

REDISCOVERING THE CIVIC AND ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC POLICY

Policy Briefings Number 8

Title: Building links between community groups and local councillors: a letter writing campaign

Brief Description of the Project:

- In a well-functioning local democracy, locally-elected representatives work closely with community organisations and other groups. However, relationships between councillors and community groups are not always as supportive or close as they could be. Many community organisations are keen to build relationships with members but unsure how to approach this.
- The Building Links project tested out different ways that community organisations could approach local councillors, get their attention, and win support for their work. How can both sides work together on relevant local issues and problems?
- The aim was to see which, if any, was the more effective approach. Some of our questions were: Do councillors find it hard to judge between different demands made on them? Can communities help with this by getting their message across more effectively?
- We recruited eight community groups, spread across the country in eight different local authorities. Each group had a real local issue they wanted to tackle, but all were keen to make stronger connections to their local councillors.
- With each group, we devised two different letters on the same topic. Each letter asked for help with the same problem, but one approach was based on the literature on how to campaign and lobby, and the other was not.

- The groups then randomly selected half of the councillors in their authority, then randomly allocated those councillors to receive one of the two letters.
- We measured the results by a) the number of replies to each of the two letters b) the helpfulness of the replies.

Key Findings:

- Overall, 18.5 per cent of councillors responded. There was a considerable variation according to local authority ranging from 4.2 to 30.6 per cent.
- The less detailed letter (i.e. the one **not** based on the lobbying literature) had a higher level of response and more helpful responses.
- The letter not based on the literature had a 21.8 per cent response. The letter based on the literature had a 15.3 per cent response.
- Helpful responses included councillors expressing a willingness to meet, and offering face-to-face follow up discussions, or positively signposting the lobbyist on to colleagues, the issue would be better dealt with by someone else. Less helpful and dismissive responses included councillors stating it was not their remit or responsibility and the letter writer needed to go elsewhere, without positively signposting the lobbyist on to colleagues, referring them on, or even in many cases offering a relevant name to the writer.
- The difference between the responses was not statistically significant, possibly because of the relatively low numbers involved. However, all the results pointed in the same direction.

Policy Relevance and Implications:

- What is noticeable is the low level of response to either of the letters, from community groups willing to help tackle what they see as a genuine local issue. This indicates an urgent need to further develop ward members as community leaders. It suggests that more work is needed to build relationships between community organisations and local members.

- It suggests that UK local politicians may still be suffer from a perception of themselves as weak status and low power, and changes to decision making structures in local government may be needed to address this, e.g. stronger roles for Overview and Scrutiny.
- Demands on local politicians have substantially increased in the last decade. Another possible explanation of the responses may be that a rise in the number of internal organisational and party political demands has left less time to represent the people who voted them in, or process lobbying requests from unknown bodies. Some preliminary follow up research for this project also suggests councillors feel overwhelmed by irrelevant paperwork and demands. Local authorities could manage their communications with members to allow members to focus on their priorities.

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