

Best practice case study

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

To transfer maximum value from all they have kindly shared with us, we have built the core content of this study in their own words.

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Please note: whilst there are important benefits for residents in Charter-enabled Member development, they are interdependently embedded in the council and councillor benefits identified. Throughout the case study, therefore, the 'benefits for residents' are identifiable where they emerge in the context of broader benefits. Key themes are also summarised in 'benefits at a glance'.



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.”

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.

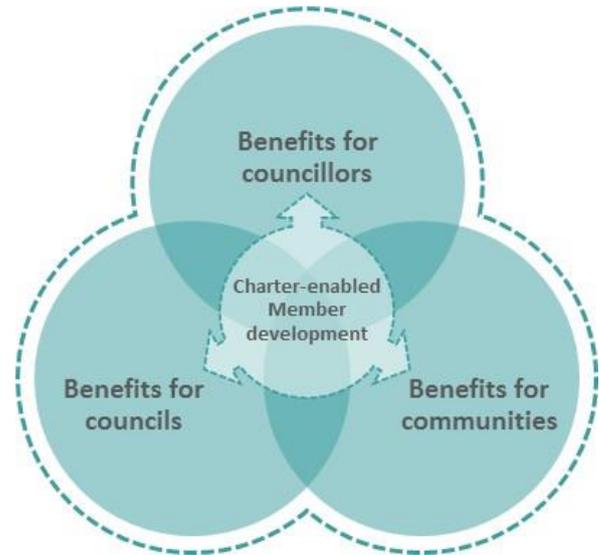
The Council recognised the need to reprioritise Member development and, building on the foundations already in place, embraced Charter reassessment with new rigour and energy.

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.*

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.

Key drivers for Charter-enabled Member development

1. As part of a broader programme of cultural reform



**Carolyn
Downs**

"When I joined the Council in 2015, it was clear that a great deal of work was needed to improve the state of relationships. We were already on a journey, but our improvement needed to be defined by what we were heading towards, not what we were leaving behind. Resident outcomes are much improved if they emerge from relationships built on trust, respect and shared purpose. Poor behaviour can undermine everything. Creating a strong foundation of healthy behaviour became our priority. That meant embedding very clear standards and a strong narrative about roles and accountabilities, and giving everyone the chance to be part of the solution by driving it through development."

2. Anticipation of the need to effectively and efficiently provide induction for an unprecedented high volume of entirely new councillors



**Councillor
Muhammed
Butt**

"Our training used to be nothing more than a big introductory meeting with PowerPoint and all the directors. Nothing that prepared us for the breadth and depth of the councillor role. Nothing that really helped us understand what the Council actually did. We were expected to find our own way. But if councillors don't know, how can they deliver for their residents? They won't be aware of all the underlying issues. They won't understand how to influence change. It doesn't make for a good council. We needed a different way of doing it, with a more formal and focused structure."



**Thomas
Cattermole**

"Although our Charter journey had already begun, the potential turnover of Members in 2014 put an indisputable emphasis on needing a structured framework for induction and beyond. Our political and managerial leadership could clearly see the need to prioritise Member development in that context."



**Councillor
Sandra
Kabir**

"Fifteen years ago, it could be quite painful to be a new councillor. There was no training and nothing structured about how we were educated and integrated into the Council. We were blind and didn't know what we didn't know. We found our way as best we could. Over the years I'm sure many talented people have lost interest or progressed more slowly because of a lack of quality induction."

3. Ambition to make the councillor role more attractive, accessible and achievable in order to promote higher levels of diversity



**Councillor
Muhammed
Butt**

"There's a perception that being a councillor is not for young people, but without new generations coming in we risk getting stuck in a rut, right when our need for innovation and fresh thinking is the most acute it's ever been. To develop the next generation of leaders we need to be a forward-looking council and continuously improve how we represent and engage with our communities. We need young people of all backgrounds to come forward from our communities, and we need to help them recognise and realise their potential."



**Carolyn
Downs**

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



**Peter
Gadsdon**

"Brent has always embraced and empowered new communities. Our multicultural heritage extends back several generations. We recognise a responsibility to help new communities settle well and engage confidently in civic life. That includes encouraging and enabling them to participate in local government. It is vital that the Council reflects the communities we serve – for our performance as well as social cohesion and wellbeing – and empowering diversity in community leadership is fundamental to that."

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



**Councillor
Muhammed
Butt**

“Every council has to provide training, but to get the right outcomes, councillors need to trust that it will make a difference. Through the Charter lens our Member development has greater substance, credibility and prestige in the eyes of our councillors. Packaging our training in a Charter programme gives councillors confidence in the learning and development we’re giving them and helps us communicate the benefits more persuasively. Our high attendance rates are testament to their recognition of the value.”



**Councillor
Sandra
Kabir**

“Councillor development is an important objective for the Council and our party. Charter focused us all on striving to reach a highly regarded standard that reflects the level of our commitment.”



**Peter
Gadsdon**

“Our Charter accreditation raises the visibility of our commitment to a high standard of Member development, legitimises our approach and gives us a strong narrative for engaging councillors.”



**Thomas
Cattermole**

“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, adding tremendous impetus. Without that commitment at the top, Member development would have continued to be a lower priority and an uphill struggle. Instead, our Members are really buying into it and take up is far better than it used to be.”

2. Provides a nationally proven and prestigious path to excellence



**Councillor
Sandra
Kabir**

“The real value of Charter is that it provides tried and tested guidance and structure, helping us formulate a solid and deliverable plan of action.”



**Peter
Gadsdon**

“Charter has inspired us to raise the standard of our learning and development offer and interventions. You need something to measure against, something to aspire to. External verification is a powerful factor and the framework itself has enabled us to engage in structured thinking and discussion about Member development. It’s also helped us drive greater value out of our relationship with the Local Government Association.”



**Thomas
Cattermole**

“Charter has challenged us to look more carefully at our needs (both individually and organisationally) and ask, ‘are we doing the best we can?’ The framework provides a comprehensive structure and options that we might not have considered otherwise. It has helped Member development evolve from the rather bland and boring ‘traditional’ offer it used to be into something we can be truly proud of.”

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.

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.

Benefits of Charter-enabled Member development for councillors

1. Enables new councillors to hit the ground running whilst accelerating their integration into the Council



**Councillor
Sandra
Kabir**

"Our new councillors have a great advantage over their predecessors in the structured development programme at their disposal. Key information is shared and standards are set. Everything is available, everything is accessible, and with our buddying and mentoring programmes, everyone is supported.

Our pre-election briefing session for candidates plays a critical role in accelerating councillor development. Approximately 100 people attended last year, learning all about what it means to be councillor and what is expected. Some people chose not to stand, but those who remained were all the more ready for the challenge – able to launch their councillor careers with their eyes open."



**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."



Councillor Promise Knight
Continued.

“There is limited formal retention of knowledge and handover at the ward level, but the induction programme goes some way to compensate. Everyone gets involved in delivering the training, exposing you to wisdom from long-serving councillors and opportunities to build relationships with senior officers. It has all felt very supportive and welcoming – focused on our needs, rather than the Council’s.

The pre-election briefing event made it all seem more real and achievable and helped us develop a stronger sense of purpose and optimism. The induction programme feels like a natural progression of that, like a continuous journey of development, and so far the experience is making good on all the expectations that were set.”



Carolyn Downs

“One of the biggest impacts and positive outcomes for councillors is how well the programme sets them up to serve their communities. The Council needs councillors who are better at engaging with residents, better at engaging with us on behalf of residents, and better at mediating the relationship between us, especially regarding what can and cannot be done given limited resources. Councillors must be able to justify and flex their decision making. To do that well they must have confidence in their own judgement, and for that they need our support and investment.”



Councillor Sandra Kabir

“A good councillor needs the capacity to serve residents; that is the reason for our existence after all. We have improved significantly, which is just as well because the role of the councillor is more challenging today. Residents are more demanding. Growing socio-economic instability and other factors are increasing the need for support and the desire to be heard. The questions they ask are more complex and challenging. 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.”



Councillor Promise Knight

“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; challenging us to ask ourselves, ‘how can we be better tomorrow?’ The training has already reinforced for me that we can’t afford to sit and wait for our work to come to us, we must go find it. There are deeply embedded issues that won’t raise themselves, but we can find them if we improve how we engage.”

- 2. Equips councillors with the skills, knowledge and confidence to engage and serve communities more effectively



Councillor Muhammed Butt

“For democracy to work you have to support those individuals who represent it. We all come in to make a difference, but without the ability to understand and collaborate with all stakeholders, we won’t be able to deliver our vision, regardless of how good it looks. The electorate need to have faith in the system and the people who take on the mantle of community leadership. In the past, councillors relied on the system to respond to resident queries, but now they have to be able to provide the answers themselves. This is what people want; this is what creates better outcomes.”





Jacqueline Carr

“Community development and leadership is a big priority for the Council and a very important part of the councillor role. To serve communities appropriately, councillors need to understand how to communicate with them. It’s not just about having a strategy, it’s about action: being visible, accessible and leading by example. 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.”

- 3. Empowers councillors and councillor diversity and supports councillor career development



Councillor Muhammed Butt

“We are moving towards better diversity and making a significant investment in future leadership. We have a young and diverse cabinet and are focused on developing the next cohort coming through. Constant change and the often unforgiving nature of politics make the path they’ve chosen a challenging one. For the good of the Council and the communities we serve, we can help them step up to the mark by making sure they have opportunities to develop themselves.

This year, for example, I have devolved some of my own responsibilities to Cabinet Members. There’s no benefit to the Council for all the power to be held at the top – for meaningful succession planning you need to release that power to potential future leaders. Giving them ownership and training them for greater responsibility encourages ambition and aspiration as well as helping them to discover confidence, recognise their own potential and become more mature in their thinking and decision-making. 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.”



Councillor Sandra Kabir

“The strength of our development programme is encouraging richer diversity at every level of our councillor population. It is much better today than it was ten years ago, and from multiple perspectives, including gender, age, ethnicity and economic background.

Some councillors are hungry for development – an appetite driven not only by the recognition it’s helping them in their current roles, but also because they realise it can help them achieve longer-term ambitions. For an individual wanting to promote their political career, our development offer is invaluable.”



Peter Gadsdon

“The diversity of the Council has changed incredibly. Lots of people are entering local government from across the demographic spectrum. That enables us to work closely with a group who contribute valuable knowledge, ideas and experience beyond the background of ‘traditional’ councillors, while we can help them to better understand and fulfil the ‘why’ of their purpose.”

Benefits of Charter-enabled Member development for councils

- 1. Enables councillors to add greater strategic value and contribute to enhancing council performance



Councillor Muhammed Butt

“We all come from different backgrounds and while we may have our own knowledge, we don’t necessarily understand everything that’s required to deliver healthy outcomes. It’s imperative that councillors understand how to participate, influence and make a valued contribution. They need to have the confidence to stand up and speak with purpose and fact. Today we are all more in sync and our councillors are in a much better place: more capable, engaged and involved in our decision making than they used to be.”





**Councillor
Sandra
Kabir**

“To deliver their responsibilities in the civic centre, councillors have to be trained, encouraged and supported. They need to understand the Council plan and have the skills to deliver it. They need to understand how the Council works and have the skills to participate. It can be daunting. If you don’t have knowledge and confidence, you’ll find it extremely difficult to contribute. Much of what we do can be quite technical, some is quasi-judicial. For some committees, special training is a strict prerequisite. Beyond that: it’s harder to be a councillor now. We face really difficult budget decisions. Our training prepares us to make difficult decisions because it helps us understand the total context in all its complexity.”



**Thomas
Cattermole**

“Member development is intrinsically linked to our strategy. Input from Members is crucial in identifying our strategic priorities and the development programme has had a profoundly positive impact on that, so much so that a 2016 peer review by the Local Government Association made special note of it.

Our role and committee-specific training is improving how we function as a council. Management, participation and behaviour in committee meetings and decision-making have improved dramatically.

Our service leadership training [e.g. corporate parenting] is helping to raise service standards and improving how we deliver them. For example, following an inspection of our children’s social care services in 2018, Ofsted reported that, “Time and energy has been invested in ensuring that political leaders and Members understand the importance of children’s social care. This deeper understanding has enabled more robust scrutiny and challenge...[and] led to significant improvements in the quality of social work practice and the services that children and young people experience.”



**Peter
Gadsdon**

“Developing the right skillsets to get more engaged in Council governance is vitally important. For example, openness and confidence are key to effective challenge in committee. Each year our chairs are more confident in their roles and they’re starting to challenge the management team more effectively and appropriately. They’re also getting more involved in setting policy and strategy.

People get involved in local government for many reasons and then find themselves contributing to policy and strategy development. But they aren’t responsible for implementing those policies and strategies, so they need to accurately understand how policy translates into strategy and then into action. Even the best ideas can have unintended consequences, so you need to understand how it all works and connects.

Meanwhile, budget decisions are going to get tougher and tougher. No one comes in to cut services and there’s a perfectly natural response that budget cuts are bad. Even veteran Cabinet Members can find it challenging, and the further you are from the Cabinet, the harder it is to understand and contextualise the decisions made. It’s critical to the effective operation of the Council, therefore, that we all understand the rules, the reasons and the ways of working.”

2. Contributes to cultural reform by helping to improve behavioural standards and working relationships



Carolyn Downs

“The investment in development for both officers and councillors has ameliorated the state of relationships considerably, with many of our development mechanisms helping to reinforce key messages. The value and impact of mutual joint development shouldn’t be underestimated, especially when it explores the very issues we need to address. People understand roles and relationships in a way they never have before. It’s encouraging a working environment where positive relationships can flourish. We’ve experienced a significant reduction in standards complaints. Trust and collaborative behaviour are now the norm.”



Councillor Sandra Kabir

“You can’t have councillors working in one direction and civil servants in another, but that’s how it used to be. It was all very adversarial. We can achieve so much more if relationships are good. People didn’t get it before, but through our development interventions people are beginning to see how important it is. They must understand the perimeters within which they have to work and they must have the right levels of knowledge regarding what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. That is what we provide, and it brings us all together onto the same page. Commitment increases, professionalism increases, things get done – and that can only be beneficial to us and our residents.”



Peter Gadsdon

“The benefits of Member development manifest best in the relationships between Members and officers. It’s much better than it was before. Shared development is not the norm in councils but that’s how we do it – even exercises like group psychometric profiling. This approach helps everyone to understand motivations, perspectives and behaviour, which helps to build the team.”



Jacqueline Carr

“Our relationship with councillors and the Council has improved without a doubt. We need to be able to work together for the good of residents, and a mutually beneficial working relationship is only possible if they understand what we do, how and why we do it and what our limitations are. In the past our experience of the Council was entrenched positions, inflexibility and conflict but in the last ten years the culture has changed dramatically. There are many factors, including the influence of new leadership, but the emphasis on Member development is clearly integral to the change. Today, our relationship is warmer, defined by partnership and collaboration. They are very much a listening council now. They may not always be able to give you the answer that you want, but at least you know you’ve been consulted and listened to.”

3. Fosters a more sophisticated and strategic Member development capability: enabling innovation, expanding horizons and encouraging higher ambitions



Councillor Muhammed Butt

“The key to doing this well is not doing it in isolation. We don’t want to limit ourselves to a Brent focus, we want wider interaction and access to a broader range of opportunities. Engaging with external training partners and other councils has taken our Member development to the next level. And it’s not just about us, of course, we believe we have much to offer and we want to share and work with everybody else. We’re all approaching the same problems in alternative ways and by exchanging knowledge, views and ideas we can enrich our thinking and build solutions that are not just fit for purpose, but fit for the future.”



**Carolyn
Downs**

“Variety is an important factor in an engaging and successful development programme. It’s not helpful if every intervention looks and feels the same. So we’re always talking about what we can do next: about what new development mechanisms we can implement. We don’t want to rely on the same old training methods all the time. For example, our peer-led development has been well received and we have found experience-based development to be very effective. External political and managerial insights are also highly valued. Meanwhile, our approach to development needs analysis has paid impressive dividends.”



**Councillor
Sandra
Kabir**

“What it means to be a councillor has changed. Staying up to date is fundamental now. Change is constant, there is so much that’s new. We have to stay on top of it. The solution is continuous learning – as with any profession – and we all have to accept that, regardless of whether we’ve been a councillor for fifteen years or fifteen weeks. If you don’t have the latest information, that can have a huge impact on your confidence and capacity to contribute, and that applies at all levels.”



**Peter
Gadsdon**

“Brent is a borough that’s not afraid to experiment, learn and look outwards. Our councillors are ambassadors for the Council. We’re developing good, confident councillors who are active on the London political scene and promoting Brent. There’s a danger that the councillor experience becomes overshadowed by ‘frontline’ issues, which can undermine the right attitude and perspective. Our approach is not just about equipping councillors to manage the challenges more effectively, it’s about lifting them up to see the bigger picture; to recognise the positives as well as the negatives.”



**Thomas
Cattermole**

“We’re always looking to improve, share good practice and learn from our partners and other authorities. Our dedicated Member development capability enables us to identify and take advantage of value for money development opportunities. We’ve also developed a strong instinct for the knowledge our Members need, which enables all of us to stay informed and ahead of the curve. Our programme is very much in tune with what affects our residents.

One of the biggest changes prompted by Charter has been our engagement with external sources of learning and development. 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. At first it was something of a culture shock for our Members, but the ‘Modern Councillor’ programme helped to bring the value to life and woke their appetite for specialist knowledge.”

