

Election 2022: So, you're getting new Councillors and Mayors...

This year a number of long-serving Mayors have indicated they are stepping down. That means new people in key decision-making leadership roles.

There's always some turnover of Councillors.

Existing Councillors may change roles – taking on leadership roles in Committees or different portfolios.

No doubt you'll be organising induction packs and training processes for them. But you'll also need to consider how having new decision-makers changes how you write your standard papers.

It's worth remembering the basic lessons of 'communicating with aliens'¹

Mayors and Councillors are politicians. Voters and their perceptions matter; different – often conflicting – interest groups are part of the landscape, and where the consistency of stories and keeping of promises are checked by ever-present media (and social media).

For those after a career in local government, their immediate interest looks to the next election, the prestige of office and the exercise of power.

To achieve and sustain this, they must have available the tools of their trade: snappy soundbites, quick responses, and sensible reasons for their choices.

Advisors, though, are local government officers, and they inhabit a different professional environment, albeit one which overlaps with local politicians at times.

Mayors and Councillors have very different backgrounds, roles and behaviour – and they vary considerably.

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https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_no_1_communicating_with_aliens.pdf

Advisors care more about being the experts decision-makers expect, supporting their bosses, ticking off to-do lists and avoiding unmanageable risks to themselves.²

This means there can be limited common reference points between those decision-makers and advisors.

Fundamentally, it is the job of the council officers to adjust to the new Mayor and Councillors rather than the other way around. You've been put together – now you must work hard to build a working relationship based on trust and focused on a potentially new set of priorities.

A successful long-term officer/decision-maker relationship is vital for your advice to be effective. This is both about the face-to-face contact you'll have but also rests on the quality and robustness of the stream of work presented to decision-makers.

To get on with the work programme, understanding whom you are dealing with is vital.

Do your homework – understand your Mayor and Councillor's background and interests

New Mayors and Councillors have a lot to learn. Of course, they'll bring their own professional background and experience³ to the role. They'll also be focused on the things they campaigned on.

But there will be issues they won't have come across before.

² We exaggerate and simplify here for the sake of exposition. We know advisors are driven by many things, including a genuine desire to make New Zealand a better place and to influence the direction of policy – as are all elected Councillors and the Mayor of course.

³ <https://www.lgnz.co.nz/assets/Elected-member-profile-2019-2022.pdf>

And they won't be fully across how Council operates (e.g. the planning environment or decision-making processes). They'll also be getting to know each other!

It's important to get it right for a new Mayor and new Councillors. Without knowing where they are coming from, you'll end up telling them too much, and it won't be appreciated; or not including enough for them to make an informed decision and take it through the rest of the implementation processes.

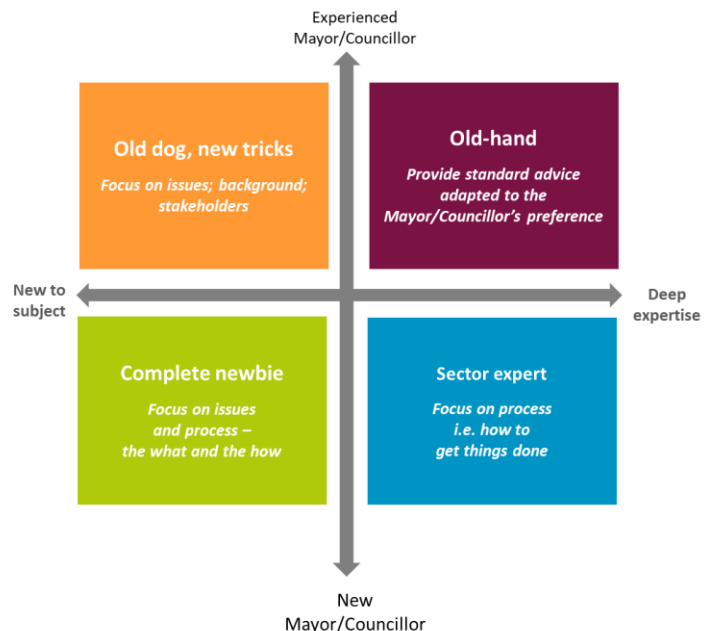
A good place to start is to understand your new Mayor and Councillors:

- Level of knowledge about a particular portfolio or issue** – have they been involved in this issue before? Is this one of the topics they campaigned on? Have they worked in this area before becoming a Mayor/Councillor? What is their professional background? The new person's professional background can not only tell you about what they know, but it can also influence how they think about an issue. Or, more particularly, the way they are used to absorbing information.⁴ The examples we often hear are that lawyers tend to prefer written briefs rather than relying on diagrams, tables and infographics; and that accountants like numbers, variances and graphs.
- Experience in the Council processes** – new Mayors or Councillors may not be used to dealing with their Council officers, understanding the intricacies of various Council processes, knowing the legal requirements etc. They'll need more advice on the rules of the game and how to manage the processes effectively. It's very different being a Mayor than a Councillor. And it's very different being a Councillor from someone outside trying to influence Council decisions.

Figure 1 outlines where to focus your efforts depending on the types of new decision-makers you get.

Figure 1 Defining new Mayors' and Councillors' needs

Background and experience are key



Source: NZIER

What does it imply?

Old dog, new tricks

Needs subject knowledge. Focus on issues, background and stakeholders. Limited process advice, except where there are portfolio-specific processes.

Old-hand

Only needs standard briefings, tailored to specific preferences and their own election platform as these emerge. Limited process advice.

Complete newbie

Needs it all! Focus on issues in context, with plenty of process advice. What and how.

Sector expert

Needs process advice. Focus on making things happen and being clear about what the Mayor or Councillor must do. While perhaps needing limited subject matter advice – remember the new Mayor/Councillor may have a different perspective. So, don't forget to adjust your language to what they are comfortable with, and back up arguments with data and evidence.

⁴ Central Government Masterclass No 2 (2016) has some advice on how various professions approach problems. https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_no_2_learning_from_other_professions.pdf

Of course, you will also have experienced Mayors and Councillors sitting alongside the new people

You are usually preparing advice for a group of decision-makers. So alongside the new people, there might be an experienced Mayor, and certainly some experienced Councillors.

You'll have to cater for them too.

This might mean providing additional background information in an appendix or attachment for those new to Council.

Start at the beginning – get a good understanding of any issues new people campaigned on

They will bring new perspectives on current issues and new issues brought to the table.

It will be important to understand what these are and how they fit into the work programme.

No doubt your Chief Executive will lead off on building new relationships

There will be an induction programme for new Mayors and Councillors. The governance group usually puts this together in your organisation. It covers legal requirements, Council processes and well as topical issues.⁵

No doubt you'll have been asked to contribute to the content of it ahead of the election.

Some of the decision-making machinery may change

Possible structural changes in the operational setting could include:

- **Different Council Committees** covering different groupings of portfolios and reflecting new priorities.
- **New sets of Council working groups** – again, driven by the priorities of the incoming Council.

⁵ A WCC example
<https://fyi.org.nz/request/11564/response/44185/attach/7/1008923%202019%20Council%20Elections%20Councillor%20Induction%20Programme%20Booklet%20P1....pdf>

But much of the business of the Council is ongoing

Of course, things don't stop because of an election.

While certain things need to be done each triennium, there is also plenty of ongoing business, e.g. service delivery, consent processes, ongoing community engagement processes, strategy and policy development in flight.

Remember to cover the background to any ongoing issues in more depth the first time they go up to new Councillors. As mentioned above, offering a more detailed briefing or appendix can be a helpful way to tackle differences in knowledge and understanding.

A useful tip is to use a diagram showing where in the process you are now and what has gone before.⁶ Of course, in some circumstances, you will be forced to rewind or start again.

The language of policy advice may change

A new Mayor or a significant shift in the mix of Councillors may seek to change some of the language and terms used. This is all about branding new and existing policies.

There may be 'in words' and 'out words' – but symbolism matters. You need to be alert and adopt the fresh language. It shows new Mayors and Councillors that you are conscious of their new priorities.⁷

You can get a good idea about what some of these new words might be from election material.

Keep working on the relationship

Working out the type of Mayor and Councillors you're assisting and sussing the new environment are just early steps in building the relationships.

You then have a key role in consolidating it by supporting your new Mayor and Councillors through your advice papers.

⁶ Our earlier Masterclass on providing a series of advice papers on a topic has some useful tips
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_25_lg_series_of_papers_.pdf

⁷ Language is an important signal of identification. Changing terms to line up with those favoured by the new administration is the quickest way the policy advisors can show they are on board and recognise there is a new regime. See Morris (2001).

You will all need to understand what works best for your new decision-makers.

Officers in the governance areas and those responsible for supporting Council committees can have some insight into this.

It's also worth attending meetings as an observer to understand the new dynamics and priorities.

Some councils run 'political awareness' type programmes for staff to introduce them to both Council processes and the dynamics of advising or presenting to Council.

Seek feedback early and often

But the best source of advice about the new Mayors' and Councillors' preferences in terms of the style of advice is the Mayor and Councillors themselves.

Some councils regularly survey elected members seeking their feedback on the advice received and the quality of papers.

But take the opportunity to get less formal feedback early in the triennium and adjust accordingly.

References

Morris (2001) "Political correctness." *Journal of Political Economy* 109: 231—265.

From LGNZ

<https://www.lgnz.co.nz/assets/1f909f5439/Equip-Prospectus-Latest-Edition1.pdf>

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