

# someone to **watch over me**

stories from the National  
Councillor Mentoring  
Programme



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The IDeA's councillor mentoring programme has made a real difference to political leaders. It has helped them to succeed in a very demanding role and has played a key role in both their own personal development and the performance of their councils.

We are very pleased to present a selection of stories from councillors who have experienced mentoring, working with councillor peers from other authorities to manage particular circumstances and their personal development.



The type and level of mentor support featured in each story was tailored for the individual and council concerned but was primarily designed to support one or more of the following circumstances:

- existing member development, training and personal development planning
- CPA recovery and improvement planning
- internal induction processes for new councillors
- changes with the political leadership and or new council leaders
- relationships within regional and sub-regional improvement partnerships to support shared learning, peer support and challenge, and learning from good practice.

Since the launch of the national mentoring programme in April 2005, the IDeA has delivered more than 100 mentoring programmes across a wide range of councils and fire and rescue authorities. Interest in the value and benefits of mentoring, to support regional improvement strategies and develop increased capabilities in councils and their partners, continues to grow across all nine regions.

I hope you find the stories interesting and inspiring. If you are interested in further details about these activities and how mentoring might support you or your political group please call **020 7296 6863** or email [ncmp@idea.gov.uk](mailto:ncmp@idea.gov.uk).

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Martin Horton".

Martin Horton  
Director, Services North

# preparing to change and restructure things

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Councillor Bill Brooks, leader,  
Northumberland County Council

Since Bill Brooks became leader of Northumberland in 2005 services have undergone major changes as a result of decisions to improve the school system, change the way adult care is delivered and restructure the fire and rescue service.



'We are changing the way things have been done for years,' he says. 'So of course it is difficult to make these kinds of decisions – like closing our council-run care homes. But you have to do it when it's the right thing to do. Often the easy option is just to do nothing, but I want our services to be excellent and we are planning for the long term. We need to modernise to be able to deliver now and in the future. We also have to make sure we are giving residents value for money. We have a limited budget and we know that people want an end to big council tax increases.'

'I come from a very traditional background. I had a good job in manufacturing until the eighties, when the area I lived in was decimated and I – along with many other people – lost my job. I ended up working as a taxi driver and writing a lot of very angry letters to the local paper. That's when I got spotted and asked if I would consider becoming a councillor. I jumped at the chance to be able to help change things.'

'When I became leader I knew I had to address some of our historical problems. Our schools were still running under a three-tier system – only a handful of areas in the country still do. This doesn't fit with the national curriculum and causes problems for both teachers and pupils.'

'A thorough assessment of fire and safety showed that we needed to build new modern fire stations in different locations – which we can do through PFI. Closing the old stations is an emotive subject for people but, again, the service had to change.'

'On top of that comes local government re-organisation. I support getting rid not just of our six district councils but also the county in favour of one new unitary authority. We know the existing system causes problems and doesn't deliver the best for our residents. District councils have their own alternative plans, however, which gives rise to some issues for those county councillors who also serve on districts.'

The deputy chief executive was the first to suggest mentoring for Bill and some of his senior colleagues. Brooks was introduced to Ian Greenwood, leader of Bradford City Council, as a possible mentor.

'We've been doing it for about a year now and it's been a fantastic help to me,' he says. 'Ian understands many of the problems I'm facing and he comes from a similar political perspective. Bradford also recently restructured their education service but they took the "big bang" approach and did it almost overnight. We are doing it gradually. He's been able to offer support and really useful suggestions. I think the learning process has been two-way because there are pros and cons to either approach.'

They have a mixed format to their mentoring sessions, often having joint meetings with Brooks' deputy, Peter Hillman, with whom he works very closely.

'We've also rolled out the mentoring across the council, in that Ian has started facilitating some of our top team meetings,' says Brooks. 'These were supposed to be exchanges of views between top managers and councillors but they had become a bit stale. Ian has really revitalised them. There's much more willingness to get into the whole workshop mentality and come up with solutions to the problems we face.'

'Ian has also encouraged us to start producing a mid-term manifesto to keep the public abreast of all the changes going on. We wanted to make sure people really knew what our vision was and what we were achieving.'

Brooks believes that the most important thing he has gained from mentoring is a different perspective on the issues he faces.

'Mentoring has also given me more confidence,' he says. 'It's great when somebody from the outside tells you when you've got something right. Normally you only hear negative criticism. I would recommend that others at least give consideration to exploring the possible advantages it may bring to them and their authorities.'

# asking the right questions

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Councillor Claire Hudson, leader,  
Liberal Democrat group, Mendip District Council

Claire Hudson has had a meteoric local government career. She first became a councillor in 2003 and was propelled to leader of her group in 2005 at the age of 32. She applied for a mentor and the IDeA appointed Trevor Jones, former leader of Dorset County Council.



'I'm an asthmatic and he's a bit like my Ventolin inhaler,' she says. 'I don't usually need it but it's nice to know it's there. I'll really miss him when he's not mentoring me any more.'

A Comprehensive Performance Assessment found Mendip to be weak and the Audit Commission recommended that the IDeA provide support and advice – which included mentoring for senior politicians.

'It never occurred to me that I needed a mentor,' says Hudson. 'I had been 'phoning the former leaders of my group and of the council for advice.'

'I didn't get to choose my mentor, which is good. I could well have chosen a friend and that wouldn't work. You need someone at arm's length.'

'Trevor has been a leader, a county and a district councillor and he's fantastic. We are completely different types of people but we work well together. Under ordinary circumstances I suspect that we would not become good friends but he's done his job and showed me what I need to do.'

'He's guided me through a minefield. A lot of thought must have gone into matching us up and I'm grateful for that.'

For her, mentoring is not about increasing personal confidence or even leadership skills.

'I was already confident about dealing with people and I don't find it difficult to work with any of my colleagues,' she says. 'Being younger helps in some ways because you are different and older people don't quite know where you are coming from. That unknown makes it easier. I don't need confidence per se,' she says.

'And anybody who is leadership material does not need to be told how to lead. But you must be open to learning. I don't have 30 years' experience but Trevor does and he is passing that on.'

While a formal learning plan has been drawn up, mentoring usually takes place through face-to-face discussions. Jones and Hudson meet regularly before council meetings and Jones will sit in on some full council and cabinet meetings as an observer.

'He reads council meeting papers with me,' says Hudson. 'For example, if it's a budget meeting, he listens to the questions I plan to ask and then adds, "Have you thought about asking this?" If you do, then you'll find out about that.'

'There have been times when I have no idea what to do and others when I've been full of suggestions and he's listened and then come up with more options.

'After meetings we do a debrief. He'll say, "You did really well on that question but on the other one you lost the argument because you said too much." That's incredibly useful.

'We cover all the points in the learning plan but I'm made to work it out for myself. I'm learning by using my own initiative. That suits me down to the ground.

'He's also given me a lot of good tips on how to deal with specific situations and on giving feedback. It's a really practical way of giving advice.'

She has also found that, while her relationships with officers have always been good, she can now ask for and receive more relevant information about council procedures and activities.

'I've learnt from Trevor what questions to ask – and that's the trick. It's not that the information wasn't available before but now I have more ability to get hold of it.'

In a crisis, her mentor would be on the list of people to call – though not at the top.

'The first person I'd talk to is my deputy. If the crisis became much worse I'd talk to Trevor but so far there's been no need. But he was the first person I talked to when I was writing our manifesto. He told me, "This is where you start. These are the people you can get examples from. This is how you lay it out – and you can do it." It was invaluable, because I was nervous.'

Hudson hopes one day that she will become leader of the council, as well as the Liberal Democrat group.

'If we win the local elections, I will request that he comes back and mentors me again. If my role changes I will need input from someone else. It's a continual learning curve and you can't kid yourself that you know everything. Somebody who has been doing the job for a lot longer than you is bound to have insights and extra tips to pass on,' she says.

'I think everyone should have a mentor. As a leader of a group or a council it should be mandatory because you learn so much, so quickly. Having a mentor has been one of the most useful experiences I've had as a councillor.'

# other ways of looking at things

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Councillor Graham Baxter, leader,  
North East Derbyshire Council

## Graham Baxter will always remember the day that put him on track to meet his mentor, Peter Box, the leader of Wakefield Council.

'12 July 2004,' he says. 'That day will stay with me for the rest of my life: I'd just become leader. We had been classed as weak in April 2004 and we had been put into government intervention.'

'IDeA people were appointed to help us and part of the package was mentoring for each of the three main parties in the council. It was one of the procedures we had to go through on the way to re-assessment. I was given Peter Box.'



Some might think that, at what was a stressful time for the entire council, introducing mentors could have added to the pressures. In fact, the reverse was the case.

'In the first session, Peter just sat in and I got on with him like a house on fire. It got more and more informal as time went on and I got more and more out of it,' says Baxter.

'Peter understood the problems. We never laid down a formal structure for our meetings on the lines of, "You do this, I'll do that." We came to a common agreement and never once did anyone say they knew best. We talked through our problems and discussed matters, working through what would happen if we did X, Y or Z.'

'Having somebody there who had been through it was like having a check on everything we did. It was reassuring. It was incredibly helpful to be able to talk confidentially to an experienced politician about work-related issues. I gained a lot.'

Graham and five of his colleagues from the council's executive attended the IDeA Leadership Academy. That experience backed his increase in understanding from discussions with Peter Box.

'One thing that came across from the Leadership Academy and Peter's knowledge was that there is always another way of looking at things. You shouldn't have a knee-jerk reaction to an issue or problem. You have to sit down and think and examine and analyse. I learnt that if you have a problem, walk away from it. Forget about it and then come back to it. Then it's easier to solve. It gives you perspective.

'Another point I discovered very quickly is that being a leader can sometimes be very lonely. It made you realise how much onus and responsibility is on a leader and how much people look to you for answers. There isn't anyone to go to. It's a big sense of responsibility.

'If you have a portfolio, almost inevitably you look inwardly to your responsibility. As a leader, you have to look more outwardly. Even though you don't try to interfere, you have to have an overall view of everything that's happening in the council. People were coming to me and I had to help fit solutions to their problems that would not create further problems elsewhere.

'Peter used to pass on his own experience and I could translate that into advice I could give my executive colleagues. I gained lots of other benefits from mentoring, such as learning about best practice; problem solving; discussing political issues; and how best to work with senior officers. While it may be difficult at first, it helps to be constructively challenged by your mentor on difficult areas. It forces you to make decisions.'

As well as meeting at North East Derbyshire's premises, mentor and mentee have also met at Wakefield Council's offices, along with executive colleagues. Baxter cheerfully admits to intellectual burglary.

'We pinched ideas and I'll pinch anybody's if they are any good. Why would I want to reinvent the wheel when a perfectly serviceable one already exists?'

North East Derbyshire will apply for re-assessment later in 2007 but already the council's district auditor has sent a letter showing a very positive direction of travel for the second year in succession. Mentoring has now finished but Baxter does not rule out a further dose of professional advice.

'Everything at North East Derbyshire is now coming up roses. It's been a slog but that's fantastic. We will carry on with member development and I would certainly be happy to continue with more mentoring. Peter's advice and encouragement has been invaluable to me.'

# getting value for the council and local people

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Councillor John Tory, leader,  
North Dorset District Council

## The job of council leader is very different from chairing the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) committee, as John Tory discovered.

Having served in local government for more than 30 years – and led North Dorset for eight – he found that his new role presented a different set of challenges.



'There is a danger that O&S is viewed as a bit of a nuisance,' he says. 'And there is a great responsibility involved in setting up a work programme that can add value to what the council does. The sky's the limit in terms of possible subjects that deserve closer inspection.'

'Getting that right as chair is hard. You've got to get value for the council and for local people, look at all aspects of an issue and get non-executive members involved too – they need to understand the issues inside out and to be aware of all the implications if they are to do a decent job of investigating things. If as a chair you don't get them involved then you have failed.'

'The important thing about scrutiny is that it is a member-led and open-ended process – we are not there to debate officer recommendations. A chair needs special skills to steer members through to effective conclusions.'

When North Dorset's chief executive suggested that senior officers and members try mentoring, there was initially some scepticism.

'Some people had been in local politics for a long time and wondered what they would get out of the process,' says Tory. 'But those doubts were quickly dispelled. Some members are still in regular contact with their mentors even though the programme is officially over.'

Tory was assigned Frank Rosamund from Mid Devon District Council – a similar authority – as his mentor.

'I don't think I could have found a better person for the job,' he says. 'Our relationship developed enormously over a six month period and he really put himself out – he came to a number of our meetings and couldn't have made himself more available.'

They used a mixture of one-to-one sessions and email, as well as group meetings between all the mentors and their mentees at North Dorset.

'Frank took me to sit in on a meeting of another council's O&S committee and it was most useful to see another chair at work,' says Tory. 'Each authority has a different way of doing things but the chairing skills needed are the same. I've had plenty of scrutiny training, but chairing the committee is different – there are all sorts of management roles involved.'

'Following my visit we set up a joint scrutiny training exercise for our two authorities – a useful by-product of my mentoring. I have learned how to make meetings more productive and to reach a definite result at the end.'

'I gained a lot more confidence in what we are trying to do and in the importance of the role which scrutiny plays. Frank also taught me a great deal on how to personally get the best out of scrutiny as a chair.'

'We now plan to set up our own internal mentoring programme for new members. I think that the longer you've been a councillor the more important it is to have mentoring. Officers have regular performance appraisal but members, by and large, don't. Mentoring can serve this function. You get set in your ways if you've been doing the job for a long time. You also need to be re-stimulated because local government work can be quite depressing – you're not likely to get much positive feedback from the electorate!'

# doing less, achieving more

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Councillor Julie Brociek-Coulton, portfolio holder,  
Norwich City Council

## It's a big step from running a Brownie pack to becoming portfolio holder for environmental management – but that's the leap Julie Brociek-Coulton has made in just three years.

She was elected as a Norwich City councillor for the first time in 2004 and became portfolio holder in early 2007.



'I see myself very much as a community person rather than a political animal,' she says. 'For quite some time I've belonged to a local community group that is supported by the council and we've managed to make a difference to a lot of people's lives with a small amount of money. So becoming a councillor seemed like a natural progression for me because I could continue this kind of role at a higher level.'

'I knew I had a lot to learn but I still felt pretty negative about the idea of mentoring – mainly because I wasn't given a choice about whether I did it or not! But it turned out to be a fantastic help.'

'One the big things it's helped me with is time management. My mentor, Robert Parker – Labour group leader at Lincolnshire – has showed me how to prioritise things much more efficiently. For four weeks we monitored every meeting I attended and he showed me how to put things into an order of priorities. The first thing it made me realise was just how much work I was doing outside of my portfolio remit! As a result of his help I'm now doing less but achieving more.'

'Another issue for me was confidence – I found the thought of speaking and answering questions as an executive member absolutely terrifying. He really helped me here. He has also made me realise that I can ask other people questions if I need help myself. When I first became an executive member I didn't push myself forward in any way. Now, I'm actually making a contribution to meetings and getting the answers that I need from people.'

Norwich has recently approved a new waste strategy that is being rolled out over the next three years. Other issues that must be tackled by the environmental management portfolio holder include dog waste, providing better recycling services, answering resident groups' questions and helping the Norwich in Bloom project get more funding.

'Robert has shown me how other councils implement and operate their waste policies and this has been incredibly useful,' says Brociek-Coulton. 'He has really listened to what I thought were little problems, broken them down and explained that these are things all councillors go through.'

'He has always talked to me in plain English and been very supportive. I feel much more confident – not just in dealing with others at the council, but also with members of the public. I remember when I was working for the Sewell Community Group I would find it very hard to make people listen to what I had to say. Now, not only am I better equipped to communicate, but I understand how things work and can actually get things done. I have Robert to thank for that.'

'I can actually get things done for local people now. When a big issue is resolved due to my efforts there isn't a better feeling in all the world.'

# taking tough decisions

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Councillor Ken Taylor, leader,  
Coventry City Council

After nearly three decades in opposition at Coventry Conservative Ken Taylor suddenly found himself leader of a party with overall control. He knew exactly what to do.



'We'd been in opposition for 28 years. I'd been in the council for 21 years and leader of the opposition for some time. We became the biggest party in 2004 and we were the new boys on the block. It's all right being in opposition but actually running the place is a very different kettle of fish.

'So we went to the IDeA. I knew of the mentoring service and we asked them to come up and see us. There was a bit of government money available and we added a percentage.

'None of us had any experience of being in control of a city council and while in opposition you can argue about everything, you never have to put your ideas into action. We had to find out how to do that. It's not just a matter of saying, "We'll spend £2 million on roads." How do you do that? How do you find the finance? What's legal? How do you handle that in terms of the relationship with officers?'

Taylor decided that the best way forward was to appoint mentors for each of his cabinet and himself. Alan Ward, an executive member of Bracknell Forest Council was introduced to him.

'How you match people is crucial. My mentor and I were a successful pairing. We're the same age group. We are of a similar political background. We had the same ideas and thoughts about the way to go. We are pragmatists and not mad right-wingers who want to change the world overnight. His views were very helpful to me, particularly on how the leader should operate with the group. Both Alan and I are outgoing and welcoming. It's not a case of standing back and saying get on with it. I want partnership.

'I'd had some experience in that area through my day job but running a council with 16,000 employees is a different matter. And we were dealing with the previous administration's budget. You can't change that. You have to work with their budget for the first year and make only minor alterations.

'It's only in year two that you work with your own budget. We had worked with officers to ensure that our alternative budgets were realistic but we had officers who had worked with Labour for 27 years and they were cautious about where we were coming from. Were we going to privatise everything in sight? What was our view of the city in the future? All they had to go on was our manifesto and what we'd said in the press. We had to go to their doorstep and explain what we wanted to do – and we had to make some very hard decisions.

'One of those was to implement single status – equal pay. It had been hanging around for seven years with no agreement. Every council had to put it in by April 2007 and we were putting it in 18 months earlier. Some lost, some gained and you could never get it right. We got the best package we could for our staff.

'Alan had an understanding of how he would deal with it and about dealing with unions. I'd never worked with unions before. It was who should drive it and how it should be presented? We'd already decided that we would not micro-manage. We'd set policy and the senior management would then get on with the job of implementing it.'

As well as the large issues involving budgets and spending at a council with a turnover of £240 million, Taylor also wanted some method of not becoming detached from the people he served. Again, Ward came up with a simple but effective approach that could be moulded to meet everyone's needs.

'A big issue for me as leader was how to keep in touch with residents while at the same time maintaining my relationships with the ward councillors who serve them. Alan suggested that I ask

ward members to set up meetings with local residents' groups and businesses and do a half-day tour with them. This had several positive effects. It raised the ward councillor's profile – being able to bring the leader to meet local people – and allowed me to communicate with people other than my ward constituents. It's also very useful to see issues at a grass roots level.

'It was the same with education. We had problems and he's education-based and knew how to handle it. He got close to it but was never attempting to manage. He showed us things and advised that we visit people. That was very useful. It gave me a better understanding of the subject. And if you demonstrate an interest in other people's subjects by going out and about, they are more likely to work with you rather than against you.'

Three years on, while the formal mentoring process has ended, Ward is still keeping an eye on developments in Coventry.

'I still see Alan – the relationship still exists but not on a mentoring basis. It's become more of a friendship. We gelled,' says Taylor. 'Mentoring works well if you have somebody who is working with you, who you can talk to when there's a hiccup and when they have a commitment to the authority and making it work. They really have to go beyond their brief. They have to have a commitment to the organisation and Alan has that.'

'He agreed to a number of hours and he still comes in to see how we are doing and talks to cabinet members and ordinary members. He's become embedded and is recognised as someone who is really trying to help us out.'

'I still lack experience of leadership of a council. I'm gaining it every day but I don't kid myself that I know everything. However old you are you can always learn from other people. I always want further training and, frankly, you forget things. I need to be reminded of the delicacies. And then there are management techniques and styles. I'm a big fan of mentoring. The essence is the relationship. Get that right, and you're onto a winner.'

# supporting turnaround strategies

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Councillor Marco Longhi, portfolio holder,  
Walsall Council

Now it is rated as a good three-star council that is improving well. It has had a Conservative administration since 2004. Marco Longhi, cabinet member for strategic transformation and performance management, believes that much of the transformation can be attributed to good mentoring.

'The situation a few years ago was very difficult,' he says. 'Poor relationships riddled the authority, between members, between officers, and between members and officers. The atmosphere was terrible.



'We needed turnaround strategies and part of that is about leadership. An IDeA team was brought in as part of the improvement programme and they looked at many areas.

'The organisational development team at Walsall identified individual and collective needs through one-to-one interviews and from officer, member and IDeA feedback, and then delivered a training programme that I believe is second to none.

'A need for mentoring was also identified and my leader asked me if I would like to have a mentor. Initially, it was an alien concept to me. If I am absolutely honest, there was an element of my own ego telling me "You don't need that!" I have always been someone who has relied on my own capabilities to move on in life but, since I had nothing to lose from the experience, I felt it was worth exploring. So I said, "Yes – why not?"'

The mentor appointed to him was one of the IDeA team, Eileen Bosomworth, the leader of Scarborough Council. She was initially booked for 10 sessions, starting with a personal development plan built up over a couple of sessions.

'I'm very goal orientated. I don't want just a chinwag over a cup of coffee. I need a plan of action, so that I achieve something in each meeting. So Eileen set me goals and I'd ask her difficult questions. If she couldn't answer them immediately, she'd find out for our next session.

'I know Eileen went beyond her brief in the support she gave me; she added value for me in ways I find difficult to describe. We became friends.'

'This was almost inevitable because we were able to share information of the type that would only be shared with the closest of friends. Although I was the prime beneficiary, I'd like to think that Eileen benefited too, even if only in some small way, by picking up on good practice in Walsall.'

Meetings were arranged at Walsall Council, Birmingham and other locations, with additional telephone calls slotted in as needed. After the first batch of mentoring sessions, a further five were commissioned to continue the process.

'If I was not happy with the situation I could have stepped out from the arrangement at any time – as indeed Eileen could have done. I was cautious but open-minded. I can say without any hesitation at all, but with the benefit of hindsight, that my accepting the offer of a mentor was one of the best decisions I have taken as a councillor.'

'Eileen was quickly able to forge a friendly but professional relationship that was based on mutual trust and confidentiality. This, in an informal but private setting, allowed information to flow in both directions and my mentor showed an uncanny ability to home in on issues that I thought I was handling well – but in truth was not,' says Longhi.

'Eileen did more than just help me out with difficult issues, whether I was conscious of them or not. Together, we prepared a personal development programme: Eileen helped identify my needs and always secured the necessary support or training. All I had to do was learn and apply myself.'

'She's helped me maximise what I bring to the table, to help me play my role in Walsall's transformation. Eileen has helped me become part of the team, just as the whole of the improvement programme has helped Walsall Council knot together and pull in the same direction. It would have been unthinkable just ten years ago. People who were poles apart now have common objectives,' says Longhi..

While the formal mentoring sessions have now finished, he still calls his former mentor to discuss issues.

'I now have a friend for life that I can talk to confidentially about pretty much anything. Call it chemistry, and maybe I was lucky, but the entire experience has been beneficial.

'Mentoring involves patience, perseverance and hard work. As with most things in life, people will get out only what they put in. The success of any mentoring scheme will directly relate to the effort both individuals are prepared to make. I cannot understate the benefits it brought me as an individual and I will always champion the mentoring scheme. My advice is this: if you are offered a mentor, then go for it. If not, then ask for one! '

# creating a new vision

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Councillor Tony Jackson, leader,  
East Herts District Council

For Tony Jackson at East Herts, it meant dealing with a restless party, unhappy officers and a lot of political fall out.

'I'd only been involved in politics for a relatively short time when I became leader,' he says. 'I started as an activist in my local village branch of the Conservative party and was persuaded to stand in 1999 by my county councillor. He suggested that I might find the job interesting and he was right!



'My first step up the ladder was a result of my professional experience. I worked in finance for many years and am now a management consultant. So, when I was offered the finance portfolio in 2002, I was able to take on the role with some confidence. Then the deputy leader retired and I was put forward to replace him.

'However, the events of last year – which led to my taking the leader position – would not have been my chosen path to the top. The current leader was forced to stand down. The council structure of two executive directors, instead of one chief executive, was no longer functioning effectively.

'The leader was getting drawn in to disagreements between the two executive directors and this led to a perception that he had crossed the member/officer divide – that he was effectively acting in the chief executive role. I was elected as his successor.'

With his professional experience of training and development, Jackson jumped at the chance of getting a mentor.

'I'd taken over a group that was without direction,' he says. 'It also needed someone who could draw a line under the negativity surrounding the council and to make matters worse, we were coming to the end of a political term. I had a large challenge on my hands and I was very conscious that I didn't have the same amount of experience as many other leaders.'

Initially, he simply wanted a sounding board for his ideas on how to get things back on track, but he ended up getting much more out of the process.

'I was offered three potential mentors to choose from and went for Lesley Clarke, leader of Wycombe, because I knew she would understand my day-to-day challenges,' he says. 'Wycombe is also a district council and is a similar size to East Herts.

'We have regular one-to-one meetings which can take place at either of our council locations. We usually start each meeting with two or three issues that either of us wants to tackle. Sometimes they are personal development issues but they can also be about ways in which either of our authorities can develop.

'I'd already spent six months as leader when I started the mentoring, so I'd begun to get my group on side and had a put a couple of initiatives into place – a newsletter, for example. I was ready to take the next step within my role. I needed to find ways of looking forward.'

East Herts is the centre for a lot of new development; hundreds of thousands of new homes and proximity to the rapidly expanding Stansted airport. Its largest town, Bishop's Stortford, is particularly affected, so Jackson decided to find a way of creating a vision for the place's future.

'I wanted to bring together a range of interested groups and agencies to create this new vision for the town,' he says. 'I talked to Lesley about it and she said her council was in the process of revamping the centre of High Wycombe. So she arranged for me to meet the developers there and I looked at the site and learned about some of the things they had done. That give me some new ideas. It also gave me confidence to say, "I know it's the end of a political term, but that doesn't mean we should stand still."

'Overall, I'd say that mentoring has enabled me to feel that I've earned the right to be leader. It's given me the confidence I needed. Lesley and I have an increasing degree of mutual respect. She's coming over here to sit in on our Local Strategic Partnership board, which I chair, because she thinks she can learn from how we are doing things here. It's been a two-way process.

'She's helped me realise that the issues I face here are not unique – she has faced many of the same problems herself. She's also helped me clarify some of my ideas and propositions. She never tells me what to do but enables me to challenge my own thinking.

'Nobody knows so much that they can't benefit from mentoring. Taking up this opportunity is not a sign of weakness. We in local government can all benefit from it – whether we've been in our jobs for three years or thirty years.'

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