Stand for what you believe in

Be a councillor

THE X FACTOR: A TALENT-SPOTTER'S RECRUITMENT GUIDE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

www.local.gov.uk/be-a-councillor

Local Government Association

"Councillors need to reflect the communities they serve, empathise with local residents and communicate effectively with them. Only by ensuring there is a good range of councillors can we hope to do this. It is vital that political parties have a good stream of new, capable people coming through the ranks, to ensure that those who hold seats do not become complacent."

Councillor Laura Robertson-Collins, Labour, Liverpool

Cover images – top: Councillor Helen Jackson, Labour – Rossendale, Lancs
bottom: Councillor Arif Hussain, Conservative – Wycombe, Bucks.

To find out how you can get involved in the 'Be a councillor' campaign please visit: www.local.gov.uk/be-a-councillor

There is also a national website for the public, full of case studies and helpful information about how to become a councillor: www.beacouncillor.org.uk

www.local.gov.uk/be-a-councillor

The X Factor
A talent-spotter's recruitment guide for local government elections

Foreword: are you ready to make a difference?

Local government is only ever as vibrant, effective and relevant as the people elected to run it. The decisions made by councillors in England's district, borough, metropolitan, unitary and county councils affect people's quality of life in countless ways, from education to housing and regeneration, community safety, environment, roads, care for older people, sport and culture, and helping local businesses to thrive.

Increasing the pool of talent from which councillors are elected is a key challenge for local government. Only by encouraging the brightest stars to stand for election can we ensure that councils are able to do the best for their communities. We need plenty of high-quality prospective councillors ready and willing to work hard and make a difference to their local communities.

We need councillors who are capable, vibrant, energetic and engaged, with a commitment to local people and a passion for change. Ensuring that councils better represent their electorate is not simply a case of encouraging more diversity in terms of age, gender or ethnicity, although that does play a part in making councils more relevant. The most important thing is raising the quality of all councillors. We need different kinds of people willing to stand for election, whether for a party or as Independent candidates, to get a choice of quality candidates.

Everyone needs to play their part in 'talent spotting' – actively looking out for committed, enthusiastic people who could make great councillors. Whether you are a councillor yourself, are involved in the formal selection process, or you're an active party member keen to initiate change, you have an important role to play.

It's all about finding people who are ordinary enough to be representative, but extraordinary enough to be representatives. It's about thinking more creatively about how to widen the talent pool. Ultimately, it's the electorate that decides who becomes a councillor, but we can all help to raise the quality of the candidates they choose from. This booklet provides some tips on how to achieve this, where to look, how to learn from the experience of others, and who can help.

Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell
Chairman, Local Government Association

"I arrived in the UK aged 11 and could hardly speak a word of English, but I was determined to learn, succeed and make Britain my new home. Later on, my family encouraged me to become a councillor and start helping to bring the changes that I was so passionate about. Giving something back to the community is extremely important to me. I wouldn't have got involved if I didn't believe I could make a difference. Becoming a councillor is one of the most rewarding and satisfying things I have ever done."

Councillor Arif Hussain, Conservative, Wycombe

Step 1: preparing for change

It can take up to two years to select, develop and prepare a new council candidate. For political parties to improve the quality of candidates and ultimately strengthen their local political teams, there are several early steps that need to be taken long before polling day.

Conduct a gap analysis

Look at your current team of councillors and work out where the gaps are. An effective council has a good mix of people who represent the local community and can bring a range of skills and specialist knowledge that other councillors can benefit from.

What are the gaps on your council – is there a need for younger people, parents of school-age children or working people? Is there under-representation of women or people from ethnic minority backgrounds? Are you looking for future cabinet material, and are there certain portfolios that require special expertise?

Or does the team need some of the energy and dynamism that comes from the quick turnover of councillors who choose to move on after one term? Conducting a skills audit across the party and the local wards can identify what type of people and skills are lacking.

Publicise and promote the role

One of the reasons people don't put themselves forward as candidates is that they don't have a clue about what the council does or what being a councillor entails. Promoting the role through the local media, community groups, workplaces and colleges can help people to see themselves as potential councillors. Enlist the help of existing councillors that your target audience can identify with.

"An election defeat in 2004, when we lost control of the council, made us think long and hard about who we wanted as candidates. It was clear that we needed to reinvigorate our activist base. We also recognised that we had not been good at identifying and encouraging new talent. We set about rebuilding the connections between the Labour group and local communities, 'talent spotting' younger people who would make good councillors and acting as mentors during the selection process. Now almost one-third of the Labour group is under 40."

Councillor Nick Forbes, Labour, Newcastle upon Tyne

Checklist

- ☐ Write articles for the council magazine or website, party leaflets or the local press
- ☐ Have a 'councillor of the month' column
- ☐ Organise party and council-led open days for the public
- ☐ Run 'question time' events with councillors
- ☐ Provide information on your website about becoming a councillor
- ☐ Use social networking services such as Twitter and Facebook
- ☐ Take out an advert in the local paper inviting people to come to a meeting to find out more.

Get the party onside

Change can create resistance. Political parties need to become outward-looking if candidates who break the mould are to be encouraged and welcomed, but this should be done in a sensitive way. Get party members onside with the new selection aspirations early on. Make sure that the aims, ambitions and reasons for this new way of doing things are communicated to all members.

Start by looking at local party structures such as the constitution and selection process to see how they can be made more open. Then look at other roles: is there someone who could be asked to have an external focus so that it becomes their job to encourage more people to get involved? Who will be responsible for preparing candidates? A good look at the systems in place for supporting potential and actual candidates is useful. Are they set up to develop confident, team-minded councillors?

"It's important to explain what the role involves. Many people think councillors spend a lot of time making speeches in council, but in reality much of the work involved is one-to-one casework with residents."

Councillor Michael Mullaney, Liberal Democrat, Hinkley & Bosworth

"From what I have seen from my council and others, most councillors seem to be white, retired or semi-retired, middle-class men. I would really like to see more 'ordinary' people, perhaps with more experience of what it is to struggle in life, standing for election. You can devote as much time to the role as you are able to, and you can make it fit around the rest of your life."

Councillor Jane Davey, Independent, Ashford

Get the council to help

While the council (as an organisation) cannot involve itself in politics, it does have a corporate responsibility to make sure that it is run properly – so officers can get involved in the recruitment and training of councillors as long as there is cross-party support. Perhaps the council can take some action on promoting the role of councillors in the local media, or run programmes for people from under-represented sections of the community to explain what councillors do and encourage people to stand.

"As a relatively young councillor who grew up in London of Irish parents, I thought I could bring a different perspective rather than the older, male, middle-class viewpoint. I really enjoy changing the public's perception of what type of person a councillor is."

Councillor Monica Coleman, Liberal Democrat, Sutton

Step 2: starting the search

Unearthing the political stars of the future takes determination. First there needs to be an understanding of why it is necessary, then a commitment to doing things differently. The next step is a plan of action on how to achieve it. Being clear about your goals will make it easier to spot the talent when you come across it.

Consider the following questions:

Who are you looking for?

Who are the under-represented groups, and what skills are needed?

Who should be talent spotting?

- councillors: every councillor should be thinking about where the next intake of talent is going to come from
- political groups and local parties: all members, whether or not they have a formal role in the selection process
- officers: relevant council staff should also consider how to make sure there is a vibrant selection process in all parties and all wards. Competition will raise the quality of councillors and keep standards high (naturally this has to be done with cross-party consent, and officers must not be involved in politics).

"I became a councillor after being involved in a local campaign about a mobile phone mast. The Conservative Association contacted me to ask if I would consider standing for election. I was unemployed and over 50 and feeling like no more challenges or opportunities were going to open up for me. I accepted the challenge of becoming a councillor with little understanding of what it entailed, and I love it. All my skill sets have come into play in one role."

Councillor Anne Gower, Conservative, St Edmundsbury/Suffolk

Why aren't talented people coming forward already?

- it can be as simple as never having been asked
- people may have outdated ideas about what being a councillor means
- they may not know how the political system works
- they may have never thought of themselves as councillor material.

What are the qualities you are looking for in potential candidates?

Council teams need a range of skills, and few of them are about academic achievement or professional expertise. However, there are some personal qualities that potential candidates do need to possess. Most of the other skills that councillors need can be developed before and after they are elected.

Checklist

- ☐ raw energy and the desire to improve things
- ☐ team player
- ☐ reliability
- ☐ loyalty
- ☐ the ability to communicate
- ☐ passionate about the local area
- ☐ involved and influential in local communities.

"It might seem unusual, but I became involved in local politics initially because of problems with refuse collections in my area. When they emptied the bins they left behind a trail of rubbish. I was talking to a friend who was already a councillor and she convinced me that a good way to do something about it would be to become a councillor myself."

Councillor Krystal Miller, Conservative, Merton

"I was 20 when I was first elected, and my experience as a young person has been vital in discussions about looked-after children in the county, transport, education – the list goes on and on. It was daunting at first, but you have to dig your roots, keep asking questions and get to know people – whether inside the civic building or in your patch."

Councillor Becky Brunskill, Conservative, County Durham

Step 3: finding the talent

In the past, council candidates were often selected from a small pool of people who were already politically active and attended party meetings. Real democracy means looking towards a much broader range of people who have the potential to be enthusiastic and committed councillors.

This should not be left to chance. Many councillors and leaders are already in the habit of talking to outstanding people they meet about the possibility of becoming a councillor, but it's not enough just to ask the people you happen to meet. Political parties need to put effort and imagination into considering who else might make good candidates.

Checklist: where to start the search

How many people in these categories have you approached and talked to about their potential to make a good councillor?

- ☐ Any local party member or known person retiring from a public service position (eg civil servant, teacher)
- ☐ Aspiring parliamentary candidates
- ☐ Chairs of local voluntary groups
- ☐ Charity workers
- ☐ Community activists such as school governors, magistrates or street wardens
- ☐ Contacts and supporters of former/retiring councillors
- ☐ Faith group members
- ☐ Former candidates who only stood because they knew they would lose
- ☐ Leaflet deliverers who comment on the leaflets
- ☐ Local party activists
- ☐ MPs' political assistants and other paid party political officers

"I have a strong sense of shared experience with many of the young people in my community: a cultural awareness and an understanding of their background and heritage. This means that I speak from a particular vantage point and am able to convey messages between the community and the council."

Councillor Michael Bukola, Liberal Democrat, Southwark

- ☐ Parents living on a council estate who are worried about the services for their family
- ☐ Parish or town councillors
- ☐ Party members who have recently moved into the area
- ☐ People who attend community group meetings
- ☐ People who lead local campaigns
- ☐ People who respond to party political broadcasts
- ☐ People who use social media such as Twitter to comment on local issues
- ☐ People who write to the local newspaper
- ☐ People you meet on the doorstep, on the bus and in the supermarket
- ☐ People you think could do the job well
- ☐ Student activists

You can also look:

Within the local party
How many members on the party roll never come to meetings? There is potential untapped talent among this group of people who care enough about the party values to pay for membership. Write to every member and invite them to an event to learn about becoming a councillor, and ask them to bring friends or family they think could be interested; or focus on a particular segment of the membership.

At councillors' surgeries
People who come in to complain about something that's not right in the local area care enough to voice their opinion. Their enthusiasm for change makes them potential councillor material. You can also tap into potential talent at consultations or neighbourhood committee meetings. Persuade people that they will have more influence as a councillor.

In the local business community
Many councils are short of working-age councillors. Promote the role of councillors to local businesses through the chamber of commerce or other forums. You can also target people with particular skills or expertise that the local team could benefit from.

"I was asked by someone in my political party to consider standing, but I refused a number of times before agreeing. To begin with I stood to try and increase the number of our councillors. However, as soon as I got out in the ward meeting people, I felt a real desire to help my local community and make residents' voices heard. I lost my first election, but re-stood two years later and won."

Councillor Abi Brown, Conservative, Stoke-on-Trent

Among local volunteers
Bright sparks can often be found spearheading local campaigns or leading community groups such as tenants' or residents' associations, youth clubs and neighbourhood watch groups.

Schools and colleges
Young people often have lots of energy for changing the world but don't know where to begin. By talking to sixth formers, colleges and university groups, you can explain that being a councillor is a great way of changing things – and that younger candidates will be welcomed and supported. There may also be a youth council or young mayor in your area – the young people involved may well be interested in learning more about being a councillor.

At public events
Council open days, the local farmer's market or street market, job fairs, leisure centres and libraries. This is about getting out, meeting people and talking to them about what the council does, and it's crucial in raising the profile of councillors.

Step 4: persuading people to stand

So, you've spotted someone you think would make a good councillor. How do you convince them?

- Ask them
  Being asked was a factor in the decision to stand for two-thirds of candidates in the 2007 local elections, according to a survey. People tend not to think of themselves as councillor material until someone else sees it in them.
- Follow it up
  People who do not particularly see themselves as potential councillors will need to be actively encouraged before they get the confidence to commit.
- Tailor your approach
  For example, younger people or parents may be worried about how much time they will have to devote to being a councillor, and may benefit from talking to councillors who understand their concerns.
- Invite them to an event
  This can be a way of explaining to potential candidates exactly what a councillor does and what the expected time commitment will be.

"In my experience it is crucial to speak to people who can tell you about the challenges and sacrifices you will make as well as the difference you can make. One of the most important factors is speaking to people who you trust and who are experienced. Standing for public office is a time-consuming process and, if you have a family, it can be a difficult thing to do. Knowing the realities of the role, positives and negatives, is a very useful preparation tool. That and knowing I had safe spaces where I could explore some of my frustrations helped enormously."

Councillor Amina Lone, Labour, Manchester

- Observe them in a number of informal settings
  Take them out campaigning to see how they interact with members of the public, hold an informal policy workshop, or do some role-play to check they have a common-sense approach.
- Arrange for them to shadow a councillor
  They need to see evidence that they won't be wasting their time and can really get things done.
- Reassure them
  Explain that no formal qualifications are needed and that all individuals do the job differently, and assure them that support and training will be provided before and after the election (and make sure this is true).

It's important to tell them you think they will make a great councillor. And finally, you can emphasise the benefits:

- the unique opportunity to help change people's lives
- support from the council to do the work
- gaining a unique experience of people and place
- professional and personal development
- small but significant remuneration
- the sense of belonging to your neighbourhood.

Step 5: signing them up

Once a potential candidate has been talent-spotted and expressed an interest in becoming a councillor, it's time to seal the deal. At this stage you need to make sure that they understand what they are letting themselves in for.

Check that they are aware:

- that agreeing to stand as a council candidate via the party route means committing themselves to becoming a member of a political party
- of the amount of time they will need to put into getting to know their ward and campaigning prior to the election
- of any other demands on their time such as group meetings, training sessions and gaining a place on the panel of approved candidates
- what you will do for them – for example identifying their training needs, pairing them up with a mentor or helping them with campaigning
- how local government works: they can't be expected to work effectively in the system unless they understand it.

"My son was starting school and I had been thinking about going back to work, but I wanted to do something different from my previous career in banking. I was encouraged by the fact that the council was prepared to look outside the box to find new talent, as I wanted to join a team with a progressive attitude. I had never seriously considered becoming a councillor until the it was suggested to me."

Councillor Emma Will, Conservative, Kensington and Chelsea

Be aware that at any stage in the process between the initial conversation about becoming a councillor to the final selection, people may drop out. You might find yourself investing time in people who don't last the course. Try not to lose those people completely. Encourage them to take on another public position such as school governor or member of a hospital trust. This way you may get them to stand next time.

Step 6: preparing the candidates

Potential candidates, particularly those who are not long-term members of a political party, will need careful preparation to help them through the complexities of the selection process.

- Brief them
  Ensure that they are clear about what the selection process involves. They will need to know about the ward they are standing in and be confident about writing and delivering a speech to the selection panel. They may need help in how to answer particular questions, especially about their party values, and be briefed on what the panel is looking for. A party or group member should be nominated to guide new candidates through the process.
- Discuss party values
  Now is the time to make sure potential candidates understand and share the values of the political party they will be representing, and what it means to be part of a political group on the council – such as the need for team loyalty, following the whip and collective responsibility.
- Reassure them
  Explain that they don't need a detailed knowledge of party policy. Local councils vary widely in terms of their style, politics and the approach they take to delivering services, and it is here that party values come to the fore.

Running a successful selection process

The selection process is critical to improving the quality of councillors, because putting the right candidates in the right seats is the only way to ensure that the best team is actually elected.

Every party has its own way of doing this, but all parties have learned the hard way that selecting an unsuitable candidate can cause significant problems. It is much harder to stop people being councillors once they have been elected than to eliminate the wrong candidates at the selection stage.

Any selection process works best when there are more applicants than places. One of the aims of this handbook and the 'Be a Councillor' campaign is make sure that there are enough high-calibre candidates to make a vibrant and competitive selection process.

"The key is to know what you're letting yourself in for, long before the elections. Shadow a councillor, do the campaigning and the leaflet delivering. Relatively little happens in the meetings – it's what you do outside that makes the biggest difference."

Councillor Allan Siao Ming Witherick, Liberal Democrat, St Albans/Hertfordshire

It is important to ask searching questions when vetting candidates. Is there anything embarrassing in their past that the newspapers would be interested in? This could include council tax arrears, county court judgements, previous convictions – anything that could damage the party and other candidates if it came to light.

Are they fully signed up to the party, and do they understand the meaning of party loyalty and following the whip? What will they do if the party wants to do something that they personally disagree with?

Selectors are often more cautious than the electorate, and they may only want to select obvious winners for any particular seat. Often this results in newer candidates being given the least winnable seats. Consider whether this is the right thing to do with your new talent. Could you put newer candidates in the safer seats and leave the marginals for more experienced people to fight? Make sure you balance the ticket in three-member wards.

Finally, could the selection process be refreshed? In some wards, selection is in the hands of a tiny number of people. Opening up the process by inviting all ward members to take part, or considering the use of open primaries – where all the residents of a ward are invited to attend – will mean that candidates are selected by a wider range of people and could prove to be more electable.

Step 7: supporting your candidates

The more support a candidate receives before the election, the sooner they are likely to be up and running as effective councillors. Building a team spirit in the early stages will also pay dividends in terms of team building and loyalty later on.

- Mentoring: set up a system which pairs up new candidates with experienced councillors, either within the ward or across the council.
- Training: talk to each candidate to find out what his or her individual needs are and then provide the right training. Run personal development programmes that cover campaigning, policy formation and political knowledge.
- Networking: bring all new candidates together frequently before the election so that they can form a support network. Introduce them to current councillors and put on activities that involve both new and seasoned candidates.
- Practical experience: set up the ward groups as 'action teams' in the period up to the election to campaign. Invite candidates to sit in on a council or committee meeting so they know what to expect.
- Team building: get to know the prospective candidates and find out where their strengths and interests lie, so that you can start to form a team that incorporates their talents and gives them a clear role if elected.

"You also need to look into the pool of activists and members in your party and target potential young/diverse candidates. Potential candidates need experienced councillors as mentors who will give them advice and support."

Councillor Awale Olad, Labour, Camden

Now it's up to you…

The number of Britons who are members of the three main political parties is estimated to be fewer than 500,000. From this small proportion of the population is drawn most of the elected politicians who exercise democratic power.

We risk ignoring the greater potential of our communities if we confine our councillor candidate recruitment to local party members, activists, safe pairs of hands and 'friends'. We need councils that truly represent the local population. This is not just about diversity by race, gender, age, experience or education; mostly it is about talent and ability, potential and ambition.

You need to consider the qualities that matter. The party line comes over more in how you do things than in what you do. A close working knowledge of party policy over the past 15 years might not be necessary; a lengthy track-record of leaflet delivery or attendance at party meetings is not essential either.

Other qualities may resonate more with the community that would be represented by this new candidate. The desire to improve people's lives is vital. Being ambitious (for their locality, their colleagues, their council and even for themselves) is important. Loyalty to colleagues, to the area and to the party values is a definite must, as is a willingness to work in a team. Develop a list from your previous good (and bad) selection experiences.

Passion is also critical. People who complain about the council are usually people who want do something about making it better. They are already halfway to becoming an activist. All you need to do is harness that passion.

Having identified the type of person, and then the individuals, you have to ask them to stand – sometimes again and again. Encourage them to have the confidence that they can do the job. With good advice, and your support, they will enjoy the role and become effective members of your team.

Good luck!

Clare Whelan, Paul Wheeler, Steve Hitchins
'Be a Councillor' campaign lead party advisers

"Islington council do a great deal to encourage those interested in standing as councillors to go ahead and stand, both by providing information sessions on being a councillor and by making existing councillors very accessible. My local party were particularly encouraging towards people who come from backgrounds that are traditionally under-represented in political life."

Councillor Lucy Rigby, Labour, Islington

Resources

Local Government Association
www.local.gov.uk

The Local Government Association (LGA) represents councils in England and Wales and runs political offices providing advice and support to councillors in member councils.

Conservative group office:
www.conservativegroup.lga.gov.uk

Labour group office:
Labour group office: www.labourgroup.lga.gov.uk

Liberal Democrat group office:
www.libdemgroup.lga.gov.uk

Independent group office (including smaller parties): www.independentgroup.lga.gov.uk (please note the group cannot actively support election campaigns for Independent candidates but can offer general advice).

This guide is part of the LGA's 'Be a councillor' campaign (www.beacouncillor.org.uk) which also provides information on becoming a councillor.

You can download the step-by-step pamphlet 'Your guide to becoming a councillor' or order a hard copy free of charge on 020 7664 3131 or email info@local.gov.uk

The three main political parties have web pages that explain how to become a councillor:

Conservative: www.conservatives.com/get_involved/become_a_councillor.aspx

Liberal Democrat:
www.bealibdemcouncillor.org.uk

Labour: www.labourcouncillor.org.uk

They also have councillors' associations:

Conservative Councillors' Association:
www.conservativecouncillors.com

Association of Labour Councillors:
www.labourcouncillor.org.uk

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors:
www.aldc.org

Further advice is available from the 'Be a Councillor' lead party advisers:

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Paul Wheeler (Labour):
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