

THE UNTAPPED RESOURCE OF COUNCILLORS' CASEWORK? A [FORMER] PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Councillors' casework contains much untapped knowledge about how local government interacts with citizens. It could inform systems to recognise some of the difficulties inherent in providing one-stop services.

Keywords: Councillors' casework, Local e-government

ICT has to bring more reliable, more accessible public services if it is to win public acceptance.

1. LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF HOW COUNCILS WORK

Despite many IT "failures", my diagnosis of the problem starts a lot further back. For, it seems that many involved every day in local government do not understand how it actually works. This may be a legacy of departmental compartmentalism, or feuding barons as it has been less politely described.

During thirteen years as a local councillor (1990-2003) I was constantly amazed at how little understanding there was among council staff about how the organization as a whole, or even other departments, worked. Senior management should have known, but for many years there was competition across departments for limited funding. This may have been aggravated by political competition among their councillor masters. Not a situation conducive to free discussion of issues and overarching solutions. Certainly not an ideal position from which to introduce ICT.

1.1 Privileged Position Of Councillors

Councillors were in the highly privileged position of working with staff from all departments, and, critically, handling all issues in their casework. But much of this was tacit knowledge. There seems a lack of any academic literature about casework. Within my own, and I imagine other, political parties there is a manual on how to cope with casework and I have spent time training new councillors in this important area of their work. But this covers practicalities, not analysis.

There is little evidence of councillor involvement at an early stage. The literature cupboard is very bare. Of the references cited only two [Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003 and Chelliah 2002] specifically deal with the role of councillor, and in both cases it is the leadership/champion role. Councillors' casework is not mentioned in any of the literature I have read and retained over fifteen years.

2. COUNCILLORS AS LAST RESORT

It is a well-known fact among councillors that constituents often come to them as a last resort - when council officials have failed them. Reasons for this failure are manifold : unhelpfulness, jargon, unavailability at hours that suit busy lives. And among constituents there may be multiple

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deprivations : illiteracy, lack of numeracy, un(der) employment, illness, caring responsibilities, fear of any authority.

The best council staff are aware of the inadequacies of the system within which they operate. They can often help councillors achieve better solutions. Councillors have performed the role of one-stop shops for many of their constituents over many years. IT may give a single record number for a person, but people's needs are often complex, cover a long period of time, and cannot be solved within a tight timeframe.

3. SOME ISSUES MAY NEVER BE RESOLVED

Councillors know that solutions may take years and some issues will never be satisfactorily resolved. Reasons for this include :

- a) incompatibilities of council policies - you cannot join up items that will not connect
 - (i) transport and education desire for safer routes for schools vs recruitment problems for crossing patrol staff and council generic retirement age debarring willing recruits/ current staff forced into retirement
 - (ii) planning conservation demanding sash and case window replacements vs sustainability sections wanting double glazed u-PVC units
 - (iii) housing need prescribing a larger house in an area less amenable to e.g. a single parent with support in another area/ child having to change school/ prepared to live in more cramped accommodation.
- b) lack of funds
- c) lack of political priority. The media do not report issues such as personnel appeals, housing benefit and council tax appeals.

4. ORGANIZATION OF CASEWORK

Probably because I am a librarian and organizing knowledge is a major facet of my work, I set out from day one to organize my casework in a way that would maximise its usefulness both to myself and my constituents. With a council computer only a glint in the eye, I developed a simple manual system which listed casework A/Z by subject and cross-referenced it to the electoral register by address. Correspondence was filed A/Z by author and also linked in.

The subject list attached [Table 1] refers to my casework from 1990-2003, when I chose not to stand for re-election. It is a quantitative list and in no way reflects the time or difficulty of each piece of casework. Every emergency homelessness case far outweighed most others. The list is weighted also by the character of the ward and people I represented. An observant colleague noted it was biased also by my personal involvement in and enthusiasm for planning and environmental issues.

5. CAN A ONE-STOP SHOP EVER PROVIDE ALL THE ANSWERS?

However, it does show the enormous breadth of work and issues covered by a large city council. It would be near impossible to promise a one-stop service able to answer such a range of queries immediately. The local council's A/Z of council services is a helpful start, but most queries require much more work. Yet, that one-stop service seems to lie behind much of the hype concerning e-2

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government. If you raise people's expectations and do not then deliver, you will not win their trust.

One particular case may illustrate the extent of the lack of knowledge, A former Chief Executive proudly claimed that cleansing was not a current problem as he had had no complaint during the last month. As a colleague and myself had between us had over thirty complaints in that particular month we were somewhat surprised. It then transpired that the department had not logged complaints, that there was a telephone fault to the department, and that a strike was imminent. Lines of communication had failed. And this was a recurring complaint from constituents : that complaints were not passed on, that promised replies had not been received.

6. IS IT POSSIBLE TO COMPUTERISE SUCH A SYSTEM?

Some consideration of the failures of compulsory competitive tendering may prove instructive. In Scotland, while many manual activities were competed for by internal direct services organizations (building maintenance, catering, cleansing), councils raised huge objections to the CCT of white collar services, recognising that outside competition was interested only in the "easy" cases and that the residue of "difficult" cases would likely revert to the council.

E-government offers a golden opportunity to improve local services, but ICT alone cannot ensure this. Changes in society must be factored in. Council services must be provided at times and in locations that suit the public and their lifestyles. There must also be skilled human assistance available, and this is expensive.

There are some services which do not lend themselves to automation. The continuing shortage of school lollipop staff does not accord with a political agenda of encouraging safer routes to school. What would be useful knowledge is if there are other staff who would be prepared to do this work, if retirement ages for all council staff should be the same, if pedestrian traffic light departments are prioritising school crossing sites.

During the period of my involvement there seemed little enthusiasm among older councillors for ICT. Indeed, in the earlier days there was actual resistance. It was not terribly edifying to sit on an ICT working group which had as its major agenda item mobile phones for councillors. Increasingly, senior councillors have personal assistants who usually do their casework for them. The hands-on councillor may be disappearing as a consequence of "professionalization."

7. IF POLITICS IS ABOUT PEOPLE, PEOPLE HAVE TO BE UNDERSTOOD

The tacit knowledge of staff who meet the public every day is little understood. Over-bureaucratisation takes away discretion. The out-sourced contract may forget that residents of sheltered housing may need help with new-style bins. People talk about "the council" and often expect a single point of service. But this is difficult to provide if there is a multiple problem : e.g. dyslexia, tears over tax council tax arrears, family illness.

8. PLEASE INVOLVE COUNCILLORS!

I feel sad that the local e-government literature sometimes describes a council service I do not recognise - and many of my constituents would not have recognised. Councillors are, in the main, there to help – they may not be academics, but they do deal with complex issues over a range of subjects, albeit with professional help from staff. The newer generation of councillors are much more *au fait* with IT, and likely to welcome their involvement. While automation can bring many benefits, the human interface cannot be ignored if local government is to remain relevant to its users. 3

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SUBJECT HEADINGS - MAY 2003	LAST NUMBER USED
Allotments	5
Anniversaries	1
Asthma	1
Awards	1
Banks	1
Basketball	1
Baths see also Commonwealth Pool; Infirmary Street Baths; Leith Waterworld; Warrender Baths	5
Bed & Breakfast	1
Bees	2
Begging see Law 8 & 9	
Benefits	1
Bicycles see also Cycling	3
Blackford Quarry see Cleansing 45	
Botanic Gardens see Recreation 19	
Bowls	4
Broken Vessels	1
Bus Shelters	15
Buses	59 + campaign files
Business Rates	4
Cabinets	1
Cabling	16
Calton Hill	4
Canal	3
Cemeteries see also Grange Cemetery; Jewish Cemetery	6
Christmas Decorations	2
City Car Club	3
Civic Hospitality	1
Cleansing see also Graffiti; Toilets; Wheelie Bins; Worms	168
Commonwealth Pool see also Baths;	3

Community Councils	2
Complaints	4
Conservation see Planning	
Council Tax see Poll Tax	
Croquet	10
Crows	1
Cycling see also Bicycles	32
Disabled People see also Handicabs; Taxicabs	8
District Court see Law	
Dog Fouling	30
Dogs-Noise	2
Dogs-Safety	1
Douglas House	3
Drains see Water	16
Economic Development	2
Education	46
Elections	2
Electoral Register	18
Employment see Personnel	
Environmental Health	49
Europe	1
Finance	2
Flyposting	4
Foxes	3
Garden Aid	1
Graffiti	1
Grange Cemetery	11
Grants	10
Green Belt	1
Handicabs	1
Health	7
Helicopters	2
Herald & Post	1
Highways see also Police 8	124
Hogmanay	9

Holiday Clubs etc	1
Home Helps	2
Housing see also Repair Grants; Statutory Notices	61
Immigration	1
Inch	1
Inchkeith Island	1
Infirmary Street Baths	3
IT	1
Jewish Cemetery	4
JPs	3
Law see also Sheriff Officers; Tenement Law	18
Leith Waterworld	1
Liberal Democrats	2
Libraries see also National Library; Newington Library	8
Licensing	67
Lights see Stair Lights; Street Lights	
Local History	1
Mary King's Close see Tourism 2 & 3	
Meadows see Parks	
Meadows Clean-up	1
Meadows Festival	8
Media	2
Mice	1
Museums	3
National Library	2
Neighbourhood Watch	3
Neighbours	11
Newington Library	10 + Campaign files
Noise see Environmental Health 10&15 & 17 &27 &33 also Meadows Festival 4 Planning 303	5
Oil Pollution	1
Parking	77
Parking Tickets see Law 2&5&7&10711712&13	
Parks	63
Pavements	47

Personnel	13
Pest Control see Bees; Mice; Pigeons; Rats	
Planning see also B&B; Green Belt	798
Police	25
Poll Tax	44
Post Offices	3
Postal Service see also Street Names 2	22
Property Services see Technical Services	
Race Relations see also Immigration	3
Railways see also Bicycles 1	6
Rates, Business see Business Rates	
Rats	5
Recreation see also Bowls; Tennis etc.	21

Recycling see also Cleansing 11 & 12&44&46&52&58&59&60&61&65&68&77 for previous items	19
Repair Grants	49
Repairs see Statutory Notices	
Residents' Associations	1
Restaurants	1
Room bookings	2
Safer Routes to School	6 + Campaign files
Satellite Dishes	2
Seagulls	1
Seats	7
Sewage see Water	
Sheriff Officers	1
Sick Children's Hospital see also Douglas House	9
Skateboarding	2
Smokeless Zones	2
Social Work	11
Stair Lights	4
Statutory Notices	25
Stonecleaning see Planning 321	
Street Lights	51
Street Names	30
Street Traders see Licensing 8,9,12,15,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,28,41	
Students	3
TV Aerials see also Tech Services 3	1
Taxis	3
Taxicards	3
Technical Services	25
Telecomms	2
Tenement Law	4
Tennis	2
Theatres	4
Toilets	5

Tourism see also B&B	3
Trade	3
Trading Standards	5
Traffic Lights	4
Training	1
Trees	68
Twinning	3
Warrender Baths see Baths	11
Wasps see Bees	
Water	17
Wheelie Bins	69
Windows	10
Worms	2

Table 1

The casework in the table was formal requests for help – by phone, letter, or email. Letters sometimes contained multiple, unrelated issues.

Informal casework, often specific requests about where to go for help, came from chance meetings in the street, via leisure activities, via work, at community council and amenity association meetings. The informal casework was not counted in the table.