

RAN Advice Forum Report

“Strengthening links between RBC Councillors and RAN member organisations”

June 9, 2021 - by Zoom video link

Introduction

1 This was our third Zoom Forum. Its aim was to see if stronger links with Councillors could improve the help we can give our clients, and they can give their constituents, and how these stronger links could be created.

2 We had 19 participants from a wide variety of different organisations. After a short introduction by Richard Harrison, RAN Chair, Councillor Rachel Eden and Councillor Adele Barnett-Ward gave a joint presentation. Rachel has been a Councillor for Whitley Ward since 2010 and is currently the Deputy Mayor. Adele has been a Councillor for Caversham Ward since 2018 and is currently the Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities, She is also CEO of RAB Sightloss, one of the RAN member organisation. The slides they used are attached to this report. The Forum concluded with a period for questions and discussion.

3 A recording of their presentation is available on the RAN website.

The joint presentation

4 In their presentation, Rachel and Adele were aiming to help participants understand what it is like to be a councillor - the range of considerations councillors have to take into account and the different pressures on them - and therefore how to build effective working relationships with them. They talked about the different roles councillors perform, the sorts of people who become councillors and how that happens, how to work with and help councillors, the things councillors can't do, and the political dimension to working with councillors.

A Roles and backgrounds

5 Rachel explained that all councillors have a series of interlocking and complicated roles, any or all of which they may have to do at the same time. They have a degree of flexibility in how they balance the different roles, but there are some core duties. They are responsible for shaping the council's plans and policies, and as Rachel and Adele are both Labour councillors, and the council is currently Labour-controlled, briefings and discussion about this takes up a significant part of their time. Councillors also have a scrutiny role - sitting on committees and asking difficult questions to ensure that the council is well run.

6 Much of their time is taken up with casework - covering a huge range of issues, some trivial, others very serious. They help local organisations and community groups understand and navigate the system. There is a ceremonial or civic leadership role - mainly undertaken by the councillors who are currently Mayor or Deputy Mayor, but other councillors also get involved from time to time. There are important representational roles - representing the council, the views of residents in their constituency, or the community more generally. And there is a core political role. They do work cross-party and often have

good relationships with councillors from opposing parties, but political parties have different views and different priorities, and these determine the political choices they make.

7 Councillors come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some have experience of the voluntary sector, others have worked in the public or private sectors. Some are retired, but generally councillors are part-time, and are fitting their council activities around work and other commitments. Unless they have stood and been elected as Independents - which is not currently the case for any Reading councillors - they are selected by their political party, and although some councillors will have built up a personal following in their ward, most people in Reading vote on party lines. They must live or work in Reading, and most Reading councillors live here. A councillor's position is always to a degree uncertain - some lose their seats at an election, others win seats against the odds, and councillors' responsibilities can change. Rachel has been in opposition, Lead Councillor for three different areas of responsibility, and Deputy Mayor.

B Working with and helping councillors

8 Adele took over to explain how to work with and help councillors. RAN members are familiar with the difference between their staff and their trustees, and there is a similar difference between RBC officers and councillors. In deciding who to approach about an issue - the officers responsible, your local councillor, or the lead councillor for a particular function - and how to approach them, it is important to think strategically. We need to be clear what we want to achieve and how are we most likely to achieve it.

9 For example, the council has procedures, which its officers operate, for dealing with problems such as fly-tipping. If RAN members email a councillor about a specific problem of fly-tipping, the email will sit in the councillor's inbox until they get to read it. Councillors get large numbers of emails - the last time Adele opened her inbox it had 88 emails; the time before it was 124 - but they don't have a required response time and they each have their own approaches to dealing with them. Once the councillor reads the email about fly-tipping he or she will pass it to one of the three officers in the Councillors' Services section, who are responsible for supporting all 46 councillors. It becomes a councillor's case. Once the case is set up, officers have ten days to respond to Councillors' Services. They will then pass it back to the Councillor and it will sit in the Councillor's inbox until they get to it. So it could be a long time before the RAN member gets a reply to their email. It is likely to be quicker to go straight to an officer responsible for the service, or use one of the on-line services.

10 So we should go to councillors about policies, or if a process or procedure is not working. But there are two other important considerations - etiquette and political affiliation. Councillors are only supposed to raise issues in their local area or, if they are a lead councillor, in their area of responsibility. So if we have a policy or process issue, it is probably best to approach the relevant lead councillor or the chair of the relevant committee and, if appropriate, get them to come and see the problem we're concerned about. If it's a local issue, we have to recognise that an approach by our local councillor will be received differently depending on whether that councillor is part of the administration or in one of the opposition parties.

11 One way of raising issues is to ask questions at public meetings. But this approach tends to be used by parties in opposition to raise the profile of potential candidates, and so could be seen as a hostile act. Moreover, it won't produce more information than we would get by going directly to a councillor. Another way of using public meetings is to ask the

chair of the relevant committee if it would be possible to give a 10 minute presentation about the work of an organisation at the start of the meeting. This is a facility which tends to be underused and can be a good way of building positive relationships with key people.

12 A number of RAN member organisations have councillors on their Trustee Boards. This doesn't increase their chances of securing council funding, or give them an inside track on discussions within the council, but it does enable them to show the councillor the value of their organisation to the people of Reading and to get a general council perspective. More generally, if we want to raise the profile of our organisations it's worth thinking about approaching the Mayor or Deputy Mayor, because these are non-political roles and they are prohibited from using any visits to our organisations for party political purposes.

13 **Most importantly, we need to make it easy for councillors to work with us.** They have very little training as councillors, they are dealing with a lot of different issues with very limited time, and although Reading councillors are generally very supportive of the voluntary sector they may not have much detailed knowledge or understanding of our world. So we need to be reasonable with our expectations - be very clear what our problem is and what we are expecting from them. It would be helpful if RAN could produce a booklet for councillors about its member organisations, so that the key things we want them to know about us are all in one place.

C In conclusion

14 Rachel and Adele ended their presentation by making a few additional points and reinforcing some of the key ones they had made earlier. Councils have statutory duties that councillors cannot override - for example, they cannot set an illegal budget. Where councillors have conflicts of interest they must declare them, and while these may not preclude them from taking part in a debate, they may have to exclude themselves from any decisions. They're not magicians - sometimes they may be able to pull a rabbit out of a hat, but only if there was a rabbit in the hat to begin with which no-one else had been able to grasp. They are not a replacement for other, more effective routes to resolve problems and most of them are only part-time.

15 We need to remember that they are politicians and will always have an eye on their political situation. They belong to party groups which reach collective decisions, and individual councillors will not deviate from those positions. If we want to campaign on an issue we need to be sure that our Articles of Association permit this and our Trustees are in agreement. If we want to have a go at the Council it is likely that we will be able to find an opposition councillor who will help us, but we need to be very clear what we are getting our organisation into. It is easy to become a political football, and this isn't likely to help our organisation or its clients.

16 Their final message was that we should see councillors as our friends. Most of them are keen on their casework and very supportive of the voluntary sector. They want to work more closely with us, since we are all there for the people of Reading.

Questions and discussion

17 Participants had questions for Rachel and Adele on a range of issues. The questions and their responses are set out below.

A How has social media made a difference to your work?

18 Social media is very helpful when you are a candidate seeking election. But once you are a councillor, you have to use it more cautiously. Being on local Facebook groups can be a good source of information, but emails are a much better vehicle to use for casework. There is a level of abuse on social media and councillors have to take care about their personal safety. They are high profile and often live in the community but get minimal protection.

B How can we reach councillors who seem reluctant to engage with our organisations?

19 Councillors have different priorities and they won't all see the voluntary sector as a key group with which to engage. But being very specific in any requests you make to them, and giving them plenty of notice may help. It may also be worth approaching the leader of the relevant political group and asking if there is someone in the group who is interested in your organisation's work with whom you could liaise.

C How can we build links with the Health sector?

20 The key organisations in the Health sector - the clinical commissioning groups and the hospital trusts - are not as publicly accountable as the council and linking with them is more difficult, but senior people in the sector often know that they need to engage better. RAN members could team up with councillors to help them do this.

D Why didn't the Council engage with our knowledge and expertise more fully around the Forbury Gardens tragedy?

21 The Forbury Gardens tragedy created circles of trauma - the pain to the individuals and groups directly involved, but also to the wider community. It cut at the heart of what Reading is all about - we are a town where we live side by side and we celebrate our diversity. With major incidents like this, particularly with the police and Home Office involved, discussions tend to be held behind closed doors, partly because of a concern that people expect the Council to have all the answers, so it shies away from making 'work in progress' statements until every 'i' is dotted and every 't' is crossed. It's not clear what multi-agency activity may still be going on, but we can find out and tell you. We recognise it can be frustrating when the Council doesn't 'show its workings' and perhaps now is the time, when we've had a year to reflect on what happened, to discuss it and see what lessons can be learnt.

E How could our organisations be more helpful to councillors?

22 Councillors don't necessarily know how charities operate, or much about the range of organisations making up Reading's voluntary sector. So it would be really useful to do a presentation for councillors on how charities work, how they're structured, what they provide, how to get in touch with them, and why fund-raising is so important. To maximise attendance it might be best to do this at the start of a committee meeting, as suggested earlier. Presentations to the ACE (Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education) Committee and the HNL (Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure) Committee would be relevant to their work and would cover most councillors. It would also be very helpful to produce the booklet for councillors about RAN member organisations mentioned earlier.

23 The Forum concluded with our thanks to Rachel and Adele for their excellent presentation and their response to our questions.

Richard Harrison
Chair, Reading Advice Network

Annex A **Presentation slides**

1 Reading Advice Network
Building relationships with Councillors

2 Aims

- The roles of councillors
- Who councillors are
- How you can work with councillors
- How you can help councillors
- What councillors can't do
- Dealing with Politics and politics and other pitfalls

3 The roles of councillors

- Shaping the council's plans and policies
- Case work
- Helping local community groups and organisations work with the council
- Scrutiny
- Ceremonial positions
- Party politics
- Representing the council
- Representing resident views
- Representing the community

Councillors do any and all of these roles at the same time

4 Who councillors are

- Selected by their political party and elected by their constituents
- Some have voluntary sector experience, others are from the public sector, retired, private sector
- Legally must live or work in the council area. Usually in Reading they live in Reading
- Councillors are generally part time
- Councillors may lose their seats, be elected 'unexpectedly', and even while on the council change roles regularly

5 How you can work with councillors

- The Trustee comparison
- Think strategically - what are you trying to achieve?
- Be aware of the etiquette

- Public meetings - pros and cons of asking questions
- Other ways to use public meetings
- Why you might want a council rep on your board

6 How you can help councillors

- Councillors are time poor
- Councillors receive a wide variety of casework
- Councillors receive very little training
- Make it easy for them

7 What councillors can't do

- Councillors are NOT a replacement for other routes
- Councillors have to declare conflicts of interest (and may need to excuse themselves from certain decisions)
- Councillors are not magicians!
- Councillors (most of us...) don't have the luxury of being councillors full-time
- Some councillors are in opposition, all are in specific roles
- Councils have statutory duties that councillors can't override

8 Dealing with Politics and politics and other pitfalls

- Politicians are political - caveat emptor
- The difference between administration and opposition
- Check your Articles of Association and relevant policies
- When in doubt, check with your trustees
- Collective responsibility
- Apolitical roles