NIHR | School for Social Care Research

Councillors and Care

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Elected councillors perform a range of functions in the adult social system at the local level.

Executive councillors who hold the social care portfolio, are responsible for strategic decision making including for budgets.

Members of scrutiny committees are responsible for providing effective challenge to decision makers and for monitoring the delivery of services. In the communities, ward councillors represent councillors they will often be contacted by residents before formal services.

However, councillors are neglected in discussions of the adult social care system.

Ward councillors in particular are an untapped resource when it comes to adult social care.

The Councillors and Care project aimed to identify the different ways in which elected councillors in England might shape adult social care services.

We focussed on the executive, scrutiny and ward roles of councillors and identified seven ways that each might make a difference. In addition, we considered what organisational conditions, training and support might allow councillors to be effective in their roles.

Details about the project and the resources it produced can be found on the project website.

This study explored how councillors can help shape adult social care services and make a difference for people using services and carers. It sought to understand the different mechanisms that councillors might use to be effective in their executive, scrutiny and ward roles and to develop resources to help support councillors and their organisations.

METHODS

A realist approach was taken to develop 'mini theories' about how councillors can make a difference. A realist approach starts

with some tentative theories which are then tested and refined through empirical research. Specifically, the researcher is interested in the mechanisms that cause outcomes and the conditions in which these mechanisms are activated.

Following a review of existing academic and practice literature, theories were tested and iterated through national stakeholder interviews (12) and interviews across case sites (43).

FINDINGS

Councillors are making interventions, making a difference

Our main finding is that councillors are making a difference through a variety of interventions in their different roles.

Elected councillors can play important leadership roles in the adult social care system, although these roles might often be overlooked and officers may see councillors as 'policy presenters' rather than 'policy makers'. The executive roles identified through the research were:

STRATEGY-SHAPER
Help shape the council's adult social care strategy to focus on the right groups and priorities

STORY-MAKER
With citizens and staff, create a shared narrative about the council's adult social care strategy

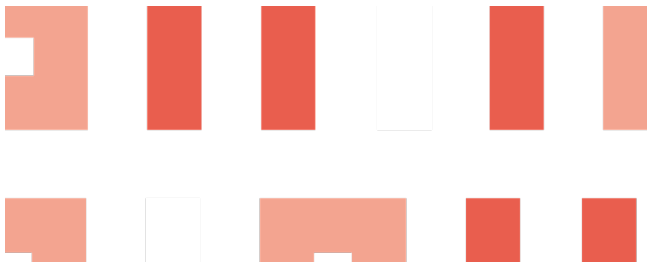
NETWORKER
Build good relationships with partners, including health, the voluntary sector and care providers

CHALLENGER
Support and challenge the council's senior officers to improve services

ENABLER
Foster a culture that encourages innovation and co-production

CHAMPION
Promote adult social care as a key service for the council, for partners and for the general population

CONNECTOR
Link different council departments to make sure services are more effective



Scrutiny councillors can play an important role in the adult social care system. In many ways scrutiny of adult social care is similar to scrutiny of other areas. There are key differences, however, these include being inclusive of people with lived experience of adult social care and the highly complex and technical nature of services.

The scrutiny roles identified through the research were:

CHALLENGER
Provide constructive challenge to the executive councillors responsible for adult social care

ASSESSOR
Give feedback to help improve the performance of service providers and partnerships

INVESTIGATOR
Explore issues of concern in the community and bring things to light

ALLY
Involve people who use services and their carers in council scrutiny of adult social care services

INNOVATOR
Propose solutions through research and credible recommendations

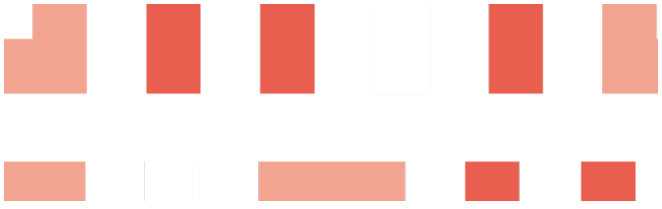
WATCHDOG
Monitor performance and risk across the care market and raise concerns where needed

ADVOCATE
Make sure that important issues for people who use services and carers are considered

Whilst ward councillors do play a visible role in the adult social care system, particularly through casework, ward councillors do not always recognise that they are doing this.

Furthermore, ward councillors are involved in many activities in the community that have a preventative effect and likely help keep residents out of the adult social care system. Ward councillors as local leaders also have the potential to support intelligence gathering and highlight service issues with officers telling us that more could be done to utilise ward councillors for this purpose.

Overall, we found that ward councillors are an 'untapped resource' within the adult social care system.



The ward councillor roles identified through the research were:

PARTNER
Help and support care service providers who are based in the community

CASEWORKER
Support, advise and advocate for individuals and families

VOLUNTEER
Help local projects that improve the health, wellbeing and independence of citizens

CONNECTOR
Signpost people to services and opportunities

ADVOCATE
Make sure that the needs of people using care services are reflected in service planning

WATCHDOG
Raise concerns about services to the council and other organisations

SENSEMAKER
Share messages with the community about how adult social care works.

Providing an important connection between citizens and adult social care services

In addition, the research was able to shed light on how councillors are able to provide an important connection between citizens and adult social care services.

Effective councillors in this space are able work with citizens in ways that officers cannot. They are able to be 'on the same level' and 'on the same side' as citizens, often as a consequence of being from the same place and being known in the community.

Councillors are also able to employ effective conversation techniques to empathise and listen whilst being honest and not overpromising. At the same time, effective councillors are skilled at building relationships with officers to help them achieve benefits for citizens.

They make informal connections before they need to ask for help, are respectful and accepting of what officers tell them, only make contact for the 'really serious' cases and give feedback and thanks.

Features of a supportive culture

The research explored the conditions in which councillors were more likely to be able to make a difference. We found that councillors could be more effective where the organisation had a 'convivial atmosphere' and an 'open door' policy for councillors with value placed on the intelligence that councillors could bring.

Plain language and clear messages were seen as particularly important given the sometimes technical nature of adult social care services – acronyms, jargon and job titles make it harder for councillors to engage.

Finally, councillors need to be kept continuously informed, ideally through regular, bite-sized briefings, seminars and conferences, and not just kept on the 'who else do we need to tell?' list.

Training and development – what works?

Gaining insights about what helps councillors to learn and develop in the context of adult social care was important both to help improve the effectiveness of councillors in this space and to inform the development offer from the project.

We found that, as well as being regular, sessions need to feature interactive debate and discussion and have a specific practical focus for example development days or policy forums looking at transfers from hospital or residential care placements.

Informally, effective development for councillors is supported by in-person, informal meetings with officers and partners and by visiting services and frontline staff, for example "a cup of tea with the team". Peer networks and mentoring were also seen as valuable ways to help councillors navigate through the complexities of adult social care.

We have free to download resources for councillors on our project website. We also run development sessions for councillors to improve knowledge, skills and confidence around social care.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

The main message from this research is that, whilst councillors can play important roles across the adult social care system, they are often underutilised and their roles often unrecognised. Councillors are barely mentioned in the academic and practice literature.

There are many examples of councillors making effective interventions and participants were able to identify further potential ways in which councillors can make a difference. Councillor interventions, however, vary greatly across different areas suggesting that more strategic approaches to engaging councillors in adult social care could be beneficial.

Executive councillors are well placed to be effective system leaders as they are able

to draw on diverse networks and provide important challenge and support for officers. Specifically, executive councillors can use their political authority and connections to communities to 'ground' officers and raise system issues and concerns.

Scrutiny councillors, through in-depth reviews for example, can use their community connections and personal experience to shine a light in issues that affect vulnerable and less heard citizens that might be picked up by officers.

Ward councillors, through their case work and community connections can offer early earning of failures in the adult social care system. Ward councillors can also support preventative mechanisms in the community through their support for local projects that foster wellbeing.

The research found that councillors are more able to make a difference if they operate within a supportive culture. Councils should offer a 'convivial atmosphere' and an 'open door' policy for councillors and place value on the intelligence that councillors can bring. Plain language and clear messages, along with keeping councillors continuously informed, ideally through regular, bite-sized briefings, seminars and conferences, are all helpful for supporting councillors.

Training and development work best when interactive and focused on specific practical issues. Informal meetings with frontline staff, peer networks and mentoring were all found to be helpful.

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