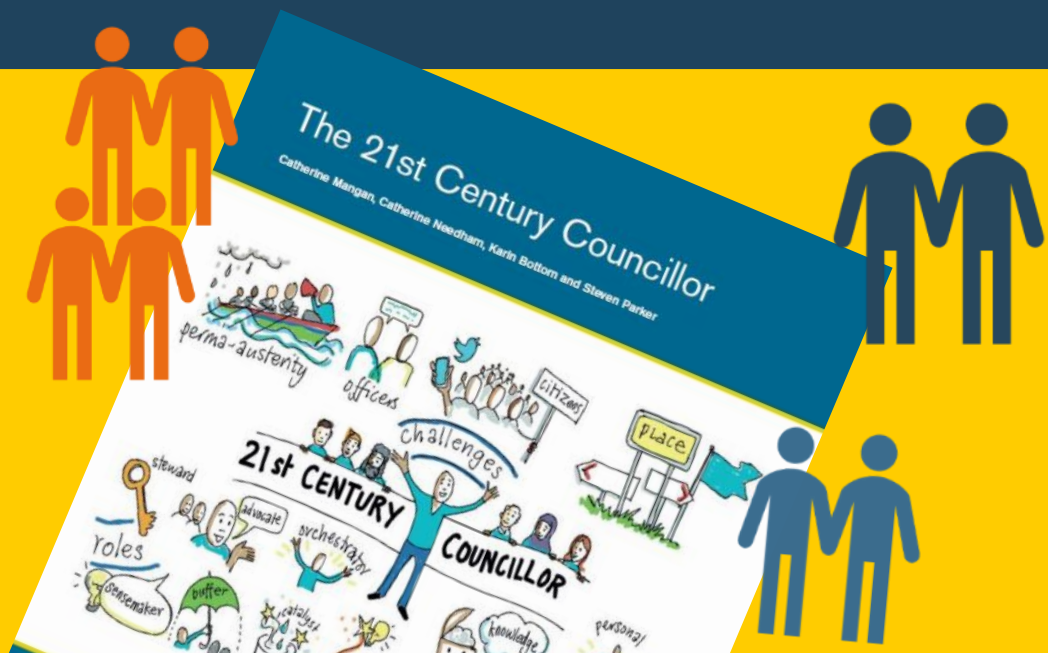


# Councillors and Communities



A report from **Jam and Justice** and **North West Employers**.

Councillors commit time to the local community. Most are motivated by a desire to shape what happens where they live. They often belong to a political party too. As budgets decrease, and public expectations remain high, it is not an easy task. A group of action researchers from Jam & Justice decided to talk with councillors, with the council officers paid to work with them, and with other people living in the same area. We wanted to hear about examples of good practice, and to look for simple things everyone could do to work well together.



## Background

Councillors are local politicians, chosen by voters to represent the local area. They are usually members of a political party too. Most councillors represent areas with between 5000 and 15000 residents. The number of people who vote in council elections is much smaller. Of 10000 residents, perhaps 8000 might qualify to vote. Sometimes as few as 1600 actually vote. Low numbers of people voting when councillors are elected raise questions about who councillors represent and how.

In the past, a councillor's main responsibility was to take part in meetings at the Town Hall. Rules changed in 2000, 2007 and 2011. As a result, many councillors no longer held the same decision-making powers. In 2016, researchers at the University of Birmingham worked with North West Employers to study the different roles now played by councillors. They suggested seven roles:

- Advocate
- Buffer
- Catalyst
- Entrepreneur
- Orchestrator
- Sensemaker
- Steward of place



## Testing The 21st Century Councillor Framework

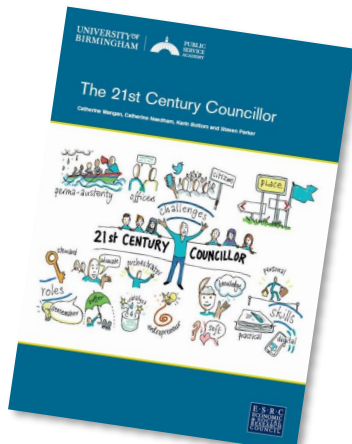
This project started as an idea from the Jam and Justice Action Research Collective (ARC), who wanted to explore the ways councillors work with other people. The project design was shaped by a team including ARC member Andrew Burridge, Jam and Justice investigator Liz Richardson, and Sharon Senior from North West Employers (NWE). The team agreed to use the seven roles suggested by the Birmingham research to start conversations about what councillors do.

NWE Associate Dawn Kelly and Jam & Justice researcher Susanne Martikke arranged group discussions in partnership with four Greater Manchester councils. Each group of people were shown pictures from *The 21st Century Councillor* and asked:

## Are these the roles we expect councillors to perform?

### Who

The people who spoke with Dawn and Susanne

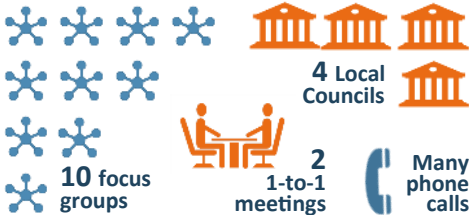


included councillors, council officers and local residents from Oldham, Salford, Bury, and Manchester. There were first-year councillors, and councillors with 20 years of experience. The council officers had 18 different job roles. People from a Youth Council also took part, and other community representatives.



### How

Most met in small “focus groups” and spent between 30 minutes and 2 hours talking about the ideas presented in *The 21st Century Councillor*. Dawn also had one-to-one meetings with two people, and many conversations by phone.



### What did we learn?

Many people said that there is not enough conversation about what councillors do and what they should do. **Public conversation is a good idea**, because sometimes a councillor only finds out what they need to do *after* the voters have chosen them. Good general knowledge about what councillors do can help people prepare.

Councillors are thrown in at the deep end without enough preparation. This increases the pressure on them.



Some people thought there was **too much focus on membership of political parties**. People often vote for councillors because of the party they represent, without knowing whether they have the right skills to be part of a 21st century council.

Often people were concerned that councillors keep making decisions even when there is **not enough money** to make what they want happen. Cuts in council budgets were a big topic in the conversations. It is difficult to know how to respond to this!

Acting on behalf of citizens is tricky. Councillors need to know what is really possible. Despite voting on cuts, some still expect officers to deliver everything.



Councillors lead the council. Officers make sure that what councillors decide happens. The number of officers has been cut. Councillors often struggle to fit everything in. Differences in power & responsibility make some conversations difficult. So the **chance for councillors and officers to talk properly** is rare and important.


Some people suggested other words that describe what councillors might do. One word suggested was **innovator**—to describe how councillors have the possibility to think, make, or do new things in different ways. Others suggested **connector**, and spoke about the importance of finding compromises when making everyone happy is impossible.

## What next?

- We would like to **create more spaces** where people can keep talking about what it means to be a councillor. Councillors make a big difference. They can make an even bigger difference if more people understand what they do and how.
- We imagine a future where **councillors and council officers benefit from joint training**—so they know how to work well with one another. This might focus on co-production: working together for better outcomes.
- We are also **sharing what we learned with the University of Birmingham**. The researchers who wrote *The 21st Century Councillor* report are keen to learn from our work and update theirs. For example, we found that many people dislike the word “Entrepreneur”. Managing public money well can mean spending it in ways that create more money for public services, but this is not about profit for profit’s sake. Also, some people preferred “mediator” to “buffer”—as Liz says, “no one likes to be piggy-in-the middle”.
- We recognise that the work of a councillor benefits from a wide selection of different skills. It is impossible for everyone to have every skill. So what are **the essential skills**? Communication, resilience, empathy and a sound understanding of finance rank highly.



A massive culture change would be required to achieve the roles outlined in the 21st Century Councillor framework.



Okay. Let’s aim to do it together.



Yes, we have many strengths to build on.

### ABOUT US

**Jam and Justice** is an action research project funded by the ESRC, with support from *Mistra Urban Futures*. Our *Action Research Collective* brings together people from different walks of life to ask how we can govern cities differently.

**North West Employers** is a not-for-profit organisation working with 41 local authorities in the North West of England to support development.

This report summarises findings from a project we called “Testing The 21st Century Councillor’s Framework”.

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