



## Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Councillors on the Frontline, HC 748

Tuesday 21 October 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 October 2014.

### **Written evidence from witnesses:**

#### **Panel 1 (Questions 1-61)**

##### Professor Colin Copus

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Simon Danczuk; Mrs Mary Glendon; Mark Pawsey; John Pugh; John Stevenson; and Chris Williamson.

#### Panel 1 Questions [1-61]

Witnesses: **Kris Hopkins MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, **Professor Colin Copus**, Professor of Local Politics, De Montfort University, and **Councillor David Sparks OBE**, Chairman, Local Government Association, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chair:** Welcome to the three of you. This is a second session this afternoon, but it is a follow-up session to the work we did on the role of councillors, which we carried out in 2012.

Professor Copus, we would particularly like to thank you for the further research that you have done on the basis of our report and the comments that were then subsequently made by the Government and then by the LGA on our recommendations. The independent research—that is what it is, and that is very important—is published on our website, and we are very pleased we have been able to do that. It raises a number of interesting points about how a sample of councillors have responded to what we had to say in terms of recommendations about their role and how they might be assisted with that, and certainly about the Government's response and the LGA's response to our report as well.

So just for the sake of our records, Minister, you have already been with us, but Professor Copus and Councillor Sparks, if you could just indicate for our records who you are and the organisation you represent, and then we can move on from there.

**Professor Copus:** I am Professor Colin Copus. I am a Professor of Local Politics at De Montfort University in Leicester.

**Cllr Sparks:** I am David Sparks. I am the leader of Dudley Council and the Chair of the Local Government Association.

**Q2 Chair:** Councillor Sparks, you are particularly welcome, and congratulations on your new position. It is not quite so new now, but this is the first time you have been with us in that role since your election.

**Cllr Sparks:** Thank you.

**Q3 Chair:** Just to begin with, to the Minister and Councillor Sparks, have you got a role or vision for local government in the next five or 10 years, and what will the role of councillors be in that? Will it be changing, evolving, or will it be substantially the same? What are your thoughts on that?

**Kris Hopkins:** First of all, as an ex-councillor myself and an ex-leader of a local authority, I deeply respect the role of individual councillors, and I know that, particularly in this climate of an extremely difficult financial environment, the Localism Act gives an opportunity for individuals to make more decisions on the ground, and we have empowered people to make those choices.

I will certainly do everything in my time as a Minister to encourage more people to participate in their local democracy, whether that is standing as a councillor or whether that is contributing to debates, putting those petitions together, or making representations. Local engagement is really important. There is an enhanced role for local authorities, but everything I can do to make that connection between the electorate—the public out there—and elected individuals is extremely important to me.

**Cllr Sparks:** I think that the primary role of the councillor will be to represent the local community. This is recognised by councillors in the studies that we have done. I think it is that 80% of councillors see that as their primary role, and the major reason why they got involved in local government. In my view, that will not change. Hopefully it will improve because I see the validity of local government to be essentially anchored in the degree to which we represent our communities. The variable factor will be the extent to which local authorities go beyond

their own boundaries and combine with other authorities, in particular to represent labour markets and other markets. This is personified at the moment by the development of combined authorities, city regions and county regions. That will be the big change, and that is inevitable because we are going to be dealing with the implications of the referendum in terms of devolution to Scotland and devolution to England, but also we are talking about the impact of globalisation on large areas of the country, and the only way local authorities can regenerate their communities is to go beyond those boundaries, especially given that many of the boundaries are arbitrary and irrelevant, really.

**Q4 Chair:** Right. Professor Copus, you have obviously spoken to quite a lot of councillors about what they think their role is. How would they respond, do you think, to what the Minister and Councillor Sparks have to say to us?

**Professor Copus:** It would depend on the level of councillor that you ask. One of the things that I certainly tried to do in the workshops was to get a good spread of representatives amongst leaders, executive members, and also non-executive members. Clearly those with an executive remit are going to feel very much in accordance with the views that Councillor Sparks has just set out. Those without, however, are, from what I am detecting, somewhat less certain about the way in which their role is likely to develop, even indeed if there is a role at all for them. Some of the councillors that are still grappling with what scrutiny, for example, might mean, and how that might operate, do not see necessarily themselves as part of this broader governing agenda that I think Councillor Sparks has set out. I certainly feel that they will still be motivated by the issue of representing their communities. One of the key factors that comes back time and time again when talking to councillors is the willingness to give something back to the communities that they are part of, and I do not detect that that will change at all.

However, it is clear that there is a group of members—councillors—that have still yet to come to terms with the changes in structures that the 2000 Act brought in, and the change in role that that requires of them. If anything, councillors will have to become more like governors and less focussed on the provision and the control of public services. That is not saying that those public services are not important, but as they shift from one organisation or travel through local government and back to somewhere else, the governing role that Councillor Sparks has described becomes more and more important for all members, and I think all members will seek a role in undertaking that sort of function.

**Q5 Chair:** Councillor Sparks, the LGA's evidence to us was saying that obviously the LGA and councils have a role in trying to develop the role of councillors and enabling them to fulfil their job, but there is also, you felt, some onus on Ministers and CLG and maybe politicians nationally to be supportive in assisting that process. Government seems to be saying to us, "Yes, of course we think that is a great thing, but it is not really anything to do with us directly." Is that fair?

**Kris Hopkins:** I missed that sentence there.

**Chair:** Regarding what the LGA might be hoping for, in terms of some proactive support from Government nationally to help councillors develop their role and come to terms with it and develop their skills, Government really is saying, "We can welcome that but it is nothing really to do with us, in detail. It is down to councils to get on with it."

**Kris Hopkins:** If you are talking about this Minister, this Minister wants to encourage councillors to understand their communities, to reflect them, and to speak on behalf of them. One of the phrases used there was about the different range of councillors out there. My observation of a large metropolitan council I visited was that there were some individuals who wanted to actually participate in a corporate, more strategic role, with some of it external. There were some individuals who came with individual expertise around education or procurement, but actually for nearly all of them their principal reason was actually about local representation, and the council itself to reflect that is the best route to it.

What I would say is that the professor has said that people were struggling to come to terms with the 2000 Act. The 2000 Act was 14 years ago, and an average life of a councillor is nine years, so there has been a bit of churn since then. So if anybody was there in 2000 and has not quite come to terms with the change, perhaps we need to get some more councillors in there, because this is the system that has been running for 14 years.

There was, or there is, an issue about some of the committee processes; some councillors felt that they had not got a role. However, my experience, certainly as a leader and somebody who was tested constantly by scrutiny committees, was that they are powerful bodies now, particularly things like the Health Scrutiny Committee, which has not just an internal council conversation but actually a district conversation now. There is opportunity to do it. Some individual councils may have to develop those skills further. The big challenge is trying to get new blood in to councils, and that is a role for political parties as much as anything else.

**Q6 John Stevenson:** Professor Copus, just one question: do you think, when you are speaking with the councillors there was a view that actually we need fewer councillors and possibly fewer councils?

**Professor Copus:** That was never articulated in that way. There is an agenda that suggests that, and there are certainly some councillors, but not in the workshops that I ran, who would be looking at mergers of local authorities, which invariably would mean fewer members. The problem with fewer members, of course, is the greater pressure of work that then falls on those that are remaining, and that element of the debate often gets missed. In terms of the workshops, the message that was coming over was, "We would be in trouble if there were fewer members on our particular councils", but I know generally that those arguments are going on. We tend to be over-governed and under-represented in this country. One of the things we do know is that the representative ratio of our members—elected councillors—in this country is greater than almost any other one across this continent.

**Q7 John Pugh:** Can I just come back for a minute on the scrutiny arrangements? As I understand it at the moment it is not impossible, though obviously it is a role that councillors have to learn. We have a scrutiny system whereby chairs of scrutiny committees like our own will obviously be chaired by opposition councillors. Now, it is perfectly possible in a council—Sefton is one good example—for all the scrutiny chairs to be taken by the governing party and there is nothing to prevent that at all, is there?

**Kris Hopkins:** I think that is in place in Bradford at this moment in time, but actually the make-up of the committee has still got to reflect the council, and so you are right. Perhaps there is a challenge there to be put in place about that, but I think the public as well would want to see the degree of transparency and a degree of accountability in place, and if they believe that somebody was gerrymandering a process by appointing leaders to it I am sure they would be outraged.

**Q8 John Pugh:** You would not see fit to offer further guidance to councillors as to how to do scrutiny?

**Kris Hopkins:** I think you raise a good point and perhaps I will reflect on that.

**Q9 Mark Pawsey:** I would like to ask about the impact of localism on councillors. Minister, we have just heard you say that the Localism Act

gives more decisions to councillors at a local level, but Professor Copus, somebody has done a word search on your report of further research and the word “localism” does not appear at all. Is that because councillors have failed to grasp the opportunities that localism presents to them?

**Professor Copus:** No, I think it is quite the opposite actually. They do localism all the time. The proximity that councillors have to their communities and to the people they represent means that they are embedded in the locality. Localism is something to do with the balance between the centre and the localities, whereas when councillors are operating within their councils, to them they are within proximity to those communities, so the term did not arise in the workshops.

**Q10 Mark Pawsey:** Given that it has been a principal objective of this Government to initiate that process through that piece of legislation, it seems surprising that there is not a greater awareness of it. Why would that be?

**Professor Copus:** I am not sure it is a lack of awareness. I just think it is the way in which particular issues are articulated. When councillors were talking they were talking about local communities, they were talking about local organisations and they were talking about empowering their neighbourhoods. It is just the term was not employed.

**Q11 Mark Pawsey:** Minister, could it be that councillors are concerned that the process of localism, by getting decisions down to the lowest possible level, in actual fact could bypass some councillors—those in unitaries, counties and districts—by passing more power down to town councils and to parish councils? Is there a fear that that could be taking a role away from councillors?

**Kris Hopkins:** I would not be afraid to pass those powers down to local councils. It depends what you wanted to do: if you wanted to give a strategic role over education to the parish council, perhaps not. My local town council has done a brilliant job at putting up the war memorial, putting the gardens in place there. Keighley looks better as a consequence of those services being passed right down to the local level.

I do think actually, although the phrase may not have come up in the report, there will be few councils who are not engaged in a local plan debate at this moment in time, or attending lots of public meetings where people have been empowered to shape their local community; there is a responsibility for them to have a dialogue with their community and engage with them. That could still be done better. I look at the variable responses with the public there.

Think about City Deals, where individual councils have come up with ways in which they want freedoms. They have sat down with their local LEPs, their local strategic partners, and said, "This is what we want." I look at a city like Liverpool: their City Deal was 15,000 houses, 16,000 jobs. That is about them taking responsibility and shaping what they want to spend, and the direction they want to go.

**Q12 Mark Pawsey:** That does beg the question, Minister, as to what extent the average councillor in and around Liverpool has had a real say in the development of the City Deal? Has the average councillor really had an input into that process?

**Kris Hopkins:** I hope so. I have visited Liverpool several times and I see a really positive engagement on the ground. They want to shape their community. They are extremely passionate about it in that city and they have laid out a vision for their city. I will say to you: it is a Labour administration there, but I am supporting them driving out with that. They want to build more houses, they want to get more people into work and they have made choices about that. I say, as a Tory Minister, "I want to support you in that process."

**Q13 Mark Pawsey:** Also, Minister, if the movement of these powers down has invigorated councillors and encouraged them to get involved, there should be a new cohort of people coming forward to present themselves to become councillors. Is there any evidence, Minister, that that is happening?

**Kris Hopkins:** It is interesting when you look at some of the transformation work that is going on at this moment in time, where you cannot just solve it as a council, you have got to go and talk to your local university, or the NHS provider, or the GP—whatever it is, the other players in this—I think it is opening democracy up to other institutions, other public bodies and certainly to business. Look at the role of the LEP. The LEP has been a really amazing opportunity to find strong leaders, whether from business or public sector, to come forward, to engage in the democratic process and to shape their community. Sometimes they may be classified as a councillor; they may stand for election. We have created models. Whether it is Enterprise Zones, whether it is City Deals, whether it is LEPs, whether it is actually the Localism Act itself, we have given an opportunity. I think, in four years, the idea is not that you are going to revolutionarily change that—you have got to let this seep through and people grasp the opportunities that are laid out in front of them.

**Q14 Mark Pawsey:** Do you think encouraging more people to come forward as councillors, which is one of the aims and objectives of

our report—to consider what some of those barriers are—is starting to happen now? Is there evidence of more people putting their names forward?

**Kris Hopkins:** There are broader issues about reputations of council and councillors. Do you want to create this environment where people do celebrate? I do celebrate the role of councillors and councils. There are obviously exceptions to all that, but these are people who have given up considerable periods of their own time and their own life, and they want to make a positive contribution. We should go back and reflect on some of the great leaders that we have had. I am from Bradford and I look at Salts—some of the great philanthropists who wanted to make a really positive contribution to it. They did not just do it for a badge or even remuneration; it was about serving their community. Giving people local power, taking power from the centre and placing it on the ground—there is an opportunity to encourage more people to come up and feel confident about making those decisions.

**Q15 Mark Pawsey:** Councillor Sparks, as the leader of the LGA, do you see councillors recognising the Localism Act as providing them with a new opportunity, and encouraging people to put their name forward as councillors?

**Cllr Sparks:** I think you need to split that into three, actually. Councillors do recognise the opportunities of the Localism Act, but the financial situation that faces most councils ensures that they cannot take as much advantage of it as they want to.

The second point is that the recruitment of councillors is largely a party-political matter, because local government is dominated by parties. The LGA itself has an active campaign, “Be a Councillor”, which to a major extent is influenced by the Committee’s report. We are focusing on under-represented groups. In fact, there have been over 100 meetings of all of the parties since the Committee produced its report, in terms of encouraging people to become councillors.

The third point, though, is that the most important thing in relation to getting someone to become a councillor is in fact to ensure that councils have powers. It is the same for any body. I emphasised the fact at the beginning about the community being the key to local government. I make it my business to chair the local Friends of the Park as well as chair the LGA, in order to keep myself in contact. You have got the same problem: if people turn up to a Friends of the Park group and they find out there is very little they can do about the park, they are not going to turn up any longer. They have got other things to do; there are a lot of things to do in life nowadays. The important thing is to ensure the legitimacy of these objects.

The 2000 Act was the most important thing that has ever happened to local government, in terms of one of the most significant changes. The change was the fact that the whole nature of local government changed, because you then had a small group of councillors who assumed the legal powers of committees, in terms of making the actual decisions. Ninety-nine per cent. of this Committee were former councillors; when we had the days of the committees it was a different kettle of fish. The decisions were disseminated, as it were, in the committee or the chief officer. People were up at the council all the time meeting each other, and you did not have different divisions of councillors. Even the chair of the committee was just a member of the committee. He was not a separate person. The leader of the council was not the leader of the council; he was the chair of the policy committee. That was why he was leader of the council.

The whole thing has changed now. I was quite intrigued by the professor's observation, because the fact of the matter is—and it is an arithmetical fact—that the majority of councillors or the majority of councils have changed. A significant proportion of councils have changed since the outset of that Act, because of the electorate and because of all-out elections and so on and so forth. I am in a minority now on my council. I was quite surprised. Even 10 years ago I was in a minority of being one of the few people who had served under the committee system. As far as being on the committee system, nowadays the mindset of most councils is in the current system.

**Q16 Mark Pawsey:** Could I just take you back to your very first answer to my question, when you said the fact that there is a pressure on funding in local government means that councillors are less motivated to do the job. You referred to the running of the park, and if there is no money to improve the running of the park why would you do it? Does that mean then, Councillor Sparks, that councillors are only there to do the job if there is money to be spent?

**Cllr Sparks:** No, quite the opposite. That is why I said, right at the very beginning, that the fundamental role of a councillor is to defend their communities. It does not matter whether councils have got a whole load of money or they have not; you need to defend your community and get a fair share of whatever resources are going. It is not to do with just spending money—quite the opposite. In fact, one of the aspects of local government in the last four or five years has been the degree of innovation and looking at new ways of doing things. That is across the board, all political parties.

**Q17 Chris Williamson:** I want to deal with the status of councillors. If I could start with you, Professor Copus, you had some

deliberations with councillors, did you not? I wonder whether you could tell us what the reaction was to the notion suggested by the Government that councillors should see themselves as volunteers.

**Professor Copus:** That was something that there was a shared reaction across the party spectrum. I think it is important to make the point that councillors from all parties, and independents, just simply did not recognise that rhetorical picture, if you like, as the reality that they lived. It was admitted quite openly: "Yes, we volunteer to become councillors, in the same way that people volunteer to take on the role of Member of Parliament, for example." However, that is as far as the volunteering analogy goes. Beyond that the world of the councillor is such that the complexities and demands are far, far different from what the term "volunteer" is often used to mean.

Obviously large numbers of volunteers are very professional and dedicated people and do an extremely good job. However, there is the thrust of an image that is created by that term that councillors were reacting very negatively towards. It was put to me in one of the workshops: "I do not look at my watch on Saturday afternoon and think, 'I have a couple of hours free. I will go and do some council work and then I will go and have tea.'" It is not like that. There are demands that have to be undertaken. There are roles that have to be undertaken.

Indeed, the other term that was used in all of the workshops was that this is a 24-hour-a-day job. There is no respite. The proximity of the councillor to their community and to the people they represent means that they are always accessible. If somebody wants to find them, they will find them. They may find them formally in a surgery or they will find them informally in the shops or in a club or a bar or wherever they happen to be. That means to say that the boundaries in the life of a councillor are very difficult to draw. They can be drawn. Clearly when you are sitting in a formal committee meeting that is obvious; you are going through a particular set of procedures. So that term, "volunteer", grated for many councillors.

**Q18 Chris Williamson:** Would you say that people took offence? Would you say that councillors across the party spectrum universally took offence at that statement?

**Professor Copus:** I would avoid the term "offence", but they certainly felt that it was not either an accurate or a helpful description.

**Q19 Chris Williamson:** Why was there such a strong reaction then, do you think?

**Professor Copus:** I think because it confronts the reality of the life that councillors lead: the dedication; the time commitments; the inability, in many respects, to say no. One of the other aspects of volunteering is perhaps to have that freedom of when to engage. For many councillors that freedom simply is not there.

**Q20 Chris Williamson:** Is there a disconnect between the reality and Ministers' perceptions of what councillors do?

**Professor Copus:** There is a debate that maybe is about avoiding the recognition that councillors do do a full time job.

**Q21 Chris Williamson:** A full-time job as a councillor?

**Professor Copus:** As a councillor. That recognition brings with it all sorts of questions about remuneration and salaries. Part of the debate about scrutiny and the executive arrangements, for example, is leading logically to the idea that there should be a debate about whether a certain group of councillors are expected to be full-time and are salaried. Maybe another group are not, but that still does not mean to say that they are necessarily volunteering to play a role they can dip in and out of.

**Q22 Chris Williamson:** If I could turn to Councillor Sparks, what would you say? Do you think the Government is justified in making a distinction between full-time, salaried politicians like MPs, MEPs and executive mayors, and councillors?

**Cllr Sparks:** They are not justified in any way, shape or form, for the following reasons. First of all, at one end of the spectrum, if you are talking about leaders of councils, they have tremendous responsibilities and are expected to put the hours in, way beyond a normal working week. Indeed, it is enshrined in terms of the legal responsibilities to make key decisions. You can see how leaders of councils and cabinet members are held accountable when you have got instances like Rochdale and Rotherham. Through the court of public opinion they are held to account.

At the other end of the spectrum, if you are talking about, shall we say, the backbench councillor or the purely community councillor, they will be putting in an incredible amount of hours as well, far beyond what you would put in if you were just a volunteer. Many of those councillors, in carrying out their function, will also be volunteers. Many councillors, where there are parish councils and town councils, will be parish and town councillors as well as, say, district or county councillors. This is because that is the political culture in that area.

It is not right for Members of Parliament to differentiate between politicians in local government on that basis. A differentiation can be made in terms of the local nature of local councillors, both in terms of service in their community and also being place-based. However, the decisions that cabinet members and leaders of councils have to make, with all due respect, are decisions that many Members of Parliament never have to make, in terms of the allocation of resources. There are professional demands in making the right decisions.

**Q23 Chris Williamson:** Would you suggest, then, that there is a cross-party view in local government that Ministers are out of touch with the reality on the ground?

**Cllr Sparks:** In relation to that aspect, absolutely. When Grant Shapps made his remark about scout leaders the vehemence of the response from Conservative councillors was far greater than that from other parties, because they felt genuinely insulted. I was particularly angry on their behalf.

**Q24 Chris Williamson:** If I could turn to you then, Minister, you have said you have been yourself a councillor and you talked about celebrating the role of councillors. You said you wanted more councillors. You will be familiar with Nick Ridley, I guess, the former Secretary of State.

**Kris Hopkins:** Yes. It was a bit before my time.

**Chris Williamson:** A bit before your time indeed, but you are familiar with him. He once said, did he not, that his idea of an ideal council was one that met once a year to dish out the contracts to private companies? Do you understand that there are people in local government who think that Nick Ridley's ideal council is something that this present Government is seeking to bring into reality?

**Kris Hopkins:** No, I do not see that at all. First of all, let me just put on record this idea of "volunteer" and "not volunteer". It has been used as a derogatory term towards councillors, whereas I look at the people who volunteer many hours to my local hospice or to the patient support unit at the Airedale Hospital. These are people who are making a valuable contribution. When I look at councillors, I do not know one councillor, an individual who stood to be a councillor, on the basis that they wanted some money out of this. They volunteer their time, sometimes to be an activist within a party, or to fight a campaign group, or to work in that. In those terms, there is a danger here that we actually insult lots of volunteers because somehow councillors are above this status. It is important to just say that I would not use the "scout leader" terminology. I have a huge respect for them. I

understand why lots of those councillors, regardless of whether they are Conservative or anything, would be insulted by that. I have said that before, on the record.

On the idea that we want to go back to Mr Ridley's comments, and that this is where we want to be, if that was genuinely what this Government was seeking to deliver, why would it place all these powers in the hands of individuals to make decisions around planning; to make decisions around City Deal; to make decisions around Enterprise Zones and the tax breaks that will be brought to it; how you actually get economy going; and how you get better public services? If you look at the Better Care Fund, how do you join up the NHS, GP services and local councils' social services? This is not about a private intervention and one council meeting, and do not cherish the contribution of elected representatives.

**Q25 Chris Williamson:** Have councillors just got it wrong then? It seems to be universal.

**Kris Hopkins:** I think your questions and some of the answers today do not reflect my engagements with councillors. They know that whether it is me or other members of this Government, we have a huge respect for councillors and have that level of engagement.

**Q26 Chris Williamson:** You say you have got huge respect though, Minister—and I accept that the Government is talking about devolving, and indeed has devolved, more powers, and indeed says it wants to go further, in terms of devolving more powers to councils—yet this terminology about “volunteer” has been put forward and the right to a pension for councillors has been withdrawn. Is the Government's intention to deter younger councillors from coming in, who maybe have to make career sacrifices in order to fulfil the role of a councillor? If we are moving down the road of volunteer councillors and not being entitled to pensions and restricting any kind of remuneration, does that not actually make it then attainable only for people with independent means to fulfil the role of a councillor, given the added responsibilities that Government is putting on councillors now?

**Kris Hopkins:** The point that Councillor Sparks makes is that a council leader, particularly in the large councils, is virtually full-time, in the fact that they are making 25-hours-plus of contribution to that, if not more than that. They are making strategic, corporate decisions. They are having to build relationships and make choices. I do absolutely respect that. There are lots of executive members who have to make that—

**Chris Williamson:** So why—

**Kris Hopkins:** If I could answer your point, you are saying we are going to freeze people out of the market, effectively, by not having a pension or not giving them employee status. I do not think that is the case. I did not stand to be a councillor by making the choice, and I do not know a single councillor who made the choice: "Let me have a think. I would like to represent my community. I would like to represent the ideology that I support in the Conservative party. I would like to drive out the outcomes that I believe my community needs. Hang on, let me think: have I got a good pension with this?" They did not start from that point, with that conversation. They start on the basis of representation. They are passionate about their community; they are passionate about the politics.

**Q27 Chris Williamson:** I think we are all agreed about that, but what is the Government's intention? Do the Government feel that people, if they want to serve their community, must accept that they will have to sacrifice their careers and not have as good a pension when they retire?

**Kris Hopkins:** I have no doubt that individuals could make other choices about spending their time, whether it is on leisure, sport—

**Q28 Chris Williamson:** So it is their choice.

**Kris Hopkins:** They are making a choice.

**Q29 Chris Williamson:** So if they choose, then, to sacrifice their security in old age to serve the public that is up to them; is that what you are saying?

**Kris Hopkins:** There is a passion within individuals who do want to do that, and they gain a huge reward as a consequence of that. They are respected by their community because they are not just doing this for remuneration. It is because they believe in trying to better the education in their local school, getting better services for elderly people, addressing those potholes that are in the road at this moment in time, or challenging, maybe, the party-political institutions.

**Q30 Chris Williamson:** Do you accept, though, that for some people who would dearly love to serve their community, who may be in their thirties or forties with a young family, maybe with a career, it might deter their willingness to stand for election, because of the inevitable impact on their career and that they would lose their security in old age as a consequence? Is that a sacrifice you think that they should make? Do you accept that that might actually result in some people saying, "Actually, I do not think I can achieve this"? The age profile of councillors is already pretty—

**Kris Hopkins:** That is probably a separate issue we can have a conversation about. Do I think that we will get a better class contribution from an individual because they have got a pension or they have got some remuneration out of this? No, I do not. People quite selflessly make a contribution to politics and to their community—community and politics can be the same thing, to address outcomes.

Sometimes we have got a responsibility—all politicians have—about how we taint the world of councils. We do not celebrate enough of those individuals. It not just about the council leader or the executive member; it is a passionate individual who is trying to get, maybe, their local bowling club open and trying to get more elderly people in there, or trying to raise funds for a particular charity or a particular aim. We should celebrate that and we should recognise that. I do not think we do enough. I said right at the beginning of this, during my time as a local government Minister, I will use every opportunity. I will not shy away from challenging individuals who are failing, but when I met a good council or a good councillor, regardless of their political background, I think we should celebrate that, and I will tell the individual.

**Q31 Chris Williamson:** Celebrations do not pay the bills, though, do they, Minister? Finally, would you disassociate yourself with the comment that the Chairman of the Conservative Party said, when he compared councillors to scout leaders? Do you disassociate yourself from that?

**Kris Hopkins:** I think I have already done that.

**Q32 John Pugh:** We are in danger, to some extent, of moving from defaming councillors to idealising them. Professor Copus, you have actually said they do a 24-hour-a-day job. I am not quite sure what you mean by that, but not every councillor works 24 hours a day on council affairs, do they?

**Professor Copus:** Not from 12 midnight to 12 midnight, no. What is meant by that term is that they are potentially accessible 24 hours a day, and it is a term that councillors themselves use.

**Q33 John Pugh:** They are phoned in the evenings or on holidays and things like that.

**Professor Copus:** While on holiday, in the evenings, while at work in the office if their work number has got round. A number of councillors have reported that people have got hold of their work telephone. The principle about the 24-hour-a-day job is the proximity that leads to the contact.

**Q34 John Pugh:** Does this not, to some extent, come with the territory? If you are a councillor and you are standing at a cocktail party and you divulge that fact, the first thing a person will do is think of a problem to bring to your attention. Is that not just a part of being a representative?

**Professor Copus:** Oh no, absolutely. Councillors do not object to that principle of 24 hours. In fact they do see it as part and parcel of the role, but it is a way in which they can articulate the idea of the accessibility that people have to them.

**Q35 John Pugh:** Just to Councillor Sparks, if councillors have this demanding role, is there a level of support they ought to be able to expect, or does it vary depending on what sort of councillor they are? Obviously councils are of different sizes, and wards represented by councillors are very different sizes, are they not, from a big met to a small town council. Is there a level of support they should legitimately expect in doing their job?

**Cllr Sparks:** It is fair to say now that the majority of councils provide good back-up to individual councillors. The fundamental point here is the open access to councillors. Councillors are not complaining that there is an open access. There has always been an open access. It is just that there needs to be a recognition that that is a particular role that they perform.

**Q36 John Pugh:** Just exploring the analogy that people have drawn between councillors who perform a civic duty and reservists, who perform a similar sort of duty, would you like to comment on that, in terms of how the employers characteristically react? Obviously a councillor, from time to time, will need to leave his place of work, as will a reservist.

**Cllr Sparks:** Yes. This is something that is exercising me considerably, because all of the time I am dealing with councillors who are deciding not to continue as councillors, and frequently many of them are the talented ones. My direct experience is that there is a difference with some employers—with many employers, not some employers now. It is a lot more acceptable to an employer for someone to be a magistrate or to be a reservist than it is to have time off for council activity.

**Q37 John Pugh:** I suppose there is the possibility also that the employer may be of a different political persuasion than them as well.

**Cllr Sparks:** I would not necessarily say that. I think it is the fact that when you are dealing in hard times, and you are running a business

and you have to make a profit, the reality is that there is pressure on people who are having time off. That is a recognition. It is a worthy subject for the Committee to look at again—the whole question of time off for council activity, and in particular the question of the voluntary nature of what councillors do. In Dudley Council, in terms of the expenses that you get, there is an element that is included in that that is meant to be part of the voluntary contribution that individuals make to society. However, we do have a problem, and the problem is you get a lot of councillors, in councils of all types, who do not stay as councillors as long as they used to do, for a variety of different reasons. It is usually because they are finding that it is affecting their careers, their families and so on and so forth. I think it merits studying, because society has changed, and because of the way society has changed what councillors do has also changed.

**Q38 Bob Blackman:** Professor Copus, one of the duties of a councillor is often to serve on fire authorities, on LEPs, and other external bodies to the council. Is it fair to say that, in your research, councillors feel underprepared and ill-assisted to take those roles on?

**Professor Copus:** Again, it depends on the level of councillor within the organisation. Those councillors that are in leadership positions do have greater access to support and research than those that are not. This is a reality. It is not the existing executive scrutiny split that is responsible for that. That was always the case under the old committee system, where committee chairs would have greater access to officers.

In terms of those types of organisation that you have identified, councillors certainly reported to me, both in these workshops and in other research, that the organisation of the council is not always set up to support them in that particular role. So in terms of research being conducted, preparing for meetings, being able to navigate those various different networks of organisations that they are involved in, there is a feeling that the support that is provided could certainly be better.

It does, of course, as you would expect with anything in local government, depend on which council you happen to be talking about. Some councils will have very strongly recognised the fact that their role in influencing other bodies is a way in which you govern an area, and therefore that is an important area to support. In others that recognition may not have been made, or even if it has decisions about spending resources in other ways have been made. For many councillors, and certainly from the workshops that we run, there was that feeling that the council of which they are a member could do more in supporting them in their activities in those outside organisations. As you rightly said, we are not talking about the local bowls club

management committee, not that there is anything wrong with the bowls club. We are talking about big, powerful organisations.

**Q39 Bob Blackman:** Is it fair to say as well that a lot of those bodies will meet during the normal working day, as opposed to an evening? Therefore, taking Chris Williamson's point, a number of people in their thirties or forties who are working will almost certainly not be placed on those sort of bodies. Therefore it tends to be people either retired or who are not working that will take on those roles. Is that fair?

**Professor Copus:** To be quite honest with you, I have not got the figures to support or otherwise that particular idea. However, you could work on the basis that a councillor has to make a decision that they are going to do that particular role full time. Those that do will engage in those organisations, and those that cannot, for whatever reason, make that decision, will be excluded from it. That is the reality. At the moment the decision as to what type of councillor to be rests with the councillor.

**Q40 Bob Blackman:** Councillor Sparks, do you recognise this as a problem? Is the LGA doing anything about ensuring that councillors are better prepared to co-operate on such bodies?

**Cllr Sparks:** First of all, I recognise there is a problem. Secondly, the LGA are continually circulating best practice. The fact that councillors meet each other and exchange information ensures that there is best practice. The third point, speaking individually as the leader of a council, I do now take it into account a lot more than what I used to do when I am putting people on outside bodies. I say, "Look, this is a day-time commitment; you are working; you have got a young family; do you really want to take it on?"

The other point that needs to be taken into account is the variation in councils, even when you are talking, say, to the Black Country. Wolverhampton and Sandwell meet during the day, or Wolverhampton does, but Sandwell not as much as Wolverhampton. Dudley and Walsall meet in the evening. If you have got a council where the norm is that you meet during the day, it does not really matter when you are on an outside body. It is when you have got a council that meets during the evening. In many instances that is because of a legacy of a two-tier authority, or it might very well be the case now because of a two-tier authority. The county council might have, for 100 years, met during the day, and the district council meet during the evening. You have got to take that into account. It is something that needs to be recognised.

**Q41 Bob Blackman:** Minister, a lot of these bodies are statutory bodies where councils need to have representatives. Is the Government issuing any guidance or assisting in training to assist councillors to make sure they are prepared for this role?

**Kris Hopkins:** There are a couple of things. First of all, we recognise the good work the LGA does because of its leadership courses. There is some exemplary work there, which we support. I go back to my own experience on this. We are talking about sending a councillor off to do a role on a committee. Sometimes we need some clarity about what is the purpose of the individual being on the committee, and, having done something on the committee, how does it actually change your council or the outcomes that you want to achieve? Setting the aims and objectives for the individual when they go on to the committee can then actually frame some of the support that may be required to facilitate the outcome. I have been in that situation of having to put somebody on, but what I really did have to challenge all the time was, "What am I trying to achieve as a consequence of this?"

I do think there is a point that you made, Councillor Sparks, around councils taking some responsibility. If we want to get people of different age groups involved rather than the individual having to give up time, this is an instrument that is an instrument of democracy. Perhaps the instrument actually needs to facilitate the democracy, rather than the individual who is trying to participate in it, who is having to compromise their workplace or time or income as a consequence of it. So how do we get more evening or morning meetings, or whatever it is, to be able to facilitate that?

**Q42 Bob Blackman:** Often these strategic bodies will encompass a broad range of other interests: businesses and so on and so forth. They are going to meet when it is convenient for the majority of the membership of that, and then the local authority may have one or two representatives on that body. Therefore that almost precludes people, in terms of sitting on them, unless they are available. Clearly, as Councillor Sparks has pointed out, some bodies meet during the day anyway, so therefore people should expect that. A lot of other authorities meet in the evenings and therefore what tends to happen is that retired people or people that are not working get appointed to these bodies. They do not even tend to be members of the cabinet necessarily, or the executive, or whatever they may be, that are doing this, or even the council leadership. It tends to be other people. In those circumstances—and that is a decision to be taken locally—what about the guidance that the Department gives on level of training and the level of support? What should be offered for those types of statutory bodies that the Government says there should be councillor membership of?

**Kris Hopkins:** Each of those individual bodies will have rules and regulations about the competence of the individuals that they seek to encourage to it. I have said before about the aims and objectives that the participating councillors from that council want to achieve. I would expect those councillors to go, tooled up, ready to get the outcome that they are seeking to achieve.

We have not really touched upon allowances here, where an individual has given some time. There are sizeable allowances out there for individuals to be recompensed, where perhaps they have used their afternoon off or some time that they have got in lieu to be able to make that work.

Just to make a comment on employers, if I genuinely heard a loud volume of individuals who were saying that employers are not facilitating the needs of councillors, then I think we might engage more in this debate. My experience was the vast majority of individuals' employers recognised the merits: the leadership qualities, the skills that they brought, the character-building that it brought to the individual who was a councillor, all qualities that were positive additions to the individual, who then brought those qualities to the company or the organisation.

**Q43 Bob Blackman:** Can I just say, the concern is not about people that are not being allowed time off? In times gone by, firms and employers would say, "Yes, it is a big, good thing to have a person as a councillor". Then you have got the competition that is going on for promotion and such like. The view will not be expressed in this way. It will be, "He is a councillor", or "She is a councillor, and this one is fully committed. I am going to promote the person who is fully committed rather than the person that is sideways." That is the unstated position. Maybe, as Councillor Sparks has said, it is time to look at the point of allowing statutory time off, or more statutory time off, to do public duties, so that it is quite clear that that is the position and should be documented as such. Do you not agree?

**Kris Hopkins:** No, I do not agree with that. I also disagree with the idea that, because somebody was a councillor, "I am not going to promote him." My experience actually is busy people can usually do more things than people who are not busy, and do fit time in and they do make that work. They are energised; they are motivated. I said before, if you are sat on a committee, if you have got a set of objectives, a real responsibility, if you are a person who has got up and wants to represent your community—you are passionate about your community—I am not an employer but that is the kind of person I would want to employ.

**Q44 Bob Blackman:** We probably need to disagree, because I think the reality is, as Councillor Sparks has said, we are seeing bright people in their thirties and forties doing one term. The evidence we have gathered is that people are doing that in their thirties and forties, saying, "Actually this is having a detrimental effect on my career. I am going to step down now."

**Kris Hopkins:** Perhaps one of the roles we have got, then, is articulating the value that these individuals have as a consequence of being a councillor.

**Cllr Sparks:** If I could just add one thing on this, in terms of the objective factors. The fundamental point in relation to Dudley and the Black Country—but this goes through a large part of the manufacturing sector—is that the change of the size of companies, from large companies to SMEs and smaller business means that, with all due respect, in the Midlands, a lot of the employers that would allow time off, and they could see that there were transferable skills and so on and so forth, are no longer there. Either they have been taken over by multinationals or they are just not there anymore. The economy is dominated by small companies. The small companies have not got the spare resources.

The other thing you have got to look at as well is the occupational structure. You might very well find that it is still the case in many occupations that you can get time off for council work because you can make time up. However, if you are working on a production line then you do not necessarily have that same option. That is the problem, because politically it is the cross-sectional nature, the very representative aspect of democracy, that is at risk in our council chambers. The nature of the council chamber has become more and more dominated by the retired. It is as if we have gone back to the 19th century.

**Q45 Chair:** It is interesting. We had a younger councillor—I think she was a Conservative councillor—who gave us evidence. She said she was being told by the job centre not to put down that she was a councillor when she applied for jobs, because it would actually stop her from getting them. That was their experience.

**Kris Hopkins:** If I found out which job centre that would be I would go and have a chat with them. It is outrageous.

**Q46 Mrs Glindon:** Professor, your findings, in accord with the Committee's report, identified a frustration amongst councillors with constant intervention by central Government. Could you tell us what sort

of views councillors expressed about this frustration, and give us some examples?

**Professor Copus:** Yes. One of the main frustrations that came over was based on the nature of the continuing flow of regulations from Government about how particular functions of local authorities had to be delivered. The idea that there was not just a legislative framework; there were also very detailed regulations about what could be done and indeed how it should be done and the standards that were reached. I know the standards regimes within local government changed recently, and many members were reflecting on a past regime. Certainly the frustrations come from having a view about what is needed to be done locally to solve local problems and respond to local views, and the regulations that flow from central Government that are looking to ensure, in some respects, a one-size-fits-all approach to particular services. That was the way in which those frustrations were articulated. What councillors were often calling for was the ability to use the local knowledge that they had got to solve particular local problems that they felt were differently manifested in their area to how they would be somewhere else.

**Q47 Mrs Glindon:** As interpreted by Government?

**Professor Copus:** That is right. They, as a body of members looking at their communities, would have a different interpretation not only of possibly the causes of particular problems but most definitely the solutions and the way in which particular services might need to be provided. It was that aspect that many found frustrating. Particularly, it was something that newer councillors were referring to more often; there was something of a shock for newer councillors in the very narrow areas of discretion and freedom that they have. Many newer councillors are flushed rightly with enthusiasm at having won, and they want to get on with doing something. Then, all of a sudden, they find that their avenue for discretion is greatly constrained.

**Q48 Mrs Glindon:** Minister, how do you respond to these findings? Government does not agree with what Professor Copus says.

**Kris Hopkins:** One thing I really took as a real positive problem from the report was that 84.5% of councillors said they would recommend their job to somebody else. It cannot be all bad if they would actually recommend their job to somebody else. To the idea that there is bureaucracy and red tape, this Government has spent most of its time removing bureaucracy and red tape and knocking stuff out. If you look at planning, there is a plethora of documentation and acres of paperwork that a councillor was expected to wade through and attempt to make a determination. It is far more simplified, as a consequence. The idea that we empower individuals through the Localism Act and

through the vehicles that we talked about earlier on is the right thing to do.

One of the things that we will see is that the best councils are the ones that do not just sit there and complain about the system or the mechanism; they get on the train. I remember, when I was leader of the council, I had a small matter that the previous administration had privatised the whole of education in Bradford, and it was being run by Serco. I did not think that was a good idea, so I went to get on the train and I went to have a chat with Ed Balls. I asked him if we could bring it, possibly, into the state regime again. It was the way to go, and it was quite an interesting conversation, as a Tory leader of the council, trying to have a conversation about the non-privatisation of the Labour Administration. Anyway, it was about the fact that I believed that was the right thing at the time for the local community and their council to run that.

What I would say to councillors and councils is, "Feel empowered. If the game is not as you want it, then do not be afraid to ask. There have been significant freedoms given to you, to be able to shape through City Deals, Enterprises Zones and a whole range of different mechanisms, to drive out particularly the economic outcomes, which will drive up the prosperity, health and wealth of your community."

**Q49 Mrs Glendon:** Minister, you said about getting on a train and being empowered. If this frustration is being expressed, is there something wrong there between what the Government are saying and what councillors are feeling? It seems that the two things are different. Can you understand the frustration? Other than people getting on a train, how can they deal with that?

**Kris Hopkins:** At the end of the day, I have not been a councillor for four and a bit years, but I constantly engage with my own council, and that has not been the issue that has been raised to me by the officers that I have spoken to and the individuals concerned. Yes, people would like more money to be able to make some of the choices around that, but that is not the game we have got at this moment in time. The last Government spent it all.

**Chair:** That was said with a straight face there.

**Kris Hopkins:** Absolutely. The bit for me, actually, is about the empowerment element of it. I went up to Sunderland recently, and I saw some amazing things that are being done there about the council building housing and addressing some of their health issues. That was about them taking control. I look at some of the transformation stuff in Manchester; there is some amazing work that is going on there, where they have laid out what their objectives are and are really driving that

out. It is all about local leadership. In that case, it is about getting lots of councils together and having a common economic outcome, really pushing that over a long period of time.

The best councils have local leadership—really strong leadership—a clear plan and set of objectives that they want to drive out and, where they have got blockages or obstructions to those outcomes, the more successful ones will be the ones that try to solve those. Whether it is talking to Government or talking to partners, to break down those barriers is the right thing to do.

**Q50 Mrs Glindon:** Councillor, the LGA said there should be a new model of partnership working, rather than dictated from central Government. Have you any idea how that model would look?

**Cllr Sparks:** I have had a great deal of experience with different Governments of different parties, in terms of pioneering a lot of new initiatives. Our view is that, fundamentally, we should be able to have a partnership between central and local government, where everything that should be done at a local level is done at a local level, and that we accept that there should be obligations on local government to deliver objectives as a result of that. My own view is that we need to fundamentally realise we are in the 21st century; it is a totally different world and it is a totally different system. We need to create a system of governance in this country that addresses that society and provides, as I said at the beginning, the best possible arena for local councillors to lead and defend their local communities.

The fundamental point is, again, that it is not just to do with local politics; it is to do with politics as such. Politics needs to be inspiring and exciting, no matter what the circumstances. As the leader of the council, I know—and I do come across leaders like this occasionally—if I am continually miserable and downbeat, then everybody else will be continually miserable and downbeat, and we will not achieve what we need to make Dudley a great place. I am passionate about my ward, Quarry Bank and Dudley Wood, and I am passionate about Dudley in the Black Country and the West Midlands. I will fight for it. That is ultimately what local government is all about.

**Q51 Bob Blackman:** Professor Copus, the average councillor is white, male and aged 60. We have had a lot of evidence about diversity, and I was a bit surprised that it does not appear to have been in your report. Could you explain that?

**Professor Copus:** The report is based on the issues that members of the workshops brought up. There was a lot of implicit, rather than explicit, discussion of that issue. The questions of barriers and the

problems of work were also seen to be a way in which you “refresh” the population of councillors. It was not the case that, in any of these workshops, members sat down and said, “We need to ensure that there are more from X, Y, Z particular groups in society.” But it was clearly something, from my reading of it, that was at the back of all the discussions about how it can be made easier for people to become councillors—“people” being whoever that might be.

Members are aware of the need to reflect their local communities. I think I said at the first meeting I attended with this Committee that something like 90% of all councillors across England come from one of the three main political parties, yet only 1% of the population are members of political parties. The greatest under-represented group anywhere are people who are not members of political parties. But that is not something particularly exercising.

Councillors are aware. Again, I come back to this point about the proximity to their communities. They are aware of the need to reflect those communities, both in a sense of the policies and decisions they make, and indeed of the make-up of the chamber. I think a lot of the discussions were implicit, rather than explicit. That would be the way I would explain it.

**Q52 Bob Blackman:** Clearly, the LGA and the Government recognise the problems of diversity. A lot of the issues we have talked about, such as constraints and barriers to becoming councillors, are actually impacting on diversity. Councillor Sparks, what is the LGA doing about this particular barrier, to assist a more diverse type of councillor? I think you referred in your earlier comments to the fact that it was getting worse, rather than better.

**Cllr Sparks:** There are a variety of different programmes that the LGA has got, the chief of which is called “Be a Councillor”. We have focused that “Be a Councillor” programme on ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, to try to rebalance the fact that such groups are the worst represented amongst the population. Speaking first of all as a former leader of the LGA Labour group, and indeed leader of Dudley, I have made it my business to make a priority of trying to correct the gender balance, in the first instance. Insufficient attention is taken, in terms of how you diversify. If you do not focus on a particular area, you increase your chances of being relatively ineffective; you do need to focus. It is up to political parties, as well, in terms of the selection of candidates. There are variations within the political parties. I have certainly been able to improve the gender balance, both within the LGA Labour group and in my own group, culminating yesterday in the appointment of our first woman chief executive.

The final point I want to make on this is that, certainly in terms of the gender balance—and the same thing goes for balance in general—I particularly want a good gender balance on my council. I learned very early on that if you do not have a good gender balance, you get an over-macho-type politics, which is not good politics and does not lead to good decision making. So, it is not just a question of representing the population. The population need to be represented in order to get the best decisions for the population.

**Q53 Bob Blackman:** Minister, what is the Government's view on this?

**Kris Hopkins:** First of all, what is one of the barriers to people actually being a councillor, never mind the breakdown of it? I think that is the reputation of politics, to be quite honest with you. We need to get it back, and say, "This is about being a representative of the community and actually bringing change. I can bring change as a consequence of this engagement with the political process." We need to fix that reputation with the public—and I mean change for the positive. So, what is my manifesto as an individual? To be able to bring change. That connection needs to be re-established or built on, where it is successful.

I served as leader of the council in an extremely diverse community in Bradford. I agree with the issue around trying to get more women and young people; there was an issue about trying to get them to stand. From a BME point of view, we had a really strong representation there. So, there are opportunities; there are places that are more representative of their community than others.

I do not want this to be taken out of context, but there is an issue. The vast majority of the people in this country are white. If we look at lots of councils, just being prescriptive about having some mix, just for political correctness, would be wrong. I valued every single member—possibly I did not value the BNP members—and the individuals from different parties who came to me about issues, wanting to talk about them, because they were players from their communities. That link back to the communities, which we are making, will fix it.

In terms of the bit around trying to get women, and particularly young people, each individual political party has got a huge role to play there, to go out there and find individuals. It is not just about gender or age, actually. It is about the quality of the councillor, as well. Is this just somebody who wants to vote Labour or vote Conservative, or is it somebody who comes with a set of skills, which can really enhance the outcomes for their community? There is not one particular type of person there, but there is a requirement and things they need. I do it in my own constituency; I look at who I can bring forward who is not just

going to be a Tory, and put their hand up. It is about what they add to the mix.

**Q54 Bob Blackman:** Taking Professor Copus's quite adequate point that less than 1% of the population is actually represented, in the sense that they are members of political parties, membership of the parties is relatively small, compared to the general population. So, is it the Government's view that political parties should be more outward-looking in attracting people who are not necessarily members of their party to stand for election to be councillors?

**Kris Hopkins:** Just because they have the word "independent" against them does not mean they are not political, not politicians or not politically energised. There are whole councils run by independents, as such, but who clearly have a political motivation and drive. I am not so hung up about that. Quite often, it is about the mechanism of delivering the outcome of the election that determines whether they get in or not.

Think about some of the by-elections that have gone on in recent years. George Galloway arrived in Bradford with three weeks' notice and got a 10,000 majority out of a very, very strong Labour seat. If you have the manifesto, which resonated in this case with a lot of women and young people in that community, you can drive a different outcome. I am not saying I agreed with the electorate, by the way.

**Q55 Chair:** You said, reasonably, that the majority of people in this country are white. However, the majority of people in this country are not over retirement age, and councillors are not representative. One of the things that really worried me, when I heard the evidence on this, is people who come in as young councillors, who then do not stay the course because of the pressures of times and finance. It is okay for a retired person; maybe their allowance is a top-up to their pension. For a young person, that allowance probably does not replace what they lose from their work in pay. On top of it, they are going to lose some pension as well. We have that evidence. Do you not think it would be reasonable to at least give some thought to that—about how a system whereby people got compensated for their loss of earnings, and did not have to lose out on pensions, might encourage some more young people to stand, not because they do not want to make money, but because they simply do not want their families to suffer?

**Kris Hopkins:** There are two things there. First of all, there is a sizeable allowance out there.

**Q56 Chair:** It does not cover many people's loss of earnings in their jobs. We have evidence of that.

**Kris Hopkins:** The basic allowance in Bradford is £12,000. That is a significant amount of money, actually, compared with the average

earnings of a lot of people out there, to top up some of those wages. As far as reasons why young people are not participating, it is not just about money; it is about going off in life's different paths and different parts of the country.

**Q57 Chair:** It is a factor.

**Kris Hopkins:** I am not saying it is not a factor, but that is why there is a safeguard and an allowance process, to be able to do that. Actually, people have a family and make different life choices. Somebody who is in retirement has set their roots many times, and actually has a clear path: this is their place, and they are able to do that. So there are other factors—not just about money—that determine whether an individual wants to make a long-term commitment. By the way, I do not then reject the idea that we should not do something to try to encourage young people to get out there. As I said earlier on, political parties have a huge responsibility there to go out and attract younger people.

**Professor Copus:** Chair, could I just give you an illustrative example? I have got a student, and I checked that it was okay to use her as an example. She is a 21-year-old woman, elected to the county council in the last county council elections, on the second year of her undergraduate degree. I am talking her into not resigning mid-term, because the world of being a councillor and doing a degree at the same time is just almost incompatible. I think it will be a tragedy if she does stand down, particularly for somebody of her age and somebody with the potential that she has got. There are sometimes personal barriers, and there are structural barriers. In this instance, it is a sad case of an individual hitting both of those barriers. As I say, I think it would be a tragedy if local government lost somebody that could potentially have quite a good future as a councillor.

**Q58 John Stevenson:** Professor Copus, you have highlighted four areas for future action. Do you think now is the time for a proper, full-on, national debate about the role of councillors?

**Professor Copus:** I certainly think that time is overdue. There have been numerous inquiries that have either touched on local government or explored the role of the councillor. There was the Councillors Commission a while ago; the Widdicombe Committee and Maude Committee are examples of where the role of the member has been discussed. What often happens is that the role of the councillor is explored at the moment in time, and the answers that are given to many of the questions about what we want councillors to do are also products of that particular time.

I think what we need, very much, is in some respects a councillors' constitutional convention, which explores what that role is and what powers, responsibilities and functions the office of councillor should have. It would come to some sort of settled will between the centre here and local government. At that stage, it is time for the centre to step back and say, "This is what we expect from councillors; this is the role that they themselves have shaped in this debate. It has been shaped with the public, and now it is over to you to govern your communities."

**Q59 John Stevenson:** Minister, do you agree with that sentiment?

**Kris Hopkins:** We have got to address the reputation of politics; that is one of the fundamental barriers to why people do not actively engage in the political process. The best councillors are the ones that do maintain a connection; even if you are a leader of a council, you still visit your local club and keep that connectivity. That is really important. I say that as a Minister, as well. It is about the connection between you as a representative and the community. That is really important. That role and that responsibility needs to be rammed home to individuals.

It is also about outcomes: "What did I deliver for you?" It helps if people can see an outcome—if they can see that your engagement on the school governing body has driven up the standards there, or the parents have a voice, or you have run your campaign to get that dog muck off the street and actually it is cleaner as a consequence of that. Some of this has got to be driven by outcomes, as well.

**Q60 John Stevenson:** Just to finish off then, Minister, do you agree that there should be a national debate on the role of councillors

**Kris Hopkins:** I think there is constantly a national debate. I would make a comparison—people have said this lots of times before. If you ask people, "What do you think of your council?" they say, "It is rubbish". If you ask people, "What do you think of the social care worker who looks after your granny?" they say, "They are fantastic, and a real treasure." I think the same goes for councillors. If you ask, "What do you think of your councillor?" they say, "They are rubbish." If you ask, "What do you think of X, who is doing such and such?" they say, "Absolutely brilliant."

What we need to do is take those champions that are out there. Some of it needs to be decontaminated. Hold these up; these are exemplary individuals, who actually really do understand their community, represent the individuals and drive the outcomes.

**Q61 John Stevenson:** Do you think there should be a comprehensive, national debate about this, rather than just talking about specifics?

**Kris Hopkins:** There are lots of national debates on lots of things. I am not quite sure what space there is in the sphere out there to have another national debate about this. We are talking about local politics; what we need is a local debate, not a national one.

**Chair:** Thank you all very much indeed for coming in and giving evidence to us. That brings us to the end of our public proceedings for this afternoon.