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The nature of local representation:  
councillor activity and the pressures of re-election

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## Introduction

The role and calibre of local councillors in Britain has been widely discussed since the establishment of directly elected councils in the 1830s (Hampton 1970; Hill 1974; Dearlove 1979). The recent initiative of the Taxpayer's Alliance in publicising levels of each council's remuneration package for its elected members is simply the latest iteration of how the perceived costs and benefits of local government divide opinion. Councillors are viewed variously as people who volunteer their time and energy in serving the needs of local communities while continuing to receive very little in return or as self-seeking individuals looking for political, social, and/or pecuniary advantage.

It is not hard to see why scepticism abounds. Like their equivalents in the Westminster parliament and now the devolved institutions it is often supposed that politicians work less than the average, spend most time on furthering their careers and largely ignore what the public wants unless an election is imminent. Yet, while the general public retains this view all the indications are that when individuals need to communicate directly with their MP/councillor their experience is largely positive. This paradox suggests a general misunderstanding about what elected representatives do with their time and their motives for doing what they do.

The aim of this paper is to contribute towards the debate about what councillors do and the roles that they undertake by taking advantage of dataset that is certainly one of the most comprehensive assembled. There have been previous and even contemporary studies that have considered the time that councillors spend performing council duties (MHLG 1967; Robinson 1977; Widdicombe 1986; I & DeA 2000; I & DeA 2004; I & DeA 2010). Other studies that have considered the different roles undertaken by councillors as they forge their political careers (Jennings 1982,; Barron et al 1991; Rao et al 1994; Copus 2004). A limited number of researchers have also taken account of the councillor's situation, whether that person represents a marginal ward, for example (Newton 1974). However, this analysis takes a more comprehensive approach by bringing together individual-level data derived from surveys of local election candidates (by definition, some of whom are councillors) conducted since 2006 and ward-level measures such as social deprivation, electoral competitiveness and partisanship. This allows us to frame the individual councillor's behaviour in the *context* of their ward representation; is the amount of time that councillors spend on council activities related to the ward's social structure and its electoral competitiveness?

The paper proceeds with an opening section that provides a short summary of previous research about both the amount of time councillors spend performing their council duties, and the roles that councillors fulfil as elected representatives. After describing the individual and aggregate-level data used in this analysis the paper explores the nature of councillors' ward-level engagement (surgeries, newsletters, community events, responding to electors' issues etc) taking into consideration either a ward's demographic and electoral characteristics (relative deprivation, marginality etc) or the councillor's own personal characteristics (sex, age, party etc). This examination reveals substantial differences in the amount of time invested and the

types of behaviour encountered and suggests a somewhat complex explanation is required to describe the councillor's role. A series of linear regression models seek to explain variations in the hours spent each week in undertaking council duties using predictor variables.

## **Councillor time investment and roles**

There have been various studies that have considered the hours spent by councillors fulfilling their council duties. The Robinson committee which investigated the remuneration of councillors in the 1970s found that councillors were spending 79 hours a month doing their work (Robinson 1977; volume 1, p.10). Later, the Widdicombe committee commissioned a 10% sample of local councillors undertaken during 1985. The survey found that councillors spent an average of 74 hours per month on council duties - five hours less than the Robinson inquiry reported but a sizeable increase on the 52 hours found by the Maud committee's inquiry in the early 1960s (Widdicombe, research volume II, Table 5.1, p.42). According to Widdicombe, Labour councillors were the most active, spending an average of 92 hours per month while their Conservative and Liberal counterparts invested a relatively modest 68 hours. There is no discussion about the rather large differences among the parties in the scale of activity. Those in paid employment were less active than both unemployed councillors and those retired from work (Widdicombe, research volume II, Table 5.3).

Similar exercises in estimating the time that councillors spend in fulfilling their roles as elected representatives are conducted by the Local Government Association. Its bi-annual National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England is fairly consistent in its reporting of the hours spent by councillors on council duties. The 2004 census reports an average of 21.5 hours per week, which rises to 22 hours in 2006 before rising further to 23 hours by the 2010 report. (I&DeA 2004; I&DeA 2010). The problem with the national census, however, is that it is dependent upon councillors completing the questionnaire, the responses are then simply weighted to the overall number of councillors, and the sub-categorisation of the data are rather limited. Nevertheless, the census does provide an independent measure with which to assess responses to our own surveys.

As well as measuring time spent there have also been attempts to describe the different roles that councillors perform. The Maud Committee commissioned a national survey that sought to define councillors as 'generalists' or 'specialists' reflecting how far their interests became centred on one particular aspect of a local authority's work. Later, the Bains committee (1972) reported on behalf of the Department for Environment that councillor activities could be defined in such terms as taking broad policy orientations, taking care of constituents' welfare needs, or serving the community in a general sense.

Another early attempt at describing role-orientation among councillors came with an examination of Birmingham during the 1960s (Newton 1974). This considered

councillors as ‘delegates’, ‘trustees’ and ‘politicos’ but as the author himself acknowledged with just 66 councillors interviewed the scope for generalisation was rather limited. Newton found that while social variables (age, sex, education, occupation) were not associated with role orientation three other characteristics (age first elected, political party and length of service) did appear to have some bearing but small sample size was a limiting factor. A study conducted at the same time estimated that three quarters of councillors focussed on constituency service, a fifth specialised in a particular service area while a small fraction could be described as authority-wide policy makers (Jones 1973).

After reviewing a range of studies Gyford concluded that “many of these orientations are apparently linked with one another, forming as it were ‘clusters’ which provide differing emphases to the varying aspects of a councillor’s role” (Gyford, 1976, p.29). Using the categories of ‘tribune’ and ‘statesman’ as some kind of continuum Gyford notes that a councillor’s length of service, ward marginality and relations with constituents are all identified as contributory factors in shaping councillors’ roles.

Of course, changes such as those introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 to the structure, internal management and organisation of local authorities inevitably means that some councillors do not simply ‘adopt’ roles but rather are formally identified as executive office holders in council cabinets or as committee chairs. Despite such changes, “councillors themselves decide how much energy they put into the representation of their electorate” (Wilson and Game 2006, p. 262), with many multi-tasking as case-workers, problem-solver’ ‘advocates’ etc. The thinking that lay behind these reforms was that whilst a minority of councillors would take on formal office-holding tasks, “Backbench councillors will spend less time in council meetings and more time in the local community at residents meetings or surgeries” (quoted in Copus 2004, p.237).

## Data

A range of individual and aggregate-level data are examined. Details about councillors and their council-related activities are from drawn from the annual local election candidates surveys, 2006-2012 (Rallings et al. 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010). Candidates were selected at random from lists of nominations published by local authorities. The sampling frequency was determined both by the number of candidates estimated to be standing and the objective of obtaining a relatively large number of responses. Prior to 2011 postal surveys were used but since then sampled candidates have been contacted by post and invited to complete an online survey. Data from the different surveys were pooled and weighted according to the original sampling frequencies.

Each survey includes specific questions reserved for respondents that have previously served as a councillor. Because of the need to match respondents to the wards represented only current incumbent councillors seeking re-election are included in the analysis. The data set comprises a total of 2,089 cases.

Matching each councillor with their local ward meant that we could consider the importance of context – social and political – upon the level of activity among councillors.

Social context was defined in terms of relative deprivation. This was calculated using the Indices of Deprivation 2010 from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The English Indices of Deprivation 2010 use 38 separate indicators, organised across seven distinct domains of deprivation which can be combined to calculate the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010 (IMD 2010). This is an overall measure of multiple deprivation experienced by people living in an area and is calculated for every Lower layer Super Output Area (LSOA) in England.

Six summary measures of deprivation have been published by DCLG for local authority areas. One measure that can be used is population weighted average of the combined scores for the LSOAs in a local authority district. This measure is calculated by averaging the LSOA scores in each local authority district after they have been population weighted. This measure retains the fact that more deprived LSOAs may have more ‘extreme’ scores. For our purposes, we use the same methodology when creating ward-level indicator of deprivation.

IMD 2010 at LSOA level and population denominators (mid 2008) were downloaded from Communities and Local Government website ([www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)). Lookup tables of LSOA to ward were downloaded from Office for National Statistics, Neighborhood Statistics website (<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>).

In total, there are 8,552 survey respondents that stood for election in 5,737 wards between 2006-2012. The IMD score was calculated for 4,418 wards (7,103 respondents). Various factors do not permit ward-level IMD calculations for 1319 wards in our dataset - 777 wards are county divisions, 89 wards are from Wales, some wards are not included in ONS lookup tables because of recent boundary change in 2011/12, while some survey replies do not contain information about the ward being contested.

Because not all 5,737 wards existed at the same time, it is impossible to use the IMD deprivation ranks in the usual way and define, for example, the top 10% most/least deprived wards. It was decided, therefore, to define ward *deprivation ranks in the dataset*. It means that the ward highest in the dataset IMD score (74.44) was considered as the most deprived and assigned an IMD rank of 1. The highest IMD rank of 4,418 was assigned to the ward with the lowest IMD score (1.20). Following this procedure the 10% of the most deprived wards in the dataset are those with IMD ranks from 1 to 441 and wards with IMD ranks between 3,876 and 4,418 are the 10% the least deprived.

The political characteristics of each ward considers ward marginality – the percentage point lead of the first party over the second party at the election coincident with the survey being conducted (i.e. not a previous election) – and whether in the case of multimember wards the seats contested at the election became divided among different parties. Marginality is defined by party (rather than a candidate’s own

personal vote) simply because a number of councillors represent wards with multiple seats and in approximately 10% of these the seats are shared among different parties. Hence, a councillor's "majority" may in effect be a negative number since his/her party finished below the winning party. Marginality is defined by four categories - majorities of below 10%, (26% of the total) 10-20% (22%); 20-30% (19%), and 30%+ (33%).

## Analysis

Table 1 describes councillors' social and political characteristics. Most represent wards in the shires although one in five serve on either a London or one of the 36 metropolitan boroughs. Just under one in ten sits on one of the surviving county councils. The dominance of the Conservative party during this period is reflected in the fact that 42% of our respondents are from this party with Labour and Liberal Democrats each contributing about one in four respondents. A quarter were incumbents seeking re-election following their initial four-year term, again reflecting the rather large turnover amongst councillors generally.

Table 1 here

Looking at councillors' personal characteristics it is perhaps interesting that a rather large proportion do not reside in the ward that they represent and later we investigate whether this relates in some way to the types of interactions with the electorate. One of the recurring criticisms of local government is that too few younger people stand for and are elected to local councils. Indeed, less than one in five of our councillors is under 50 years of age while almost four in ten is aged over 61 years. Both women and ethnic minorities are considerably under-represented also. The relatively low level of remuneration earned by most councillors possibly explains why 40% of them are retired from work although the number in full or part-time employment is only slightly smaller than that. Councillors are relatively well-educated compared with the wider population – almost half have at least one university degree qualification while eight in ten either currently holds or formerly held a professional or managerial level occupation. Despite using rather different survey methodologies and weighting procedures these data closely follow the finds of recent censuses of local authority councillors conducted by the Local Government Association (I & DeA, 2010).

From the beginning the annual surveys have sought information about the means whereby councillors relate to their electorates. These include the running of ward surgeries, circulation of newsletters, responding to telephone/written inquiries as well as engaging with local MPs and media organisations. For each activity we also ask about its frequency, ranging from more often than once a week to never. Prior research noted that Labour councillors spent more time on council duties than did their counterparts in the other two main parties. Of course, this might be a party characteristic but is more likely to be demand-led since Labour councillors are more often to be found representing wards with higher levels of relative deprivation.

Table 2 examines the different aspects of a councillor's activities. As outlined earlier the wards in our dataset were given a rank ordering based on their relative deprivation scores. Here, we sub-divide wards into three categories – the top ten per cent most/least deprived and the 80% left in the middle. The range of council activities was also divided into four categories. Councillors may be pro-active when communicating with voters. The running of ward surgeries, delivering newsletters that provide contact details and attendance at community meetings are all examples of councillor-driven activities. The interaction may instead take the form of reacting to constituents – receiving letters, phone calls, emails or approached in the street. A third type of activity may not engage directly with voters but is nevertheless designed to 'get the job done'. Constituents' complaints are sometimes handed over to local MPs to handle if the problem lies outside the councillor's jurisdiction while many councillors talk to local media organisations as a way of reaching a wider audience. A fourth category of activities is associated with the local party. Most councillors as party members are required to attend at party meetings seen as necessary for the maintenance of party coherence and discipline as well as improving the individual's chances of re-selection. Finally, the frequency of these activities were placed into three categories – more often once a week, more than once a month and less than once a month or never.

Table 2 here

In terms of both pro-active and reactive engagement with voters it is clear that councillors representing the top ten per cent deprived wards are the most active while those representing the most affluent wards are least active. More than half the councillors in deprived wards are running a surgery, distributing newsletters or attending meetings more than once a week – double the proportion in affluent wards, a third of whom rarely or never undertake such activities. The demands on councillors' time also relates to the ward's demographics – 86% of councillors in deprived wards are receiving communications from voters on a weekly basis but only six in ten of their counterparts in wealthier wards do so.

The differences are less in respect of contact with MPs and/or local media is concerned. The bulk of councillors – 50% in deprived areas, 68% in affluent areas, rarely if ever engage in this kind of activity. Similarly, attendance at party meetings does not appear too closely related to the type of ward represented. While half of councillors representing the poorest wards attend party meeting more than once a month that commitment is shown by four in ten of the councillors in the wealthiest wards. It should be noted, however, that a fifth of councillors in deprived wards attended party meetings more than once a week but the number of cases is rather small.

Overall, these differences in activities among councillors controlling for type of ward each represented, has consequences for the amount of time invested weekly. In the 80% of wards lying between the two extremes the average number of hours per week spent on council duties is 22.5<sup>1</sup>. Those councillors holding seats in relatively affluent areas have smaller caseloads, are less engaged with voters directly and consequently

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<sup>1</sup> When average values are presented unless otherwise stated the differences are statistically significant at the .05 level.

spend an average of 19.6 hours per week. This is almost six hours less each week than councillors sitting for one of the poorest wards.

Table 3 here

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that a councillor reacts to matters raised by electors, especially if there is no apparent threat to continuation in office. It would be interesting, therefore, to consider the relationship between councillors activities and their own electoral situation. Wards were sub-divided into four categories. The most marginal wards were those where the first party lead over the second-placed party was 10 percentage points or lower. The second and third categories were between 10-20 and 20-30 point leads while the safest seats were defined as those where the lead was either greater than 30 points or where the respondent was subsequently elected unopposed. The results shown in Table 3 are somewhat surprising. A priori, one might think that councillors in the most marginal wards would be the most proactive in attending to electors' interests since this concern might translate into much-needed votes. On the contrary, although the differences are not great, it appears that councillors in the most marginal wards were less active than their counterparts in safer wards and only as active as those representing safe seats. A similar pattern emerges in terms of reaction to electors' approaches with 66% of respondents in marginal wards reporting such contacts taking place more than once a week compared to over 70% in safer wards. In other respects, initiating outside contacts with MPs and media and attendance at party meetings there are virtually no differences in councillor activity after taking ward marginality into account. Taking all these activities into account the mean number of hours per week for councillors in the most marginal wards was 21.8 hours while the remaining three categories were 22.5, 25.0 and 23.1 hours respectively.

One possible explanation for this finding is that some incumbents facing the prospect of electoral defeat simply invested less time in delivering newsletters, holding ward surgeries and attending community meetings. Table 4 divides respondents into those that successfully defended their seats and those that were defeated. It reveals an interesting picture. About a third of each category are involved in weekly activities but re-elected incumbents are slightly more likely to be engaging in activities more than once a month. Larger differences emerge when the process is one of reacting to electors' concerns. Here, 72% of successful incumbents reported receiving phone calls etc more than once a week but among defeated incumbents this falls to 59%. It is unclear at this point why this should be the case. Again, although not shown here there are few discernible differences in terms of outside activities and party matters. In general, while defeated incumbents averaged 21 hours per week on council duties re-elected incumbents spent 23.7 hours, almost four hours more.

Table 4 here

One of the most striking findings of the research undertaken for the Widdicombe report was the differences in time spent on council duties controlling for a councillor's party. Conservative and Liberal councillors reported spending 68 hours per month but Labour councillors gave a much higher figure of 92 hours. Independent councillors were the least active, 61 hours, and those standing for one of

the smaller parties reported 71 hours per month (Widdecombe 1986, Table 5.3, p. 44, volume II). The most recent evidence is that Labour councillors are still the most active (24.8 hours) but these are followed by Conservatives (23.3), Liberal Democrats (21.9), minor parties (21.6) and finally, Independents (20.4).

Table 5 reveals some rather large differences in the type of activities undertaken after controlling for a councillor's party. Just under three in ten Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors are proactive weekly in their wards but 46% of Labour councillors are engaged to that extent. Labour councillors are receiving more inquiries from electors – 77% on a weekly basis with only Independents as busy. Across the board, it seems, Labour councillors are busier than councillors from other parties – just under a fifth of them are attending party meetings and making outside contacts on a weekly basis. One caveat worth noting here, however, is that it is perhaps surprising that given the higher frequency of council activities undertaken the differences in the total number of hours is not greater than that reported above.

Table 5 here

Of course, the distribution of a party's councillors relates to the type of local authority with Labour more likely to win seats in urban Britain and the Conservatives stronger in the shires. Despite this, there are differences in the hours spent on council duties within this urban/shires distinction. For example, councillors in London show an average of 25.4 hours per week but in cities outside of the capital the time spent in three hours more on average. Shire district/unitary councillors commit 21.6 hours but those serving on the more powerful and geographical dispersed county councils are spending 27.1 hours. At smaller geographical scales these differences disappear. It appears that a large fraction of councillors, just under half, live outside the boundaries of the ward that they represent. But any differences that might follow from this – additional time spent travelling to the ward perhaps or less commitment because of separation between residence and representation, are not evident with both types of councillors spending 23.1 hours per week. Another feature of the ward that might impact on how councillors fulfil their duties is whether or not a single party holds all the seats. Approximately one in ten of the multi-member wards contained in our sample were split in the sense that councillors from different parties were elected. This obviously reduces the number of cases for consideration but the evidence suggests no real differences in councillor activity.

But differences do emerge when men and women councillors are considered separately; women councillors, although fewer in numbers, appear to spend more time on council work when they are elected (Table 6). While 31% of male councillors are active on a weekly basis the corresponding figure for women is 42%. Women are more likely to be contacted by voters – 76% report weekly contacts but only 66% of men do so. In general, women councillors commit three hours more per week. Another feature that appears to impact on a councillor's level of activity is their length of service. Those seeking their second four-year term were less active (both proactively and reactively) than were more seasoned campaigners. It is difficult at this stage to assess the cause of that difference but one possibility is that seasoned councillors might be the ones whose council future is threatened more by the party selectorate than the voters. In those seats where the incumbent faced no competition

for re-selection the amount of time invested, certainly in terms of time spent pounding the streets and attending ward surgeries is rather less than for those councillors who first had to battle through a selection process before facing the electorate once again.

Table 6 here

A relatively large proportion of councillors are retired from work and it is unsurprising that this permits them to spend more time on performing council duties than councillors still working. The mean hours spent each week is 25.5 for the retired, falling to 22.5 hours for the self-employed and just 18.9 hours for those in full-time or part-time employment. But hours spent performing council duties does not equate with level of activity. While 34% of councillors that were retired were active on a weekly basis the figure for the employed was 31%. While 69% of the retired received an approach by constituents at least once a week so too did 67% of the full and part-time employed and 64% of the self-employed. Although the retired clearly spend more *time* on performing duties they appear not to undertake more *work*.

## Multivariate analysis

Certain personal and partisan characteristics about the councillor, the particular ward he or she represents and the type of local authority that is being represented are related to time spent council duties. Women spend more time than do men, Labour councillors are busier than others while urban-based councillors commit more hours than colleagues in the shires with the exception of county councillors. Councillors who represent the most deprived wards are spending more time than others but the electoral situation measured in terms of marginality appears to impact but in a manner that is not expected. Time investment does though appear to payoff - re-elected incumbents are investing more than those defeated at the ballot box.

Such differences in the data suggest a rather more complex explanation is required to account for variations in the hours each councillor spends on activities. In the following section we employ a linear regression approach with the hours spent each week as our dependent variable. However, at the outset we share our concerns about using this method given the distribution of the dependent variable as shown in Figure 1. Although respondents are permitted to enter any value for “hours” there is a clear “digit preference” with respondents tending to estimate in steps of five – 10, 15, 20, 25 etc. There is also a tiny fraction that because they believe that being a councillor is a 24/7 activity give a very large number but we cap this at eighty hours. Conscious of the properties shown by the dependent variable we applied various other statistical methods when modelling the data, including logistic regression (using different cut-off points), probit and logit ordinal models and multinomial but the findings are broadly similar to the linear regressions reported below.

Figure 1 here

Various linear regression models reported in Table 7 were developed using the following variables as predictors:

- ‘additional responsibilities’: 1 if chair of committee or leader of council etc., zero otherwise. This variable was not included for the 2006 survey so these data are excluded from this part of the analysis
- ‘retired’: 1 if retired, zero otherwise
- ‘women’: 1 if respondent is a woman, zero otherwise
- ‘probability of winning’: Self-estimated probability of winning on 0-10 scale with 0 no chance and 10 certain to be elected
- ‘probability SQUARED’: Probability of winning specified as a quadratic function to accommodate for the non-linear relationship between hours spent and estimate of chances of winning
- ‘ward IMD score’: Index of ward-level multiple deprivation was calculated using the ‘Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)’ : issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government and population estimates for mid-2010 at Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level from Office of National Statistics (measure excludes county council divisions and wards that are no longer current following recent boundary changes)
- ‘Multi-Member Ward’: 1 if the number of seats in a ward exceeds one, otherwise zero.
- ‘more than 4 yr experience as a councillor’: 1 if the incumbent seeking re-election had served more than one previous four-year term, zero otherwise
- ‘age (years)’: Respondent’s self-reported age
- ‘ward resident’: 1 if councillor lives within the ward represented, zero otherwise
- ‘non-white’: Self-reported ethnic identity
- ‘CouncilDuties\_Proactive.binary’: 1 if respondent reported at least weekly activities involving ward surgeries or circulating newsletters or attending community events, zero otherwise
- ‘CouncilDuties\_Reactive.binary’: 1 if respondent reported at least weekly activities involving receipt of letters, phone calls or emails from residents or being approached by local reporters.
- ‘CouncilDuties\_Outside.binary’: 1 if respondent weekly activities in respect of contacts with local media and or local MP.
- ‘split ward’: 1 if the election was in a multimember ward and candidates from different parties were elected , zero otherwise.
- ‘ward majority’: Percentage majority of respondent’s party in ward. Note, in split wards the party may have in effect a negative majority if finishing below the top position but these are set to zero for this analysis.
- ‘More people seeking selection than seats in the ward’: 1 if the councillor faced competition for re-selection, zero otherwise.
- ‘Campaigned in other wards’: 1 if the respondent reported campaigning in other wards at local elections, zero otherwise.
- ‘Conservative incumbent’: 1=Conservative councillor seeking re-election
- ‘Labour’: 1=Labour councillor seeking re-election.
- ‘Liberal Democrat’: 1=Liberal Democrat councillor seeking re-election.

Table 7 here

Model 1 includes a set of core predictors and shows that councillors with more than simple backbench responsibilities were likely to commit more hours to council activities as were the retired and women. The amount of time commitment is also related to the candidate's own estimate of the probability of winning the election while the greater the relative deprivation the more investment in time spent by councillors in carrying out their duties. Councillors sitting in multi-member wards are more likely to reduce their contribution presumably because the representative burden does not fall fully on their shoulders. Although all the variables are significant the model only explains a small amount of the variance in councillors' hours.

Model 2 adds further characteristics about each councillor but none are significant and are subsequently omitted from further models. Model 3 takes into account both the type of activities that councillors are engaged in vis a vis their constituents and also their own electoral situation. While all those variables that relate to activities are significant those that consider ward marginality, the division of seats between different parties and competition for the party's selection are not significant. The model's r-squared value rises to 0.29. Substituting the variable 'campaigned in other wards' for those describing the electoral situation (Model 5) lowers the model's explanatory power but the variable is significant.

One of the issues surrounding local elections is that it is often national rather than local issues that determine the ultimate electoral fate of councillors. Between 2007-2009, for example, there was a distinct swing towards the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats and away from Labour while from 2010 onwards the pendulum has swung in the contrary direction. Councillors facing electoral defeat through no apparent fault of their own might be inclined to give less of their time to ward issues. A general linear model allows us to take account of the changing fortunes experienced by the main parties including interaction between party membership and particular time period but impact on 'hours' was not statistically significant (not shown in the table). However, comparing each of the main parties' councillors with 'others', i.e. minor party or Independent incumbents we found that they spent significantly more hours on council duties (Model 6). Under the same circumstances, a Conservative councillor is expected to spend additional 3.9 hours, Labour and Liberal Democrat -3.1 and 3.7 hours respectively when compared with 'others'. Although the party variables are all statistically significant there is no improvement to model fit.

Finally, model 7 is the same as model 3 but removes the index of multiple deprivation which allows councillors representing county council divisions to be included in the analysis and raises the number of cases to 1,590. Removing the deprivation index reduces the model's explanatory power, however.

## Conclusions

By bringing together a range of individual and aggregate-level data this analysis is able to consider the activities of a large number of councillors representing a wide variety of social and electoral contexts. Some of these councillors represent wards that contain some of the most deprived sectors of the population while others are elected for relatively affluent areas. These same councillors have many characteristics in common, however, not least that they are directly elected (apart from the relatively small number that are elected unopposed) and therefore need to face the electorate from time to time.

The survey data report that the average councillor spends about 20 hours per week in performing their council duties but that time investment appears to be conditional upon the ward context, the individual's personal situation, and the wider electoral challenge the councillor experiences in seeking re-election. Wards exhibiting relatively high levels of social deprivation appear to make much greater demands upon councillors' time – six hours more each week compared with councillors representing the most affluent wards. This certainly raises the broader question whether the councillors that represent such wards are effectively constrained in terms of their political career choices, destined to miss out on leadership positions within the local authority.

*A priori*, it might be thought that elected representatives whose electoral future is in doubt will invest more time with their constituents while those incumbents facing certain re-election will invest less. Although the differences are not great after accounting for ward marginality these data suggest a more complex explanation is required. Councillors in the most marginal wards invested less not more time in undertaking council duties compared with counterparts whose council careers were less vulnerable to the swing of the electoral pendulum. Closer analysis of the aggregate electoral data might provide some explanation for this but simply controlling for whether the incumbent was successful or not does show that the re-elected spent rather more time *responding* to the electorate than did the defeated.

But this may not be the whole story. Councillors with relatively little political experience were investing less time in their wards than the more experienced members of council benches. It is impossible to conclude from these data but it may be that given what we already know about the relatively high level of turnover amongst councillors we should think about a categorisation that distinguishes 'survivors' from 'retirees'. Some people elected to local government find the experience too time-consuming and stressful on their personal relationships and although all of our respondents were seeking re-election some may already have chosen to take a step back in terms of the level of their commitment.

We also discovered differences in time investment after taking into account the councillor's relationship with his or her own party. Those incumbents that had faced a challenge for the seat nomination were spending more hours and were certainly more proactive in conducting ward surgeries, leafleting and attending community events. Women councillors are also the most active, especially in terms of responding to the needs from ward electors, a finding that seems to agree with the experience of

MPs also (Norris 1997). Again, it would be interesting to investigate this further in order to see whether the lack of women in senior leadership roles in local government is not simply a function of the usual constraints (family, caring responsibilities etc) but also that women councillors are perhaps perceived by the electorate as more approachable and more effective in resolving issues and that it is this kind of demand-level activity that shapes their political careers.

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Table 1: Characteristics of councillors: Survey evidence 2006-2010

	Count	Column N%		Count	Column N%		Count	Column N%
London	176	8.4	40 yrs and under	181	9.1	No qualification	174	8.6
Mets	237	11.4	41-50 yrs	262	13.1	GCSE	386	19.1
Districts/Unitaries, all-out	903	43.4	51-60 yrs	828	41.4	A level	481	23.8
Districts/Unitaries, thirds	586	28.1	61-70 yrs	543	27.2	First degree	636	31.6
Counties	181	8.7	71-80 yrs	172	8.6	Higher degree	340	16.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>2,083</i>	<i>100</i>	81-91 yrs	12	0.6	<i>Total</i>	<i>2,016</i>	<i>100</i>
Con	878	42.1	<i>Total</i>	<i>2,000</i>	100	Full/Part-time paid employment	703	35.1
Lab	516	24.8	White	1,954	96.7	Self employed	350	17.5
LD	490	23.5	Non-white	67	3.3	Retired	802	40.1
Minor party	80	3.8	<i>Total</i>	<i>2,021</i>	100	Other	147	7.3
Independent	120	5.7	Male	1,471	70.8	<i>Total</i>	<i>2,003</i>	100
<i>Total</i>	<i>2,084</i>	<i>100</i>	Female	605	29.2	Professional	970	48.5
First term on council	503	25.8	<i>Total</i>	<i>2,076</i>	100	Managerial/technical	610	30.5
more than one term	1,446	74.2				Skilled, non manual	166	8.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,949</i>	<i>100</i>				Skilled, manual	141	7.1
Live outside the ward	794	38.3				Partly skilled	69	3.5
Live in the ward	1,276	61.7				Unskilled	43	2.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>2,070</i>	<i>100</i>				<i>Total</i>	<i>2,000</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 2: Councillor activity and ward social deprivation

		10% most deprived wards	Middle range wards	10% least deprived wards	Total
		Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %
Proactive	more often than once a week	52.2	31.5	25.4	32.5
	more often than once a month	39.4	46.4	41.7	45.3
	never or less than once a month	8.4	22.1	32.8	22.2
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Reactive	more often than once a week	85.5	67.8	62	68.5
	more often than once a month	11	24.4	25	23.4
	never or less than once a month	3.5	7.8	12.9	8.1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Outside duties	more often than once a week	15.6	12.2	6	11.8
	more often than once a month	34.7	28.7	25.8	28.8
	never or less than once a month	49.7	59.1	68.3	59.4
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Party meetings	more often than once a week	20.3	11.2	5.4	11.3
	more often than once a month	51.2	46.3	41.1	46.1
	never or less than once a month	28.5	42.5	53.5	42.6
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 3: Councillor activity and ward marginality

		Below 10%	10-20%	20-30%	More than 30%	Total
		Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %
Proactive	more often than once a week	31.6	36.9	36.3	33.4	34.3
	more often than once a month	45.1	39.2	45.7	46	44.2
	never or less than once a month	23.3	23.8	18	20.6	21.5
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Reactive	more often than once a week	65.8	71.2	71.8	67.9	68.8
	more often than once a month	25.2	20.7	21.2	24.5	23.2
	never or less than once a month	9	8.1	7	7.6	8
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Outside duties	more often than once a week	12.9	11.5	14	9.8	11.8
	more often than once a month	27.8	29.4	29.1	29.7	29
	never or less than once a month	59.2	59.1	56.9	60.5	59.2
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Party meetings	more often than once a week	10.8	12.6	13.8	8.2	10.9
	more often than once a month	43.9	45.5	49.2	46.1	46
	never or less than once a month	45.3	41.8	37	45.6	43.1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 4: Councillor activity and incumbent success

		Re-elected incumbent	Defeated incumbent	Total
		Column N %	Column N %	Column N %
Proactive	more often than once a week	34.0	35.0	34.2
	more often than once a month	45.3	40.5	44.3
	never or less than once a month	20.7	24.4	21.5
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Reactive	more often than once a week	71.6	58.5	68.8
	more often than once a month	22.5	25.7	23.2
	never or less than once a month	5.9	15.8	8.0
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Outside duties	more often than once a week	12.2	10.5	11.8
	more often than once a month	30.1	25.1	29.0
	never or less than once a month	57.7	64.4	59.2
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Party meetings	more often than once a week	10.8	11.6	10.9
	more often than once a month	46.6	43.6	46.0
	never or less than once a month	42.6	44.8	43.1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 5: Councillor activity by party

		Con	Lab	LD	Minor party	Independent	Total
		Column N %					
Proactive	more often than once a week	29.8	45.7	27.7	40.8	39.7	34.2
	more often than once a month	44.7	41.3	48.2	40.0	40.7	44.3
	never or less than once a month	25.5	12.9	24.1	19.2	19.6	21.5
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Reactive	more often than once a week	64.4	77.0	68.5	62.4	73.5	68.9
	more often than once a month	26.6	16.1	24.2	28.8	20.3	23.2
	never or less than once a month	9.0	7.0	7.3	8.8	6.2	8.0
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Outside duties	more often than once a week	10.1	17.2	9.9	9.2	10.8	11.8
	more often than once a month	28.1	31.3	27.9	36.3	25.5	29.0
	never or less than once a month	61.8	51.5	62.1	54.5	63.7	59.2
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Party meetings	more often than once a week	10.0	18.4	6.3	9.2	4.3	10.9
	more often than once a month	42.1	57.6	50.0	31.1	11.9	46.1
	never or less than once a month	47.8	24.1	43.6	59.7	83.8	43.0
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Table 6: Councillor activity: Sex, Experience and Selection

		Sex		Experience		Competition	
		Male	Female	First term on council	more than one term	Re-selection challenge	No challenge
		Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %	Column N %
Proactive	more often than once a week	31.2	42.3	29.8	35.7	41.6	30.2
	more often than once a month	45.5	41.1	47.6	44.1	40.3	46.5
	never or less than once a month	23.3	16.7	22.6	20.2	18.1	23.3
	Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Reactive	more often than once a week	66.2	75.5	61.1	72.1	72.7	67
	more often than once a month	25.1	18.5	29.2	21.4	20.7	24.2
	never or less than once a month	8.7	6	9.7	6.5	6.6	8.8
	Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Outside duties	more often than once a week	11.6	12.3	9.9	12.8	15.3	10.6
	more often than once a month	29.6	27.5	26.2	30.5	32.3	27.7
	never or less than once a month	58.8	60.2	63.9	56.7	52.4	61.7
	Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Party meetings	more often than once a week	10.2	12.5	9.7	11.2	15.7	9.3
	more often than once a month	46.8	44.1	42.9	47.4	53	45.3
	never or less than once a month	42.6	44.8	47.4	41.4	31.3	45.4
	Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 7: Hours spent per week performing council duties

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>	<i>Model 7</i>	
(Constant)	16.96 (2.49)**	14.91 (4.14)**	12.95 (2.32)**	13.30 (2.57)**	12.03 (2.34)**	9.69 (2.57)**	11.08 (1.19)**	
additional responsibilities	5.51 (0.84)**	5.69 (0.91)**	4.34 (0.78)**	4.51 (0.82)**	4.03 (0.79)**	4.32 (0.78)**	5.19 (0.71)**	
retired	4.06 (0.73)**	3.97 (0.95)**	4.19 (0.68)**	4.20 (0.72)**	4.31 (0.69)**	4.18 (0.68)**	4.14 (0.62)**	
woman	3.58 (0.78)**	3.11 (0.83)**	2.37 (0.73)**	2.33 (0.76)**	2.39 (0.73)**	2.35 (0.73)**	1.81 (0.68)**	
probability of winning	-1.72 (0.74)*	-1.81 (0.78)**	-1.61 (0.68)*	-1.74 (0.73)*	-1.50 (0.68)*	-1.67 (0.69)*	-0.54 (0.59)	
probability SQUARED	0.17 (0.06)**	0.17 (0.06)**	0.16 (0.05)**	0.17 (0.06)**	0.15 (0.05)**	0.16 (0.05)**	0.08 (0.05)	
ward IMD score	0.15 (0.03)**	0.13 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.07 (0.04)*		
Multi-Member Ward	-2.55 (0.71)**	-2.86 (0.76)**	-1.66 (0.67)*	-1.87 (0.75)*	-1.71 (0.67)**	-1.72 (0.66)**	-1.95 (0.62)**	
more than 4 yr experience as a councillor		1.40 (0.89)						
age (years)		0.00 (0.04)						
ward resident		0.21 (0.77)						
non-white		0.67 (2.13)						
CouncilDuties_Proactive.binary			6.97 (0.74)**	6.88 (0.78)**	7.02 (0.75)**	7.00 (0.75)**	6.99 (0.67)**	
CouncilDuties_Reactive.binary			5.21 (0.78)**	5.59 (0.82)**	5.17 (0.78)**	5.19 (0.78)**	5.61 (0.71)**	
CouncilDuties_Outside.binary			2.40 (1.07)*	2.51 (1.10)*	2.27 (1.07)*	2.35 (1.07)*	2.58 (0.98)**	
split ward				1.45 (1.40)				
ward majority				-0.01 (0.02)				
More people seeking selection than seats in the ward				-0.37 (0.75)				
Campaigned in other wards					2.03 (0.71)**			
Conservative incumbent						3.92 (1.34)**		
Labour						3.13 (1.46)*		
Liberal Democrat						3.65 (1.40)**		
	<i>R<sup>2</sup>adj</i>	0.10	0.10	0.29	0.29	0.24	0.23	0.22
	<i>N</i>	1,206	1,096	1,197	1,104	1,189	1,197	1,590

Unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\* - significant at 1% level

\* - significant at 5% level

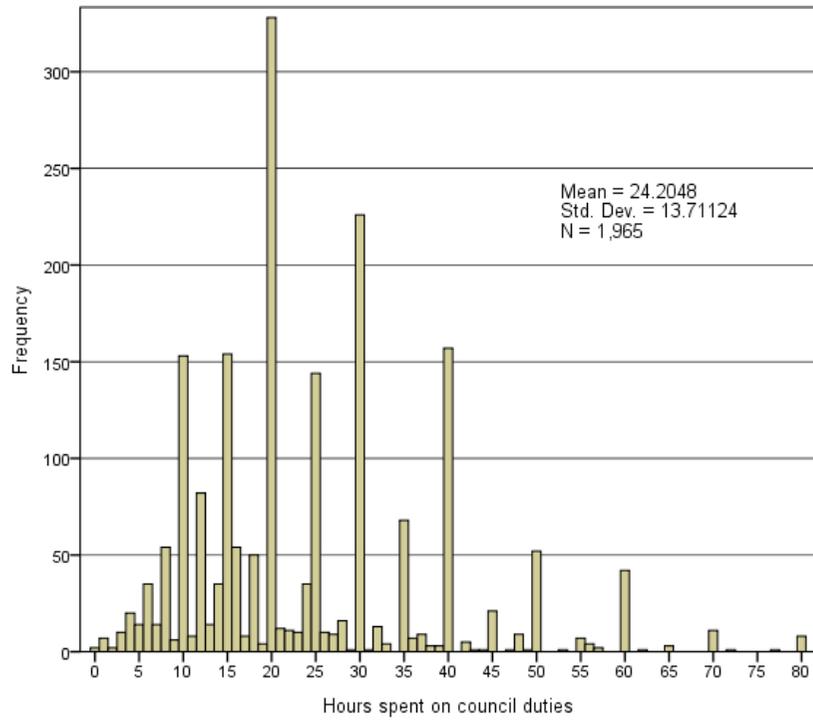


Figure 1: Frequency responses for weekly hours spent performing council duties