Elected Member Induction Notebooks

Roles and Responsibilities of the Elected Member at Ward Level
Preface

Elected Members undertake many different roles both within the council and within the community. The roles that elected members play will change as they take on different responsibilities within and outwith the council and as they gain more senior positions within the council. Which roles you want to take on will depend on:

• your interests
• how much time you have available
• whether other elected members will vote for you to take on some of the roles

In this notebook we will focus on the roles that all elected members will carry out at ward level.
1. Public Expectations of the Elected Member Role

The public expectations of an elected member can be considerable. The public tends to want an elected member who:

- is visible, accessible and accountable
- lives locally, understands the local community and stands up for it
- is pro-active, listens and is available to local people
- talks to them and gets to know them
- acts on local views

The public want an elected member who deals with their problems and who consults with them and represents their views. Both are key roles of the elected member at ward level.
2. The Ward Level Role

A key role of all elected members is to represent their ward and the people who live there.

As an elected member, you are uniquely placed to take an active lead locally because you have been democratically elected to represent the interests of your community and the council. This will involve you building relationships with individuals and groups within your ward and informing, consulting and empowering local people.

In general, the ward activities of an elected member include:

- Representing the community within the council and to other agencies, such as the police and health services.
- Communicating the work of the council and other public agencies to constituents.
- Leading the community and others in developing a vision for the area and the steps to achieve it.
- Undertaking case work on behalf of individual constituents.
- Developing links with all parts of the community, and seeking to help to negotiate solutions to meet their local needs.
- Campaigning on local issues.
- Winning resources for the ward.
- Meeting with other elected members, MSPs, MPs.
- Supporting local partnerships and organisations.

You have a duty to be accessible to all the people in your ward and to represent their interests conscientiously, while acting in the interests of the council as a whole and all the communities served by it.

“You’re the connection between ‘the council’ as a corporate body and the communities that the council is there to serve.”
3. Multi-Member Wards

Multi-member wards were introduced in Scotland in 2007, with three or four elected members representing the local community.

Multi-member wards can cover large geographical areas, more densely populated urban areas and some can have a mix of both. What is certain is wards will have a diverse range of broader communities and it will be the responsibility of you and your fellow ward members to represent those communities effectively.

Evidence over the last ten years has shown that multi-member wards can work well and effectively when the focus is on delivering to the community. However, when members focus on political competition they can be much less effective.

A simple principle applies to you and all your colleagues in multi-member wards: if your right to be there and to represent the community is based on the election, then the other members of your multi-member ward have exactly the same right as you. If you want to be treated seriously because you are an elected member, you have to treat your colleagues in the multi-member ward seriously as well.

When members of a multi-member ward work together and collaboration occurs, caseload can be better managed, representation is more forceful and effective and the multi-member ward team is generally more effective in ensuring public services are held to account.

For example, if we deal with constituents’ issues complaint by complaint and never look at why those complaints are occurring, we do not create a process that results in service improvement. If all the members of the multi-member ward team work together and identify across their caseloads that certain issues are recurrent within the area, they can then pull in the local service managers and investigate with them why these complaints are occurring so often and what can be done to avoid them in the future.

Based on the experience of elected members operating in multi-member wards since 2007, there are a number of ways in which you can organise yourself at ward level to gain as much benefit as possible for your local community:

- Working with the other elected members in your ward to share caseload, knowledge and
information to support constituents and to coordinate surgeries and holidays.

- Working as a multi-member ward team to ensure all of the local public services are performing well and are properly held to account by the local community. You could establish a multi-member ward meeting every two to three months, where constituents can tell you about the issues and challenges they are facing and the experiences they have had of local services. You could also consider inviting local service managers to hear the issues constituents are concerned with and to respond to them, and to agree on improvement strategies to take forward the public services in the area.

- Formalising the sharing of workload with other ward members – this can be done on an area basis with elected members taking responsibility for ‘patches’ within the ward or with ward members specialising in particular service areas. For example, one member would lead on Social Work and housing, another would lead on education issues and another on health and social care. This means that when any constituent needs support and representation, they get someone who has a fairly specialised knowledge, expertise and the relevant contacts to take up the case on their behalf. However, members remain representative of the whole ward and must be careful not to misrepresent this fact in circumstances where they agree to take responsibility for a particular ward area or service area.

A number of councils have established formal protocols for multi-member ward working.

You have been elected as an individual and it is ultimately entirely up to yourself how you play your role as a member within a multi-member ward. The evidence suggests there are some substantial gains to be had through collaboration and team working and often it is issues of personality in relationships that prevent that. You should think carefully in such circumstances of your duty to represent all constituents in your ward, and of your responsibility to represent their interests for the greater good of the ward’s population.

It must be accepted that any elected member has to decide on their own behaviour and how they relate to other members of a multi-member ward.
4. Understanding Your Ward

Your council will hold social, economic and population information for each ward.

This data will help you to understand your ward area better and it can be very useful in helping you, community organisations and other agencies to develop and review policies and services in your ward.

You may also wish to access the www.statistics.gov.scot which will provide you with a range of information at ward level such as data on health, educational achievement, poverty, unemployment, housing, crime, population. You will also be able to see how your ward compares with others in your council area or other council areas.

As an elected member you are also entitled to a full copy of the electoral roll for the ward. The roll is available on paper or in an electronic format that can often be merged with a data management system. This can help considerably with managing your casework.

Getting to know your ward

Many elected members will have lived in their ward area for a number of years, nevertheless they are unlikely to know all of the communities or all of their issues and problems. The people who come to your surgeries and who bring you casework will tell you quite a lot about the area. But you will need to find other ways of getting to know your ward if you have been elected for the first time.

It is likely that one or more elected members in your ward will have been re-elected, and they will therefore already have a good understanding of the main issues in the ward as well as contact with key groups and individuals. They will be a valuable

“All of us live in a community of some sort or other. All of us have an interest in seeing our communities doing well and you take an interest in what’s happening in your community. You see things and you think that could get done better.”
resource to you, particularly if they are from the same political group or are fellow Independents. They could introduce you to the council officers, local head teachers, housing and social work managers, the area’s voluntary organisations, community groups, the local community police officers and religious and other local community leaders.

Find out whether the council has any community development workers employed in your ward. If there are, arrange to meet up with them and ask them what they think the key issues are in the ward. They can be very useful in helping you to contact and meet local people.

Even if you have lived in your ward for years, it would be a good idea to go for a walk, cycle or drive around your ward, looking at roads, pavements, parks and open spaces, play areas, council housing, leisure facilities, libraries, community centres and other community facilities. You should report issues of concern, e.g. potholes, graffiti, faulty streetlights, vandalised swing parks, broken fences, fly tipping etc. to the appropriate council department and keep a record of the action taken. This will be useful to demonstrate what you are achieving for your ward.

**Networking**

You will need to build up your own directory of names, phone numbers and email addresses for key people from a range of local organisations that are relevant to your ward, such as community and residents’ associations, schools and playgroups, neighbourhood watch, leisure and sports groups etc. This will enable you to introduce yourself and arrange meetings with others involved in the community. The council may also provide you with a directory of useful contacts such as council officers, the Police, the Fire and Rescue Service, health bodies, local MSPs etc.

It is also worth knowing the main employers in your ward area and whether a particular type of business or industry is a major employer of local people.

One of the things you will find as an elected member is that there are a very large number of community groups and groupings, many of whom would like you to come along and speak with them and listen to their issues. As suggested earlier, a division of labour between all the members in a multi-member ward may make that workload more manageable and may also make elected members more efficient and effective in learning from
these meetings and taking issues back to the council to be dealt with. In all these respects, a good caseload management system that allows elected members to keep up with whom they are visiting, what came out of those meetings, what action they have promised to take, and making sure that those actions are then taken is very important. Simply turning out and having a productive meeting will not keep these community groups happy if nothing then follows from the meeting.

You may also find it helpful to keep a diary noting all of the major meetings such as annual general meetings or open days, of the community organisations in your ward. This diary could also be a shared diary with your fellow ward members, also allowing you to coordinate your holiday leave together. You should try and attend as many ward events as possible, if it is appropriate to do so.
5. Casework

Casework usually involves requests to solve specific problems for individual constituents. It comes through emails, social media, phone calls, surgeries, letters, responses to leaflets and door knocking.

You will also meet your constituents on the street, in pubs and restaurants and in other areas where they will bring issues to your attention.

If you find that you do not get much casework, you should explore whether it is because you represent a very self-sufficient community or because your profile within the community is too low. In areas with high levels of deprivation, members of the public may be less aware of the role of elected members and more work may be needed to engage with them. Most constituents are likely to be unaware of the many issues you can help them to resolve, and it will be up to you to let them know how you can help them.

Constituents may seek you help in relation to something of a quasi-judicial or regulatory nature, such as planning application, taxi, betting and gaming, liquor, and street trader licences and a range of other similar applications. You should not pursue any casework that may come before a quasi-judicial or regulatory committee that you sit on, as it could preclude you from taking part in that decision.

You should also remember that undertaking casework on behalf of a constituents, you are still a member of the council and you should exercise care to ensure you comply with the Councillors Code of Conduct.

Phone enquiries

Your council will provide you with dedicated telephone equipment and facilities and you could be called at any time during the day or night. You should use an answering machine or service, particularly after normal working hours. You should make sure that your message on your answering machine/service makes it clear who you are and what information you need from the caller.

Surgeries

Whilst a very small proportion of the population actually goes to see an elected member, the expectation that ‘they will represent me’ is very strong amongst the electorate. Holding surgeries offers one way of meeting members of the public, but also benefits you by:

- Solving constituents’ issues and gaining constituents’ support.
“I do a surgery once or twice every month but I also do a lot of community work as well just in terms of turning up to a tenants and resident’s associations or to a community group meeting.”

- Giving you a way of checking on the impact of policies on the ground.
- Enabling you to speak with authority as an advocate for the community and for individual constituents.
- Giving an opportunity to explain council policy.
- Raising your profile within the local community.
- Giving the relevant political party (or Independent Elected Member) visibility.
- Enabling you to meet a variety of constituents.

If you operate surgeries you should think of how you organise matters. Some general issues to consider are:

- Should people just turn up or should they make an appointment, potentially through the council’s customer contact/service centre?
- Should you have some sense of what issue constituents have in advance, so you can be well prepared to respond to them when they do turn up?
- How will you share cases and information on the content of surgeries with other members?
- If your council has an electronic caseload management/customer relationship management system in place, will you make use of that to record details of enquiries and monitor the progress being made with the resolution of enquiries?

You should advertise your surgeries widely in the community and keep them to a regular pattern. Your council may provide support in terms of providing premises for your surgeries and assisting you with the promotion of your surgery times. Some councils have produced guidance on surgeries.

Rather than hold traditional office based surgeries, another option could be to run street surgeries, which would involve you knocking on doors in your ward to gather concerns, opinions and casework from constituents who would not normally attend a surgery. This may enable you to gather more opinions and views than you would otherwise get if you waited for people to visit you at your surgery, as well as target hard-to-reach sections of the population. You may offer to meet people at their home or yours if that is more convenient for you. However, if conducting street surgeries or home visits you should consider taking someone with you to help take notes and for your personal safety. You
You would also need to consider how to communicate details of these to your ward through social media, leaflets, letters etc.

You may find that some constituents who attend your surgeries are stressed, angry and frustrated about issues, such as decisions the council has taken or services it has provided, anti-social neighbours, prevalence of under-age drinking in the community etc. If a constituent acts aggressively:

- You should offer whatever help and advice you can but you should not promise something that you cannot deliver to diffuse the situation.

- You should not be afraid to tell them that their behaviour or attitude is unacceptable and if they are offensive in any way, you should bring the interview to a close.

Your council may provide you with advice on personal safety and dealing with difficult constituents.

**Managing casework – key issues to consider**

Councils operate in different ways and it is important that you understand the procedures for dealing with casework in your council.

Whatever the source of your casework you should consider the following issues:

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### Identify the issue

Are you the first person the constituent has approached? Has another elected member from the ward already dealt with the issue? Have they already talked to council officers? You are often the last resort and your constituent may well come to you with a problem with a long history.

Establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. Who at the council is dealing with the problem and what have they said and written so far?

Be aware that if you are a new elected member, some constituents may seek to get you to raise an issue that they have previously raised with former members but, perhaps, have been unsuccessful in achieving a satisfactory outcome. It is
worth speaking to more senior elected members if you suspect that this is so and take their advice on how to respond.

Some cases will arise because constituents are not getting what they want. You may discover that a policy decision or system is correct and has found against your constituent correctly (e.g. refusal of a planning application, refusal to award Council Tax benefit) but they refuse to accept it. In such cases you will need to be honest but firm about what you can and cannot do for your constituent.

By all means promise to investigate and get back to the constituent but do not undertake to do something until you know the full story.

Refer the problem to the appropriate council department

You may want to put your concern in writing to a council officer. Always take a copy of your letters or emails on behalf of constituents, and always date your letters/emails. It is best to carry out quickly the actions you agreed to take on behalf of your constituent and, where possible, let your constituent have a copy of any letters/emails you write. Often a phone call will be quicker and will be sufficient. But it is wise to always keep a record of when you phoned, to whom you spoke, their job title and what was said. This is important if you need to chase up any action on behalf of the constituent.

Provide feedback

After you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.

Consider the wider issues

Some of your casework queries should prompt you to think about the bigger picture – i.e. why problems have occurred in the first place, whether the issues presented by your constituents are just
the tip of the iceberg in terms of wider community concerns or whether the case is likely to affect other local people. Reflect on the issues raised by the casework and where relevant, let other members know. A number of similar concerns raised with members may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. You must be careful when sharing information as data protection issues may apply. The *Standards and Ethics and Information Handling notebook* covers data protection in more detail.

**Monitor your effectiveness**

You may wish to ask your constituents for feedback on what they felt you did well in responding to their queries and anything you could do to improve. You could also monitor a number of key facts and statistics about your casework to ensure that you are targeting the people that need the most help and are being effective in resolving as many queries as you can.

Some elected members operate a ‘bring-forward’ system, where they will note in their diary when they expect to have heard from the council on issues that they have raised with a service or department. This note reminds them to contact the service if they hear nothing. Such a system usually consists of a diary or file with a pocket for each day of the month. You can put the notes about the constituents’ case in the diary or file, for say 10 days time, to remind you to check on progress.

**Electronic caseload management systems**

A number of councils have introduced caseload management systems for elected members, which enable them to manage their caseloads electronically whether at home, in the office or at their surgery. These systems are typically web based and allow elected members to raise complaints or enquiries on issues reported to them by constituents, such as faulty street lights, housing issues, bin uplifts, graffiti etc. These enquiries are then passed to the appropriate council officers for resolution. Elected members can monitor the progress being made with the resolution of the enquiry, and they can add additional case notes as required.

Typically, elected members can choose to share enquiries that they raise on the system with other elected members, provided that the constituent who raised the enquiry has given consent to share their data.
6. Communication

A key role for you in your ward is to keep constituents informed about important local issues and council policies, and to seek their views.

You will also need to develop effective relationships with key stakeholders in your ward to ensure that you learn about local issues and problems when they first arise. You will soon find out that elected members are often the first people to hear about issues impacting on their ward and you should not assume that others already know about them.

Achieving effective communications with constituents, fellow elected members and the wider community is vital for elected members. What you say and do – in the media, via social media, at public meetings or in private discussions - has a direct impact on your public image, reputation and the overall perception of you as an elected member. Crucially, communication has to be two-way. You have to listen to constituents, engage with them and do everything possible to understand the views of the wider community.

All councils employ expert and dedicated communications teams to represent the council corporately to the media, public and all other key stakeholders. However, individual elected members take full responsibility for their own communication with constituents and the local community, both in terms of what they say and what methods of communication they choose to utilise.

From the moment the election campaign begins, you will find yourself engaging and communicating with a variety of different groups on a daily basis. This communication will continue throughout your time as an elected member. The different groups include:

- Constituents
- The media – local and national
- Political party/group
- Other elected members
- MSPs/MPs
- Council officers/management team
- Local organisations/associations
- Local businesses
- Council partners
- Community/church leaders
Regional, national and central government bodies

Councils are prohibited under legislation to publish, or give financial or any other assistance to the publishing of any material that promotes a party political nature. This includes points of political controversy that promote or oppose the view of a political party.

Styles and methods of communication

The respective audiences have to be addressed in different ways. For example, communicating with council staff on policies requires a certain level of detail and could involve writing reports or attending official meetings. Information put forward and discussed in this instance will be completely different to relations with the media, who will only be interested in the main angle of the story and any important facts/figures and quotes.

Likewise, when it comes to daily engagement with constituents, some prefer face-to-face, personal communication via surgeries, while others are content to read your thoughts and views in local newspapers, individual newsletters or engage with you via email, blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In the past, elected members had little choice in terms of communication methods, but nowadays there are numerous tools that can be utilised – both traditional and modern. Some are highlighted below.

Social media

Social media has become an important part of everyday communication and many elected members use platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to interact and communicate with residents. Quick, simple and direct, social media allows you to circulate information, explain views and receive feedback and input from constituents. Well established applications like Facebook and Twitter have large followings in Scotland and provide good opportunities to tap into the existing local communities and communities of interest and practise. Many elected members see social media as a very efficient addition to local surgeries and traditional local engagement as it is accessible for a large number of constituents, who may not be reached in more traditional ways. Social media is also cost efficient and provides a platform to present your work that might be picked up by local media and interested stakeholders.

As social media in its nature is
a platform with free access and
dialogue, you should be aware that
any content can be picked up and
shared by others very quickly or that
you may experience people who
engage with you in manner that you
find unpleasant or dishonest. It is
therefore advisable to be cautious
when posting on social media and
remember that all material is public
and is virtually impossible to remove
completely once published.

‘FollowMe’ is a social media guide
for elected members which has lots
of helpful tips, hints and suggestions
that will help you to use social media
to engage with constituents and local
organisations in a productive and
useful way.

The Standards, Ethics and
Information Handling Induction
notebook provides more information
on adhering to the Councillors Code
of Conduct, which will apply when
using social media in your role as an
elected member.

Local media - newspapers and
broadcast
Local newspapers and radio stations
continue to devote a great deal of
coverage to council matters and
community issues, and it’s important
to have a presence and let readers/
listeners know who you are. Elected
members can issue press releases,
but making yourself accessible to
journalists/reporters and co-operating
on stories may also prove worthwhile
in the long run, and could help make
sure your stance on certain issues is
represented in the way in which you
want it to be. In terms of broadcast
media coverage, most elected
members will very rarely have to give
radio and TV interviews. However,
when you are called upon, always
make sure that answers are clear and
concise. Most soundbites will only
last a few seconds, so concentrate on
getting your point across simply.

As a new member it’s worth seeking
advice from the Communications/
Media team in your council until you
are more experienced in dealing with
the media.

Email/text
Email is one of the most common
methods of communication for
elected members as it allows you
to easily share information with
individuals, organisations or groups,
and is a simple way of holding a quick,
direct two-way conversation. Some
elected members also opt to release
a weekly or monthly e-newsletter
via email. Regular text updates to
constituents are less common, but
this is also a simple, effective way of
communicating with large groups.
When using email or text, make sure you follow data protection laws, which are covered in greater detail in the *Standards, Ethics and Information Handling Induction notebook*.

**Websites/blogs**

A lot of elected members have their own websites or blogs. Websites host contact information, background details and all important news and information. Blogs tend to be more informal and act as an online journal/log of your life as an elected member. Blogs offer a platform to air views on any subject and encourage debate and discussion. However, elected members should adhere to basic rules when updating blogs, in order to ensure no negative publicity is generated.
7. Community Engagement

It is widely accepted that public services that involve their users are likely to be of higher quality and more relevant to the communities they serve, so engaging constructively with communities is increasingly important.

Indeed, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 is clear in that community consultation is no longer enough. Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs), of which the council is a partner, must be able to demonstrate active participation and engagement across key areas.

The Act commits government and public services to engage with, listen to and respond to communities in order for those communities to have greater influence or control over things that matter to them. More detail on the Act is provided in the Policy and Legislative Context notebook.

Elected members are critical to successful community engagement. As a community leader, you have a key role to play because:

- you understand your ward in terms of the demographics, the key challenges facing local people and communities and the services delivered by the council and other partners
- you represent the views and voices of local people and communities, by ensuring that they are taken into account by the council and its partners when making decisions
- you safeguard and enhance the interests and wellbeing of local people as the central part of your role and your accountability
- you are in a strong position to facilitate and negotiate solutions to community problems, that will empower communities and make governance more effective, and
- you can influence local government policies to make sure they are based on effective engagement with communities.

In a time of financial constraint, the case for community engagement is particularly compelling as it can encourage cost-effective solutions that can help communities be more resilient and self-resourcing.Engaging with communities in a spirit of

“I like speaking to people. I like when they come along and I can actually make a difference.”
openness and honesty can:

- aid a better understanding of the impact on communities of the different cost-cutting options
- identify costs savings not apparent to councils and their partners, and
- help find alternative and potentially better ways of achieving local outcomes

You may, however, face a number of challenges as you attempt to engage with local communities. For example:

- You may act simultaneously as a ward representative, as a member of council committees and the full council and as a council representative on outside bodies. These roles can sometimes conflict and you may face the challenge of striking the balance between being accountable to the communities who elected you and your responsibility to govern. For example, you may find that in some cases the interests of local communities conflict with decisions taken by the council that you have been party to.

You also need to ensure that you do not listen to and articulate the views of the ‘usual suspects’, as their understanding of local issues and priorities can be distorted.

Every community is made up of different individuals and groups, whose particular views, interests and expectations may often be at odds and in some cases, not reconcilable. The challenge you will face is ensuring that you seek the views of as wide a representation as possible.

Your role is to support, encourage and work alongside local people, community organisations and local interest groups to get people more actively involved in decision-making and the achievement of local outcomes and to work collaboratively with other leaders (e.g. of local organisations, networks etc) to help establish a shared vision for the future of the community and how best to work towards it.

If serving on a Regulatory committee (e.g. Planning, licensing) you must not declare your position on a forthcoming application without removing yourself from dealing with the application. Constituents can find it hard to understand why you cannot represent their interests at committee in these instances.

Some of the factors you will need to consider encouraging greater engagement from citizens and communities are:
• Deciding which methods of engagement to use – various methods can be used such as surveys, focus groups, road shows, social media, newsletters etc. You should choose the method most appropriate to your audience.

• Ensuring the engagement is accessible and any costs involved are commensurate with the resources at stake in any decision making process.

8. Local Campaigns

As an elected member, you may become involved in, or lead, local campaigns within your ward.

This could involve anything from campaigning for speed bumps to be installed outside a primary school to campaigning for more affordable housing in your ward to politically motivated campaigns. You should not feel under any obligation to lead any such campaign and you may find that often your involvement will be as a participant, supporter or facilitator.

If you are approached with an idea for a local campaign that you support, you may wish to:

- Undertake some consultation within the ward and with other relevant stakeholders to find out how widespread support for the issue is.
- Help set up a local campaign group that will be responsible for leading the campaign.
- Talk to council officers and/or officers in other organisations that may be able to help.
- Organise petitions or public meetings.
- Help the local campaign group to deliver presentations or to ask questions of committees.
- Bring the relevant groups/individuals together to negotiate solutions.
- Involve the local press, radio and television
- Publicise the campaign on your personal web page or blog

If you are approached to get involved in a local campaign that you do not support, you can still offer some support to local people in terms of:

- Advising people how to present a petition to the council, deliver a presentation, speak to a committee or how to ask the right questions.
- Providing advice on council policy and procedures.
- Providing contact details for other organisations, groups or individuals that could potentially help.
- Helping people to access the information that they need.
Of course you may also not be able to support or oppose a local campaign that relates to an application that is to come before a regulatory committee (e.g. Planning, Licensing) that you sit on as you would have to declare an interest at that committee and not take part in the determination of the application.

Furthermore, if you are part of a campaign but aren’t sitting on the regulatory committee that is hearing the forthcoming application, you are not allowed to lobby members on that regulatory committee.
9. Dealing with Complaints

Effective complaints handling is a key part of good customer service. It is beneficial to your council and your customers to resolve complaints quickly and efficiently.

Complaints provide valuable feedback from your service users on the services they have received and can provide opportunities for improvement within your council. Furthermore, they often provide an early warning of more fundamental problems in service design and delivery.

As an Elected Member, you may be asked by a member of the public to help them make a complaint or to make a complaint on their behalf, so it is important for you to understand the complaints procedure at your council and when it is appropriate to refer a complaint to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The Elected Member Briefing Note on the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman provides further information on the role of SPSO and effective complaints handling.

You may also find it useful to ask officers to provide you with a breakdown of complaints to enable you to see what local constituents are complaining about and to communicate to them what improvements are being made as a result of their complaints.
Checklist for the roles and responsibilities of the elected member at ward level

You should:

1. Familiarise yourself with the ward activities of an elected member.

2. Make contact with other elected members in your ward to discuss opportunities to share caseload, knowledge and information and to coordinate surgeries and holidays.

3. Find out if your council has a formal protocol in place for multi-member ward working.

4. Ask your council to provide you with social, economic and population information on your ward.

5. If you think it will be helpful, access a full copy of the electoral roll for your ward.

6. Find out whether the council has any community development workers in your ward and if there are, arrange to meet them to find out what they think the key issues are in your ward.

7. If you think it would be helpful, go for a walk, cycle or drive around your ward and report issues of concern to the appropriate council department.

8. Think about how you will build up your own directory of key local contacts relevant to your ward and a diary of relevant ward meetings and events.

9. Ensure that you have a clear message on your answering machine/answering service advising callers who you are and what information you need from them.
10. Find out what support is available to you from your council in terms of setting up and advertising surgeries.

11. Learn to manage the paperwork – learn what you need to read and what you don’t and ensure you have a system in place for managing your casework.

12. Find out if your council has an electronic caseload management system in place and how you can access it.

13. Familiarise yourself with the different ways in which you can communicate with your constituents.

14. Familiarise yourself with your role in community engagement and think about who you would wish to engage with and what engagement methods you will use.

15. Familiarise yourself with the types of support you could provide if you are asked to get involved in local campaigns within your ward.

16. Find out who the council’s key partners are in your ward area and make contact with them to discuss existing partnership activity or to explore opportunities for collaborative working.

17. Familiarise yourself with the council’s complaints procedure.