

## **Best practice guide – getting women to stand as councillors**

### **Introduction**

Labour Groups across the country are looking at how to diversify the candidates they select to run as councillors. In 2017 the Fawcett Society found that only 33% of councillors are women, and there is little sign of the numbers having increased significantly since then. In order to get more women elected as councillors, we need more to stand as candidates in the first place, but in doing this we need to recognise the barriers in place and the support that can be given to overcome them. Labour Groups and local Labour parties from around the country are already putting support structures in place to encourage and support more women to stand.

Only 20% of Labour council leaders are women. This is on par with the other political parties, but it is not representative of the councillor population or of the populations that councillors represent. As well as getting more women elected as councillors in the first place, Labour Groups need to look at how women are promoted within Labour Groups to ensure that leadership opportunities are open to them, including making sure that there aren't perceived "women's" and "men's" cabinet roles. Women are traditionally given roles such as education and adult social care whereas men are given more strategic roles such as finance and regeneration, and you're more likely to become a leader if you have done the latter. In addition to this, Labour Groups should ensure that they're making the role of a councillor accessible to as wide range of people as possible. This should include, but is not limited to, having a parental leave policy in place for the Labour Group and the council where Labour is in power and suitable provisions in place to support councillors with caring commitments. Political culture also puts off a lot of people from becoming councillors, and Labour Groups and local parties should work together to address this locally, as well as working with the Labour Party and LGA Labour Group on this issue.

The LGA Labour Group has gathered together best practice from Labour Groups and local parties from around England and Wales in order to help other areas encourage more women to stand.

### **Shadowing, mentoring and buddying**

**Peterborough Labour Group** have focused on getting more Russian and Eastern European women to stand in recognition of the large numbers of residents from those areas. Candidates and sitting councillors have offered shadowing to female community activists and party members so they can better understand what being a candidate and a councillor entails.

Once candidates had been selected, each female candidate was assigned a sitting councillor as a mentor by **Islington Labour Group**. Mentors were expected to meet with their mentee at least once in person through the course of the campaign but were on hand to support new candidates both throughout the election and once elected. Both campaign staff and Labour Group staff were also committed to supporting the new intake, especially recognising the need to support new female councillors.

**Lambeth Labour Group** have set up a buddying system to give support to female candidates to help them through the process of becoming a councillor and in the first few years of office. Candidates are buddied up with a serving female councillor who can guide them and give them advice – once elected and once they have been in post for a few years, they are then able to become mentors themselves.

### **All Women Shortlists**

The LCF negotiated with the Regional Party to agree a policy that in the 2018 local elections, all seats currently held by women in **Islington Labour Group** would be AWS and the safest 4 wards where there was a vacant seat previously occupied by a man would become AWS. As a result, the majority of Islington's councillors are women, with 26 women to 21 men. In addition to the use of AWS, a number of the seats that were vacated by men saw women candidates standing in their place. Both **Medway** and **Ipswich Labour Groups** also uses AWS for council seats.

### **Women's fora**

To engage more women, **Ipswich Labour Party** has an active women's forum. The activities of the forum range from holding informal social events at local coffee shops, organising events and conversations with women councillors to help women party members understand what the role of a councillor involves, and encouraging more women to stand to be CLP and BLP officers. As a result, 14 out of the 17 women councillors on Ipswich Borough Council are Labour councillors. Other local parties, including **Lambeth**, hold women's fora at CLP levels to encourage more women in the Labour Party to become politically active locally.

### **Training sessions**

A number of Labour Groups and local parties hold training sessions for women thinking about standing and those who are already candidates. **Dartford Labour Party** held 'Be A Councillor' training aimed specifically at women thinking about standing. Every woman member in the borough was phoned ahead of the event, and a range of female speakers were invited to speak. The event was filmed for those unable to make it to the session. The session addressed the practicalities of how to get selected as a candidate and what being a candidate and councillor entails, but also dealt with the barriers faced by women entering politics and why we need more women in politics, particularly in local government. As a result of their work, 11 of their panel for the 2019 elections were women, and 10 were men. Feedback from the sessions said that having a network of strong women locally encouraged women to stand, and that having speakers talk about why we need more women to stand also helped. Other local parties, including **Tower Hamlets** and **Medway**, have also held Be A Councillor sessions aimed specifically at women, some in partnership with organisations such as Labour Women's Network and the LGA Labour Group.

### **Women only canvassing sessions**

After feedback that canvassing was seen as being quite male dominated and intimidating, several local Labour parties have started holding women only canvass sessions. These sessions can be for women candidates, to mark a particular event (e.g. International Women's Day) or with women politicians (e.g. the council leader if they are a woman, local women MPs or cabinet members who are women). They are often combined with an informal social event, such as a coffee, so that women are able to campaign in a safe environment, lead campaign sessions and get to know other women locally. **Lambeth**, **Croydon** and **Islington** have all used women only canvassing sessions during elections and by-elections. To become a councillor will require having campaigning experience, and these sessions give women another opportunity to get this experience.

### **Building the profile of women in politics**

**Lambeth Labour Group** have made a concerted effort to ensure that women councillors, whether they be backbenchers or in leadership roles, are put forward to sit on panels as speakers and chairs, and to speak at other events, both locally and nationally. This raises the profile of women's voices in community debates and within politics locally and nationally.

**Caerphilly Labour Party** holds regular events focusing on women's empowerment. Women members in Caerphilly and in neighbouring CLPs attended and event with women speakers who are in political and community roles so they could share their stories about how they got involved in politics and activism so they can encourage more women to do the same.

### **Women in the community**

Ahead of their all-out elections in 2019, **Medway Labour Group** reached out to women who were active in their communities but not Labour Party members to see if they would be interested in becoming a councillor for Labour. Several women expressed an interest which resulted in one, who has a long history of working with refugees in the local community, being elected in 2019.

### **Making the role of a councillor more accessible**

A number of councils are taking steps to make the role of a councillor more accessible for all. Fifteen councils have adopted the LGA Labour Group's parental leave policy giving councillors who become parents who serve on these councils more certainty about their rights when they become parents. Another six councils have existing parental leave arrangements, and an additional eight Labour Groups have adopted a parental leave policy for their Labour Groups. A number of councils are looking at how they can better support councillors who have caring responsibilities, including looking at the system of allowances.

Having these support mechanisms in place sends a message to councillors that this is a role open to everyone, not just a narrow subsection of society.

### **Conclusion**

We hope that these examples have been useful to you and that they will help you support more women into standing to be councillors. We want to keep updating this guide with examples of what Labour Groups and local parties are doing, so please get in touch with the LGA Labour Group if you'd like to share your experiences with us. To do this, or if you have any questions please email

[Hannah.lazell@local.gov.uk](mailto:Hannah.lazell@local.gov.uk)