
MUNICIPAL COUNCILORS: ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND PERFORMANCE (2007-11)

INTRODUCTION

On October 17, 2011, the newly expanded Chennai Corporation will be having its first election. 44.5 lakh voters will be casting their vote for the Mayor and for 200 ward councilors. Suburban voters, many of whom have been suffering from rapid urbanization accompanied by a lack of services are eager to come under the administration of the Corporation.¹ Voter turnout in local body elections is generally much lower than in Assembly elections: 45% in 1996, 36% in 2001, and 55% in 2006. This is unfortunate, because councilors have a great deal of power to change local conditions in their constituencies.

PURPOSE

This issue brief is designed to give the reader a clear idea of the powers and responsibilities of the ward councilor. It uses data collected and analyzed from various government documents to evaluate the performance of councilors from the most recent Council. Please note: All data here uses the old ward numbers, which no longer apply. All datasets and original Right to Information (RTI) responses if relevant are available on www.transparentchennai.com.

DATA SOURCES

Data in this report and on our website is taken from three different sources: Information on aggregate spending from the Mayor's Special Development Fund and the Councilor's Ward Improvement Scheme is taken from responses to an RTI, and the response was given to us on 1st August, 2011.

Attendance for the Council meetings, questions, and speeches is culled manually from Council Proceedings Official Reports from the month of January 2007 to the month of May 2011. Please note: attendance figures do not include the months of November 2008, March and April 2009 and March and April 2011 because no meetings were conducted in these months. These databases were compiled by Transparent Chennai researchers from hard copies of the reports made available to us, and they are available on our website with far more detail than is used for the analysis here.

Information on Zonal level ward committee meeting attendance and individual councilor spending from Councilor Development Funds is from responses to an RTI filed to each of the Zones. However, because we did not receive answers from all the Zones for this, the data is incomplete, and therefore, not included in this written analysis. However, the incomplete and very interesting datasets are available on the Transparent Chennai website for download.

¹ City Bureau, "In suburbs, expectations high," *The Hindu* 10 October 2011.

THE CORPORATION COUNCIL

The newly expanded Chennai Corporation has 200 wards grouped into 15 Zones, with an approximate total population of 6 million.² Each ward has an elected representative called the Ward Councilor. The councilors headed by the Mayor form the elected body, the Council, which runs the city of Chennai.³ The Mayor is directly elected by the people, and is not a councilor in any ward.⁴ The Deputy Mayor is elected from among the Councilors.

Council meetings are chaired by the Mayor. They are held in the Council Chambers near the Mayor's office in the Ripon Building. Councilors at the meeting sit according to their party, and the press is permitted to view the meeting from a press box.⁵ Council meetings happen once a month, and are also attended by the Corporation Commissioner, the head of the city's bureaucracy.⁶ These meetings need to be attended by at least 50 members for any business to be transacted.

The Council has the power to pass resolutions on various matters such as taxes, and public works like lighting, drainage, and sanitation. The Council or any Standing Committee can ask the Commissioner to furnish any record or document under his control, accounts and plans of the administration, and reports on any subject connected to the municipal administration.

Six Standing Committees are formed in the Council, with 15 Councilors in each, on Accounts, Education, Public Health, Town Planning, Works, and Taxation and Finance. These meet once a month.

Councilors also meet monthly at the Zonal level presided over by the Ward Committee Chairman, and the Assistant Commissioner, Executive Engineer, Assistant Engineer from the Zonal Electricity Board Office, Assistant Health Officer, Assistant Revenue Officers, Assistant Executive Engineers, Junior Engineers and Metrowater Officers also attend these meetings. Councilors bring up resolutions here, usually regarding problems in their ward. Resolutions must be approved by the ward committee, and then by the relevant Standing Committees before they are brought up in the Council meetings.

² Formerly, the city had 10 Zones with 155 wards. Both the number of wards and Zones has increased, and the boundaries of existing wards and zones were redrawn to ensure that each ward had approximately the same number of people.

³ Members of Parliament and Members of the State Legislative Assembly of those constituencies within the Chennai Corporation are also members of the council but they do not have voting rights.

⁴ In 2006, the DMK mayor was elected from among the Council members.

⁵ All the meetings of the Council are also supposed to be open to the public, although researchers from Transparent Chennai found it difficult to enter a recent Council meeting without support from an existing Councilor.

⁶ The Commissioner is an IAS office appointed by the State government, and performs those functions authorized by the Council and by the State government. The Commissioner has all the records of the Corporation, and his salary is paid from Municipal Funds. The Commissioner can also attend all the meetings of the Council and the various Standing Committees, but cannot vote.

Each Councilor is also allotted a discretionary fund known as the “Ward Development Fund,” which steadily increased from Rs. 7 lakhs in 2007 to Rs 15 lakhs in 2008, and Rs 25 lakhs in 2009.⁷ The Mayor is also given a Special Development Fund of Rs 2 crores, increased from Rs. 50 lakhs in 2009.

WHAT HAPPENS IN A COUNCIL MEETING?

Three things happen at the Council meetings. First is question hour, in which 15 councilors are selected to ask questions, usually about relevant civic issues. According to a Councilor we interviewed, a letter is sent out to all Councilors by the Council Department three weeks before a Council meeting requesting questions to be submitted. The Councilors are supposed to respond within 10 days to this request. These questions are circulated to the relevant departments beforehand, and the Mayor reads the answers. A database of questions asked in each Council session is available on <http://www.transparentchennai.com/research/municipal-elections/performance-indicators/>.

Second, individual Councilors are called upon to address the Council in the form of speeches, of which there are not more than 15 in each meeting. The time duration permitted is around 5 minutes with the Mayor keeping time. Both speeches and questions are allocated according to the strength of the party in the Council.

Finally, the majority of the time at the Council meeting is spent discussing resolutions. As the Mayor calls out their names, councilors stand up to present resolutions they are sponsoring. A resolution can be passed only with the approval of the Council. Some councilors propose multiple resolutions, and some resolutions are backed by multiple councilors. Up to 150 resolutions are regularly passed in a single Council meeting. Resolutions are published online on the Chennai Corporation website in Tamil.⁸ Resolutions, once passed, must be implemented by the Commissioner and the relevant departments unless overruled by the State government.

The Council Secretary, a bureaucrat appointed by the government, keeps attendance, puts together the agenda, and publishes the monthly reports of Council proceedings. These reports are available in the Council Department’s library at the

⁷ These funds can be used for infrastructure within the ward, such as public toilets, parks, infrastructure for Corporation schools. The funds cannot be used for streetlights, memorial statues or places of religious worship.

⁸ An examination of the resolutions between 2007, when they first began to be published online, to mid 2011, when we put together this report revealed that although the resolutions are clearly written, with a brief explanation of the issues, a brief timeline of progress, and the wards and zone details where relevant, they do not always provide details about who proposed the resolution, making it difficult to judge which councilors are more or less involved in Council activities. These records are also not adequately organized: resolutions passed in certain months are missing, while some month’s resolutions are repeated and listed under incorrect dates. There is also no larger database of resolutions available, so following up on a particular issue or following the work of a particular councilor is nearly impossible.

Corporation, and are issued to each Councilor, and are available for perusal in the library to the general public, pending the Council Secretary's permission.

PARTY MEMBERSHIP IN THE COUNCIL

The chart below shows the total number of members in the council from each party.

PARTY	No. of Councilors
DMK	92
Congress	35
PMK	15
Bahujan Samaj Party	3
Communist Party of India	2
Independent	1
MGR Kazhagam	1
CPI (M)	1
Tamil Nadu State Desiya League	1

ATTENDANCE AT THE CORPORATION COUNCIL

Council meetings are important to attend, because they are the ideal time for a Councilor to bring up the issues in their ward with the Mayor and Commissioner. However, attendance alone does not equal active participation: From the minutes of the Zone 6 Ward Committee,⁹ Transparent Chennai found that while all the Councilors attended every Zonal level ward committee meeting between 2007 and 2011, there is extreme variation in the number of resolutions they have put forward, ranging from none from the Ward 87 Councilor to 25 for the Ward 91 Councilor.

Transparent Chennai obtained attendance data for Corporation Council meetings by culling Council reports and creating an attendance database from this. All in all, 13 councilors shared the record for best attendance, and 5 were from the Congress, and the rest from the DMK. The Mayor has been excluded from this analysis, but attended all meetings.

COUNCILOR NAME	PARTY	WARD #	ZONE	ATTENDANCE
A.Subrahmani	Indian Communist Party	32	3	58
Hon. Deputy Mayor R. Sathyabama	DMK	25	2	58
J. Srinivasan	DMK	51	4	58
J.Jeenath Birdahus	DMK	33	3	58
M. Kalpana	DMK	94	6	58
M. Samikannu	DMK	60	4	58
P. Sivakumar	DMK	112	7	58
P.L Kalyani	Congress	39	3	58

⁹ This information was obtained through an RTI.

Radha Sambandham	DMK	128	8	58
S.M Vembathal	Congress	41	3	58
Saithai P. Ravi alias Rangaramanujam	Congress	116	8	58
Selvi Sounderajan	DMK	146	10	58
T.R. Thulkaranai	Congress	28	2	58

The 10 councilors with the worst attendance records came from a range of parties:

COUNCILOR NAME	PARTY	WARD #	ZONE	ATTENDANCE
Durai alias Kanchi S. Durai	DMK	57	4	45
K.Armstrong	Bahujan Samaj Party	53	4	43
I. Kennedy	DMK	141	9	42
J.Karunanidhi	DMK	127	8	42
Latha Vasu	DMK	56	4	42
D. William	Congress	132	9	41
C. Sekar	DMK	35	3	40
M.Saravanan	D.M.D.K	48	3	40
K. Sharmila Devi	DMK	90	6	39
R. Hemavathi	Congress	52	4	39

Average attendance of council members within each party did not vary significantly, ranging from 49.5 days for the 4 DMDK Councilors to a high of 57 days for the 2 CPI Councilors. The 92 DMK councilors had an average attendance of 52 days out of a total of 58. Full attendance tables by year, along with our analysis, are available on our website.

Transparent Chennai obtained Zonal level ward committee meeting attendance by applying under the RTI Act to each Zone separately. All Zones responded in a timely manner, except for Zone 10. As a result, a complete analysis of the Zonal level attendance could not be completed. The available details of Zonal attendance are available on our website at <http://www.transparentchennai.com/research/municipal-elections/performance-indicators/>.

COUNCILOR AND MAYOR DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

Councilors were allocated Rs. 7 lakhs as ward development funds in 2007 – 08, which subsequently increased to Rs 15 lakhs in 2008 – 09, and again to Rs 25 lakhs in 2009 – 10. Yet, as the table below reveals, councilor utilization of the funds decreased significantly with each increase, climbing upwards only in the last year.

Year	Allotment (in lakhs)	Expenditure (in lakhs)	Percentage used	Allotment per Councilor (in lakhs)
2007-08	1085	760.28	70%	7
2008-09	2325	1476.36	63.50%	15
2009-10	3875	1573.88	40.60%	25

2010-11	3875	2431.42	62.74%	25
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The Mayor's Special Development Fund also received a sharp increase in allocation from Rs. 50 lakhs in 2007 – 08 to Rs. 2 crores in 2009 – 10. But spending from the fund has been dismal, and steadily decreasing, both as a percentage of the total and in actuals. In 2009 – 10, only a mere 4.9% of the funds were spent. Although the numbers are small relative to the total budget of the city, the Mayor could have still done a better job of spending it.

Year	Allotment (in lakhs)	Expenditure (in lakhs)	Percentage used
2007-08	50	18.36	36.72%
2008-09	50	12.62	25.24%
2009-10	200	9.71	4.86%

The systematic under-utilization of funds by both the Councilors and the Mayor suggests that either a concerted effort is needed to educate elected representatives and residents about this money, or that the process for spending the money needs to be made simpler. Transparent Chennai has also received in response to their RTI for detailed information on individual councilor spending from the development funds from Zones 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, but did not receive this information from Zones 3, 4, and 10. The information currently available to us can be accessed at <http://www.transparentchennai.com/research/municipal-elections/performance-indicators/>. As a result, we were not able to do any analysis on the data. However, the available data reveals a great deal of variation in spending among Councilors.

QUESTIONS AND SPEECHES

From the reports from the years January 2007 to May 2011, the Transparent Chennai team determined that a total of 458 questions were asked in the Council meetings. Councilor D. Subhash Chandra Bose, DMK, asked the most questions with a total of 18 questions, while P. L. Kalyani (Congress), Usha (DMDK), and S. Umasasavi (BSP) asked 17, and S. Venkatesan (PMK) asked 16.

There were 55 councilors who did not raise any questions at all during this period. The table below shows the number of councilors by party who asked no questions, and the average number of questions asked per councilor. 38 councilors from the ruling DMK asked no questions at all, while 14 from the Congress did not ask any. The councilors from the parties with the smallest representation asked the largest average number of questions, suggesting that perhaps the allocation of questions by party skews the question hour in favor of extremely small parties. The high number of questions from parties with just one to three Councilors in the Council also allays fears that electing an independent or a non-ruling party councilor will decrease your ward's voice in the Council, at least in the matter of questions.

Party	Total # of Councilors in the Council	Total # of Questions asked	Total # of Councilors who asked questions	Average # of Questions per Councilor
D.M.K	92	168	38	1.82
Congress	35	120	14	3.42
P.M.K	15	54	3	3.6
D.M.D.K	4	20	0	5
B.S.P	3	31	0	10.34
Communist Party of India	2	16	0	8
CPI (M)	1	12	0	12
MGR Kazhagam	1	14	0	14
Tamil Nadu State Desiya League	1	10	0	10
Independent	1	13	0	13

The detailed dataset (available on <http://www.transparentchennai.com/research/municipal-elections/performance-indicators/>) also reveals that 30 councilors asked only one question, and 22 of these were from the DMK. This means that there is a great deal of variation in the number of questions asked per councilor as well, with some councilors participating much more in the question hour than others.

At the Council meeting, after the question hour, Councilors get a chance to make speeches to the Council about matters regarding their ward and city-related problems. From examining Council records, it seems that the last speakers are almost always the P.M.K leader M. Jayaraman, Opposition leader Saidai P.Ravi and the Ruling party leader N.Ramalingam.

In the 58 meetings that took place from January 2007 to May 2011, 844 speeches were made by the Councilors. M. Jayaraman spoke 40 times; Saidai P.Ravi 48 times and N. Ramalingam spoke 47 times. Apart from them, V. Prabu of the B.S.P has spoken the most with 36 speeches followed by P.Devi of CPI (M) with 33 speeches.

While MLA's S.V. Sekhar spoke 4 times and V.S. Babu spoke twice, 28 Councilors did not speak at any of the meetings. Of these Councilors, 25 were from the D.M.K, 2 from the P.M.K and 1 from D.M.D.K.

25 of the D.M.K Councilors made only one speech each. So, of the total 302 speeches made by the D.M.K Councilors, keeping aside the Councilors who made one or no speeches and the speeches made by N. Ramalingam, 230 speeches were made by 41

Councilors. This would bring the average speech per D.M.K. Councilor to 5.6. MGR Kazhagam Councilor N.Durairaj alone has made 25 speeches.

Party	Total # of Councilors in the Council	Total # of Speeches Made	Total # of Councilors who made no speeches	Average # of Speeches per Councilor
D.M.K	92	302	25	3.28
Congress	35	221	0	6.31
P.M.K	15	102	2	6.8
D.M.D.K	4	41	1	10.25
B.S.P	3	57	0	19
Communist Party of India	2	33	0	16.5
CPI (M)	1	33	0	33
MGR Kazhagam	1	25	0	25
Tamil Nadu State Desiya League	1	12	0	12
Independent	1	18	0	18

18 Councilors asked no questions and made no speeches. Of these, 17 were from the D.M.K and 1 from the P.M.K. Two of these were the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor, whose role in the Council is of course different from that of the regular Councilors. A table of all these Councilors appears here:

Ward	Councilor	Party
6	Chinnaponnu alias G. Rajeswari	D.M.K
17	M.Das	D.M.K
18	(Sreedhar died on 01.07.08) N.Krishnan	D.M.K
25	Hon. Deputy Mayor R. Sathyabama	D.M.K
34	Nirmala Dayalan	D.M.K
56	Latha Vasu	D.M.K
60	M. Samikannu	D.M.K
71	R. Sivalingam	D.M.K
76	C. Sumathi Citybabu	D.M.K
79	J. Anjalidevi	D.M.K
87	M. Dhanasekaran	D.M.K
90	K. Sharmila Devi	D.M.K
92	M. Lalitha	D.M.K
94	M. Kalpana	D.M.K
115	R. Manivannan	P.M.K

118	K.Jayanthi	D.M.K
140	Honourable Mayor M. Subrahmaniam	D.M.K
148	A. Babu	D.M.K

INFORMATION AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE:

1. Ongoing research, publications and datasets on Municipal Councilors are available on the research section of the website <http://www.transparentchennai.com/research/municipal-elections/>
2. Our blog, Chennai Kaleidoscope, also publishes weekly information on Transparent Chennai's ongoing work, including updates on Municipal Councilors. <http://www.transparentchennai.com/blog/>

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ABOUT US:

Transparent Chennai (www.transparentchennai.com) is a government accountability project housed at the Centre for Development Finance, Institute for Financial Management and Research, Chennai. Transparent Chennai creates and disseminates maps, data, and research about important civic issues, and works with citizens to create data to aid their advocacy. The project has collected and mapped both government and citizen generated data on public sanitation, solid waste management, informal settlements, road safety and pedestrian infrastructure, electoral and administrative boundaries, and much more. Its maps and research studies are widely disseminated through issue briefs, publications in newspapers and blogs, and through public meetings.