidence in leading, however, was more likely to be achieved by councillors with limited leadership experience. Appraisers were also asked to give feedback on this core skill. Their responses suggest that mediating between different people with conflicting needs might be an area for improvement for some councillors.

Partnership working: Good evidence of improved partnership working among the councillors emerged from both the surveys and interviews. Councillors said the training provided a good environment for working with council colleagues, including those from other parties. For some, the training had increased their knowledge of other agencies and bodies, and had expanded the scale and quality of their partnership working. The scale of the impact was, again, dependent on councillors' previous experience. Appraiser feedback suggests that demonstrating how one's work has made a difference might be a specific area of improvement for some councillors.

Communication skills: Feedback given via the surveys and interviews points towards reasonable increases in members' communication skills, as a result of the training. Responses were split between those who had found the training beneficial and those who felt they were already effective communicators – the latter were less likely to report any improvements to their communication skills. Of those who felt they had developed new techniques and skills, information on communicating with the press had been particularly useful, as had training on chairing meetings and asking questions. Developing relationships with one's local communities was another area where some councillors felt the training had helped. Appraiser feedback suggests that speaking to the media might still be an area of improvement for some councillors.

Political understanding: Reasonable evidence emerged from the surveys and interviews to suggest that councillors' political understanding had developed, or been topped-up, by the training. In particular, work in the following areas was identified as useful: roles and boundaries, good political conduct, reflecting and listening, accountability and responsibilities, and learning from other councils. No specific areas for improvement emerged from the appraiser survey.

Scrutiny, monitoring and challenge: Strong evidence was found from the surveys and interviews of an improved understanding of councillors' role within the scrutiny process. Councillors spoke very positively about gaining a better understanding of: how to challenge decisions more effectively, how to scrutinise information, how to ask more searching questions and how to think more deeply about certain issues. Overall, there was a feeling that the council had developed hugely regarding its scrutiny function. However, appraiser feedback suggests that holding decision-makers to account might still be an area for improvement for some councillors.

Ethics, regulation and standards: Good evidence emerged from the surveys and interviews that councillors had gained a greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a councillor, and protocols and standards of behaviour, from the training. The training had helped some to more fully consider the consequences of their actions and why the council's culture had needed changing. Councillors were positive about the child safeguarding training; it had underlined their responsibilities, increased their awareness and given them the opportunity to re-engage with the issue. Appraiser feedback suggests that keeping up-to-date with legal protocols/procedures might be an area for improvement for some councillors.

Suggestions for improvement and further training: On balance, based on all the data collected, councillors were positive about the training and support they had received from Rotherham Council. Table 1 presents some possible areas for improvement and further training, as suggested by councillors.

Table 1: Suggestions for improvement and further training	
Session specific	More time for discussion (or on-going sessions)
	More time between sessions (too much all at once)
	More officer involvement
	More interactivity (less traditional style)
	More evening and weekend sessions
	More case studies (incl. Rotherham-specific, how to apply knowledge)
	More mixing of participants across sessions and better political balance
	More mixing levels of experience (but also more experience-relevant sessions)
Subject specific	More on data analysis and sourcing information (incl. measuring success)
	More on organisational workings (incl. cross-organisation contacts e.g. social workers)
	More on delivery styles (incl. how cultural diversity affects communication, softer skills for committee engagement)
	More on warning signs of child sexual exploitation (incl. training for public, schools and members)
	More on children and young people (incl. Children Act, accessing services, looked after children issues)
	More on council's relationship with the police (incl. cybercrime and grooming)
	More on getting the best from officers and the backbencher role
	More on dealing with unethical behaviour among councillors