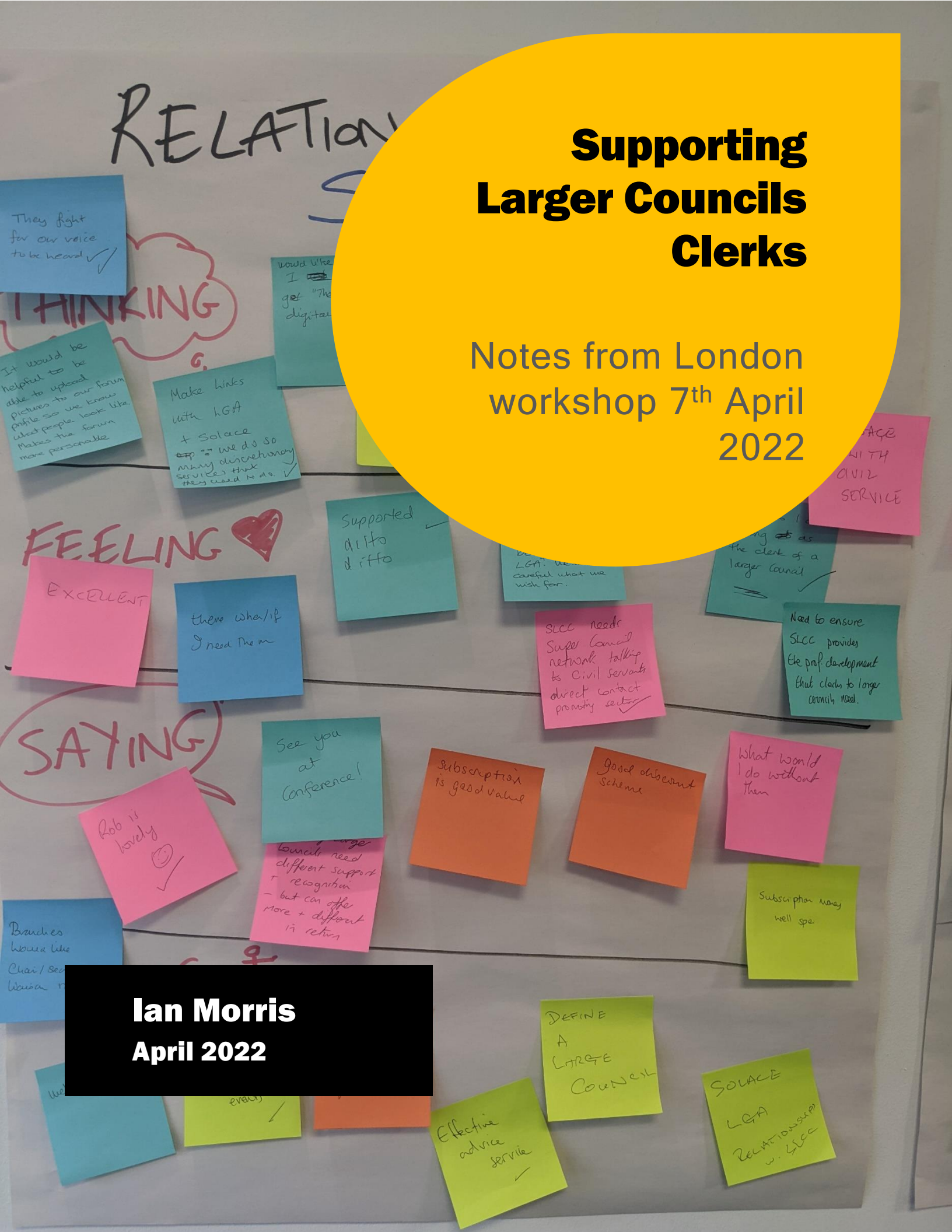
Supporting Larger Councils Clerks

Notes from London workshop 7th April 2022



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Supporting Larger Councils Clerks

A group of Chief Officers/Clerks from larger Town Councils met in London on 7th April 2022 to discuss some of the professional and personal challenges that we are facing.

The facilitated workshop was supported by SLCC and kindly sponsored by CCLA, and was very much colleague-driven. Its primary intended outcome was to deliver a series of 'problem statements' that capture some of the more pressing issues that we want to address.

This report provides a summary of the output from the workshop and is intended to feed into ongoing work on this subject in coming months.

Figure 1: working well together

Methodology.

The 7th April workshop was intended to deliver the 'empathise' and 'define' stages of the 'Stanford Design Process' – a creative design methodology that is particularly suited to coming up with innovative solutions to 'wicked problems'. You can read more about the methodology in my blog here: https://bit.ly/37LP9qx

The workshop consisted of three substantive activities:

1. An opportunity for colleagues to work alone or in small groups to consider the problem(s) from the perspective of their own personal thoughts, feelings, words and actions; then
2. An opportunity for colleagues to work in small groups to consider the problem(s) from the perspective of a couple of different 'personas' or archetypes of Clerks; then
3. Working in pairs, and then larger groups, to synthesize the insight gained from activities 1&2 into a series of 'problem statements' for future exploration.

Figure 2: discussing some of the big issues facing senior officers in our sector

Notes from the workshop activities.

Throughout all the activities participants expressed their thoughts, feelings, words and actions as written notes which were shared and discussed during the day.

The verbatim notes from each group in each session are provided in the following pages. There has been some minor editing of the 'problem statements' to try to get them into a consistent format.

Next steps

The 'problem statement' output from the workshop will be presented to a wider group of colleagues at the SLCC 'Management in Action' conference in June 2022.

Following that conference, further virtual and/or face-to-face sessions will be held to continue through the Stanford Design process through 'Ideation' and the 'Prototyping' of potential solutions.

Notes from the workshop activities.

Issues mentioned once are written in font size 10; Issues mentioned twice are written in font size 12; Issues mentioned three times are written in font size 14; Issues mentioned four or more times are written in font size 16

Empathise session 1

Board 1.1 'Relationships with NALC'

They should be for whole sector not just Councillors The federated structure isn't effective Should be a role for CALCs promoting sector locally They are <u>not</u> committed to the Civility & Respect work Patchy We don't align in priorities Seek equality for government discussions Time to find an alternative route to government + LGA rather than via NALC Not proactive, very reactive – but slowly What can/should they do for us? It's unclear what they are trying to achieve Attitude towards Clerks ☹ I don't know why I subscribe/is it value for money? The products/ advice/legal topic notes useful What does the Super Council Network group do? Nothing? What is terms of reference?	They don't value the Clerks They do not understand us There is a lot of lip service More for Councillors than for me They are there for the Government, not for Parish & Town Councils (but we pay them) Far too fuddy-duddy Dull talking shop NALC don't know how to deal with Larger Councils It seems to be one-way traffic when they want us	SLCC hides behind NALC coat tails Typical! They only do things when we push hard and get annoyed. Archaic structure – too Committee driven. Relatioship between NALC and CALCs NALC don't see themselves as equals with SLCC NALC Officers need to get out a bit more Yes, SALC/NALC is worth it Needs to lead from the center…national position Some of their training courses are good They bombard my inbox Not open to change	Subscribing Challenging Officers on the lack of action They are a bit arrogant re SLCC relationship Not dynamic

Empathise session 1

Board 1.2 'Relationships with OTHER TIERS OF GOVERNMENT'

Thinking	Feeling	Saying	Doing
I wonder if it is different between Unitary and Borough/County? Is it easier with B&Ds + County? Government influence via good MPs Government doesn't respect our (Councils) roles Good with unitary – depends on Leader/CEO We should be plugged more into DLUH&C especially with LU. How do we engage properly with them rather than just sit there and be told what's happening with no appreciation of what we could offer to increase success Closer links to Civil Servants needed We need another James Kingston in Government Over bureaucratic More influence than we think, not used sufficiently Lost opportunity, when we work open and work together we are invincible How to engage through MP when he's not engaged Most don't understand our sector Slow Is there an APPG on P&TCs? If not, why not? And if there is, why don't I know about it??	I'm glad I can easily contact my MP and he will attend meetings with us I don't have enough knowledge of DLUH&C to be able to be in a position to work with them and influence them A change in culture of unitary authorities Government happy we operate under the radar! Do Government know that we exist? Often forgotten or last minute thought Town Clerks have the ear of senior officers Patronised Unappreciated Difficult in three-tier areas	Government – Parish & Town Councils are important Shite! Spend too much money Clear difference in relations for larger and smaller T&PCs Upper tiers appreciate their lack of local knowledge Careful! The freedom of setting the precept is to be protected	Maintaining great, effective, positive links with Officers despite Councillors taking chunks out of each other at every opportunity Grant funding through Local Authorities not working Not letting DLUH&C off the hook about [Council name]'s challenge under the Sustainable Communities Act (despite NALC's best efforts to let it get forgotten) Lot more wish to work jointly They never hand over the money! We're working closer with other tiers + MP Transfer services to Towns

Empathise session 1

Board 1.3 'Relationships with SLCC'

Thinking	Feeling	Saying	Doing
Engage with civil service Automatic logging of CPD points from SLCC courses I really like the paper 'The Clerk' Would like the option to only get 'The Clerk' digitally It would be helpful to be able to upload pictures to our forum profile so we know what people look like. Makes the forum more personable. Going from strength to strength Not doing enough for larger councils Very well run Make links with LGA/SOLACE – we do so many discretionary services that they used to do. They fight for our voice to be heard You should challenge NALC more. They don't see SLCC as an equal.	Excellent There when/if I need them There is a freedom in being in the gap between NALC and LGA/SOLACE. We should be careful what we wish for Need to ensure SLCC provides the professional development that Clerks to larger Councils need Sometimes I don't belong as a Clerk of a larger Council SLCC needs Super Councils Network talking to Civil Servants direct to promote sector Supported	Branches would like Chair/Secretariat liaison nationally See you at conference! Clerks of Larger Councils need different support & recognition – but can offer more & different in return Good discount scheme What would I do without them Rob is lovely ☺ Subscription is good value/money well spent	Webinars Define a Large Council A good job…continuous improvement required Solace LGA relationship with SLCC Excellent training & events Effective Advice Service

Empathise session 1

Board 1.4 'Relationships with EACH OTHER'

Thinking	Feeling	Saying	Doing
Why don't you know that?! Don't speak out too often in big meetings or get on your soapbox because the majority of Clerks don't have the same issues. I don't want Clerks rolling their eyes when I start to speak Need to work together more effectively. Not 'one size fits all', we are unique How can I help? All in it together Can do attitude	"That's alright for you" attitude [from some clerks of smaller councils] Sad, when good people leave because of dysfunctional councils Lack of 'civic' respect Lack of engagement/different levels Clerks liaison is essential Jackie Weaver has damaged our sector. We're seen as a joke. And if my Mum says "read the standing orders!" one more time over Sunday Lunch, I'll go mad. Moral belief in supporting the sector/each other Help each other learn We are professionals Be Proud. Need to celebrate and shout out about larger councils and clerks' bigger issues (and not be embarrassed about that)	Supporting via the SLCC network How's it going? Being helpful Support Jackie Weaver Too many people look too much about the negative bit of a balanced argument	Picking up phone/emails Cooperate Learning and questioning based on others' experience Good at what we do, self-promotion Giving something back after taking from the sector over the years Using the forum Using SLCC resources Sharing knowledge, resources & experience Still learning

Empathise session 2

Board 2.1 'Persona 1: Curious, enjoys new technology, values new experiences, happy to work flexibly, enjoys discussions and challenging/being challenged.'

Think & Feel	Hear	See	Say & Do
That's new, I've learned something That I need to lead on change or new initiatives Frustration with compliance Lonely and insecure	Being tuned-in From staff: "I've got too much to do" Whatever is coming over the hill Opportunities for something new to do Pride in work and whatever learned	Beyond the popular opinion (eg facebook!) Opportunity for growth/ improvement What they are doing To many 'nae sayers' that need to change to 'yes sayers' Learn from others	"Come on, let's go!" "Just say no" to ever more requests to do more Ask questions, show/be interested "Just try it" – keep an open mind "Make it happen" I don't think, I have to talk things through Problem-solving ☺
Pain		Gain	
Bored by too much routine, this is my fear Exhaustion – with things still to do before the end of the day		Grow as a person & team Doing something Making a difference Variety The feeling of having made an improvement to peoples' lives Freeing time to plan next steps	

Empathise session 2

Board 2.2 'Persona 2: Quite reserved, more wary of new technology, task-orientated, prefers set routines, less comfortable openly challenging people.'

Think & Feel	Hear	See	Say & Do
More comfortable challenging people face to face, 1:1, rather than in Zoom meetings in front of every one Feels busier/I'm busier No going back on IT, meetings staying on YouTube (etc) More community engagement from the public on social media Relief that we're out of restrictions and back to usual routines, especially meetings	Freedom of information requests increased Residents complaining that meetings are no longer virtual Councillors and staff relieved that they don't have to use as much technology Bullying is still a problem	Changing workforce due to pandemic Additional public expectations No time to embrace new technology Election year – nastier; difficult; pressure	Day to day service delivery hasn't changed Leaving the job/sector Quality not coming into the sector Additional resources

Pain	Gain
Staff management more challenging Bigger IT, Bigger Challenges Delays to get borrowing approval Staff wellbeing issues Danger of burnout Extra pressure for those in office from those working from home Inflation interest rates for borrowing Need to increase our skill set Very small number of Councillors & public	More engagement with public if embrace digital Being appreciated Carrying on working from home Mix of home & office working

Define session 1: Problem Statements

	Resources & Culture	Professional Development	Communication
National level	How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to delive the best value for money for our community? How can SLCC and NALC help to improve the quality and status of our sector by providing more relevant direct support that better reflects the different requirements of larger councils? How can we make more people be attracted to the role of Councillor (e.g. disabled, single parents, carers, etc)? How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?	How can SLCC better provide personal/professional development skills development for Clerks of Larger Councils in order to increase well-being, effectiveness and community benefit?	How can the sector better promote its successes whilst not attracting criticism? How can we as a sector articulate our needs and wants more effectively so that we know what our solutions are rather than dwelling on the past and perceived problems?
Local level	How can Local Councils reduce the role of political bias to ensure that they can work together better with each other and other tiers of local government?		How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services? How can we improve the understanding of the work of larger Town councils amongst smaller parish clerks so that we can support & share valuable resources for the benefit of our residents, visitors, etc?
Personal level	Treating all questions from the public with respect and answering with integrity is important to me, but dealing with silly but complex questions from outside sources takes too much of my time. How can we enable our Councils to allow sufficient 'slack resources' and staff capacity to take forward good ideas without squashing their ability to innovate, helping to manage expectations and reduce staff stress levels? How can I stop Councillor micro-management of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?	How can I better resolve conflict between managers in my council? How can I balance the need to talk-through issues with my managers and my 'open door' policy with the frustration that I never have enough thinking time because I'm always being distracted by people walking through that open door!?	

Parking bay: proposed solutions suggested as part of the Define 1: Problem statement activity

The workshop activities were specifically designed to not include proposed solutions. However, being senior Officers we just couldn't help ourselves from stepping in to 'solution mode' from time to time! Where colleagues proposed ideas that were solutions rather than problems they were recorded anyway as these ideas will be useful in the 'ideation' phase that will come next:

CIL should be implemented nationally with 25% passed to Local Councils to administer

Council meetings should be remote or hybrid

We need to borrow £3.5million; get Council approval; conduct consultation; get DULHC approval; let contract

P&TCs should be able to pay dependents' care expenses to attract more diverse councillors

Larger Council clerks need different skills sets eg leadership; contract negotiation; staff management; etc that are not covered in CILCA

Larger councils have changed hugely in the past 15-20yrs requiring more modern Chief Officers (a new breed) with different skills to the traditional former/retired DC-lawyer type…need to invest in benchmarking, training for the role

Figure 3: the winning team in the post-lunch warm up activity demonstrates a diverse range of technical and personal skills!