

Best practice case study summary

Charter for Elected Member Development

London Borough of Brent

Introduction

This local government best practice case study is part of a series highlighting the value of Member development where enabled by the Charter for Elected Member Development.

We have explored the stories of those organisations leading the way. We aim to raise the profile of Charter-enabled Member development as a highly-effective approach to improvement, drive its consideration as a strategic priority and celebrate the progress that has been made, whilst identifying and sharing best practice for the benefit of current and prospective practitioners.

We have conducted a programme of interviews with key stakeholders from each participating council, seeking real insights and experience. From the London Borough of Brent, we are grateful for the opportunity to speak with:

- Councillor Muhammed Butt, Leader of the Council and Chair of the Member Development Steering Group
- Carolyn Downs, Chief Executive
- Councillor Sandra Kabir, Majority Group Chief Whip
- Councillor Promise Knight
- Peter Gadsdon, Director, Performance, Policy & Partnerships
- Thomas Cattermole, Head of Executive & Member Services
- Jacqueline Carr, Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Brent

Background

The London Borough of Brent was the first authority in London to achieve the Charter Plus standard for Elected Member Development, doing so in 2015. Brent originally achieved Charter recognition in October 2010, several years after launching a new vision for Member development: to ensure the best possible community leadership by developing councillors to their full potential.

However, the real journey to current levels of strategic momentum, maturity and impact in Member development at Brent began in 2013, alongside the decision to reapply for Charter status. With an unprecedented high level of councillor turnover anticipated for the local election in 2014* it was clear that the successful integration of new, first-time councillors into the Council and community would depend on a more robust and structured induction programme.

The Council recognised the need to reprioritise Member development and, building on the foundations already in place, embraced Charter reassessment with new rigour and energy.

Brent successfully reaccredited in January 2014 and subsequently applied for Charter Plus status, which was awarded in September 2015. The arrival of a new administration and a new corporate management team during that period also contributed to the elevation of Member development as a critical success factor in the future of the borough.

Brent recommitted to the Charter in January 2018 and successfully reassessed for their Charter Plus status in December.

** Approximately 50% of councillors elected in May 2014 were new, of a total of 63.*



Councillor Muhammed Butt

“Supporting and developing our Members as community leaders is critical to the success of the Borough Plan which sets out our vision and commitments. All councillors – the newly elected and those with many years’ experience – have a duty to themselves, their fellow councillors and their electorate to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to carry out their wide range of roles as effectively as possible.

For this, they need access to high quality learning and development. We are therefore committed to providing a learning and development programme which supports and expands Members’ abilities to understand and represent their communities, and to building a robust development and support offer according to the expressed desires of front-line councillors as they carry out their work.”



Councillor Muhammed Butt

“If councillors don’t know, how can they deliver for their residents? It doesn’t make for a good council. We needed a different way of doing it, with a more formal and focused structure.

Through the Charter lens our Member development has greater substance, credibility and prestige in the eyes of our councillors.

For democracy to work, you have to support those individuals who represent it...The electorate need to have faith in the system and the people who take on the mantle of community leadership.

We are moving towards better diversity and making a significant investment in future leadership...It helps them to grow as individuals, ready to take the next step, and it helps us to develop the leaders we need for tomorrow.

Our councillors are in a much better place: more capable, engaged and involved in our decision making.

Engaging with external training partners and other councils has taken our Member development to the next level...We can enrich our thinking and build solutions that are not just fit for purpose but fit for the future.”



Carolyn Downs

“Creating a strong foundation of healthy behaviour became our priority...giving everyone the chance to be part of the solution by driving it through development.

Helping individuals develop the skills and confidence they need to push and challenge appropriately and constructively is a critical factor in sustainable progress.

One of the biggest impacts and positive outcomes for councillors is how well the programme sets them up to serve their communities.

They must have confidence in their own judgement, and for that they need our support and investment.

The investment in development has ameliorated the state of relationships considerably...Trust and collaborative behaviour are now the norm.

We’re always talking about what we can do next: about what new development mechanisms we can implement.

Our approach to development needs analysis has paid impressive dividends.”

Key drivers for Charter-enabled Member development

1. As part of a broader programme of cultural reform.
2. Anticipation of the need to effectively and efficiently provide induction for an unprecedented high volume of entirely new councillors.
3. Ambition to make the councillor role more attractive, accessible and achievable in order to promote higher levels of diversity.

Specific value of Charter as a framework for implementation and improvement

1. Represents an externally recognised and visible standard to engage, align and focus the organisation and key stakeholders.
2. Provides a nationally proven and prestigious 'excellence' path to follow.



Councillor Sandra Kabir

“I’m sure many talented people have lost interest or progressed more slowly because of a lack of quality induction.

Charter focused us all on striving to reach a highly regarded standard that reflects the level of our commitment...It provides tried and tested guidance and structure, helping us formulate a solid and deliverable plan of action.

Our new councillors have a great advantage over their predecessors in the structured development programme at their disposal.

We need to be able to respond with the right information, we need to know our wards inside out and we need to be more prominent and involved in the community.

Our development programme is encouraging richer diversity at every level of our councillor population.

For an individual wanting to promote their political career, our development offer is invaluable.

Our training prepares us to make difficult decisions because it helps us understand the total context in all its complexity.

Commitment increases, professionalism increases, things get done – and that can only be beneficial to us and our residents.

Staying up to date is fundamental now...The solution is continuous learning – as with any profession.”



**Councillor
Promise
Knight**

“The induction training was intense but invaluable and incredibly rewarding. It’s provided a strong understanding of our role, helped us navigate all the systems and processes, and enabled us to hit the ground running. I don’t see how new councillors could function without it.

It has all felt very supportive and welcoming – focused on our needs, rather than the Council’s.

The training is proving to be an important catalyst for many of us: equipping and encouraging us to reflect, plan and develop a broader strategic vision for our wards.”



**Peter
Gadsdon**

“Our Charter accreditation raises the visibility of our commitment...legitimises our approach and gives us a strong narrative for engaging councillors.

Charter has inspired us to raise the standard of our learning and development offer and interventions.

The framework has enabled us to engage in structured thinking and discussion about Member development.

We can help them to better understand and fulfil the ‘why’ of their purpose.

Each year our chairs are more confident in their roles.

It’s critical to the effective operation of the Council...that we all understand the rules, the reasons and the ways of working.

This approach helps everyone to understand motivations, perspectives and behaviour, which helps to build the team.

We’re developing good, confident councillors who are active on the London political scene and promoting Brent.”

Benefits at a glance



Benefits for councillors

- Enables new councillors to hit the ground running whilst accelerating their integration into the Council.
- Equips councillors with the skills, knowledge and confidence to engage and serve communities more effectively.
- Empowers councillors and councillor diversity and supports councillor career development.

Benefits for councils

- Enables councillors to add greater strategic value and contribute to enhancing Council performance.
- Contributes to cultural reform by helping to improve behavioural standards and working relationships.
- Fosters a more sophisticated and strategic Member development capability: enabling innovation, expanding horizons and encouraging higher ambitions

Benefits for communities

- Communities and the challenges affecting them are more effectively understood, represented and provided for.
- Feedback and enquiries from residents are addressed and actioned more effectively and efficiently.

Member development at the London Borough of Brent today

Member development at Brent is managed by a cross-party Member Development Steering Group, comprising the Leader of the Council (also Chair of the Steering Group), the Majority Party Chief Whip and a Member of the Opposition Group. The Steering Group is supported by the Chief Executive of the Council and the Head of Executive & Member Services.

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Thomas Cattermole

“Our political and managerial leadership could clearly see the need to prioritise Member development in the context of the huge turnover predicted for 2014.

Charter is the most widely recognised indicator of performance in Member development, and that has helped focus the minds of our leaders on the agenda.

Charter has challenged us to look more carefully at our needs (both individually and organisationally) and ask, ‘are we doing the best we can?’

It has helped Member development evolve... into something we can be truly proud of.

Input from Members is crucial in identifying our strategic priorities and the development programme has had a profoundly positive impact on that.

Our role and committee-specific training is improving how we function as a council... Our service leadership training is helping to raise service standards and improving how we deliver them.

We’ve developed a strong instinct for the knowledge our Members need, which enables all of us to stay informed and ahead of the curve.

In the past, Member development relied entirely on internal provision, but we’ve broken out of that bubble, bringing a wealth of external expertise in-house.”



Jacqueline Carr

“It’s important that residents feel listened to and that their questions and concerns are answered openly and honestly. Member development can only enhance this engagement and the outcomes.

Our relationship with councillors and the Council has improved without a doubt... Today, our relationship is warmer, defined by partnership and collaboration. They are very much a listening council now.”

The Member Development Steering Group owns the Council’s Member Learning & Development Plan. Other responsibilities include:

- oversight of the Member Learning and Developing Programme and associated budget;
- reviewing requests and suggestions for training;
- reviewing attendance levels; and
- maintaining councillor role descriptions.

The Member Learning & Development Plan is monitored quarterly by the Steering Group and reviewed annually by the Council’s Standards Committee. It has a dedicated annual budget, with a dedicated officer responsible for ensuring resources are allocated appropriately. The objectives of the plan are directly informed by the Council’s key priorities in the Borough Plan and delivered through the Member Learning & Development Programme.

The programme offers a rich, varied, innovative and well-structured curriculum, informed by individual role and personal development needs as well as strategic priorities. Scheduling takes councillor personal and professional commitments and responsibilities into account wherever possible.

Development needs are defined in terms of:

- Skills (e.g. chairing skills and the ability to facilitate discussions; confidence in public speaking; casework management)
- IT skills (e.g. social media; MS Office; using handheld mobile devices)
- Knowledge (e.g. community leadership and engagement; local government finance and budgets; code of conduct)

A Member Needs Analysis programme has been conducted in 2014, 2017 and 2018, to identify general development priorities, whilst a Personal Development Plan process is in place to help identify and prioritise ongoing needs for individual councillors.

The Member Learning & Development Programme employs a range of flexible learning solutions, including mentoring, e-learning, group presentations, interactive role-play, networking and sharing good practice and development opportunities with other London boroughs.

Training and development is largely provided by internal officers and partners, although the Council has engaged external expertise when appropriate.

For example, the Steering Group commissioned the Local Government Association to deliver a series of ‘Modern Councillor’ workshops in response to specific needs identified through the Needs Analysis programme.

The programme also includes comprehensive induction for new councillors, development opportunities for aspiring leaders and backbench councillors, and training to ensure councillors are aware of and understand changes in relevant legislation.