

LGA Labour Group – Summary and key points from our submission to Democracy Review

The LGA Labour Group exists to provide a strong voice for Labour in local government, both within the cross-party LGA and within the wider Labour Party. We represent and support Labour councils and opposition Labour Groups in England and Wales, including political support, leadership training, and sector-led improvement. Our leadership, officers, and regional representatives are elected by Labour Groups on an annual basis.

The LGA Labour Group is delighted by the recent surge in membership of the Labour Party, and the opportunities that this brings. In responding to the Democracy Review we have considered how our party's rules and processes can be improved to assist councillors and Labour Groups to be effective in delivering for their communities, to be as open and accountable as possible, and to ensure that the role and importance of local government is properly understood and recognised.

This summary sets out our eight main areas of recommendation to the Democracy Review:

1) A stronger voice for local government

Local councils are responsible for spending £1 in every £4 of public expenditure in the UK, and Labour councils run services that support tens of millions of people. Labour councils and councillors are the beating heart of our communities, and are in an influential position to deliver Labour values.

But the importance of local government is severely undervalued within the Labour Party – with few places on key party structures reserved for councillors, despite contributing over £2 million annually to the party via the councillor levy, and much more through local donations. The time has come for the contribution of Labour councils and councillors to be recognised with a strong voice at every level of the Labour Party, including the NEC, Regional Boards, and the National Policy Forum.

2) Helping more members understand local government

Local government is a confusing jigsaw of different council types, electoral cycles, voting methods, and governance models. Local government funding is also complicated, with council tax making up less than a quarter of an average council's income. In the last eight years Labour councils have faced unprecedented funding cuts. As we welcome hundreds of thousands of new members to our party, and give them the opportunity to shape local policy development and hold their elected councillors to account, the Labour Party should do much more to help them understand the roles, responsibilities, and restrictions which Labour councillors have to grapple with.

Ensuring that all members have access to this information would help councillors, Labour Groups, local parties and local members come to a common understanding of the background against which lively debate (and disagreement) can be had in a comradely manner, and reduce the number of unwarranted attacks on the integrity of elected representatives.

3) Reforming and improving local government party structures

The introduction of LCFs has played a part in improving cross-constituency co-ordination in most areas. However we recognise that some members feel that the central focus of LCFs on candidate selection and campaigning has led to confusion over the appropriate forum for debate over local policy choices and scrutiny of Labour Group decision making.

We suggest LCFs are reformed and renamed 'Joint Local Government Committees', reflecting their primary responsibility for overseeing all issues related to local government, including member engagement with policy and manifesto development, and underlining the fact that membership is drawn from local members, trade unionists, and the relevant Labour Group. We would suggest that 40% of members should be CLP delegates, 20% trade union affiliates, and 40% should be elected by the Labour Group.

There should be no restriction on councillors standing for election as either CLP or trade union delegates to their LCF should they wish to do so. However we would recommend that councillors should not sit on selection panels or disciplinary hearings in their own local authority area to avoid conflicts of interest.

4) Developing accountability and transparency

We would strongly assert that Labour councillors are the most accountable elected politicians in the country. Most Labour Groups work hard to keep members informed through regular communication, but in some areas members feel their Labour Group is not sufficiently transparent. We suggest that existing rules could be amended to increase clarity for members and Groups about the regularity and type of reporting.

The new Joint Local Government Committee should be given overall responsibility for organising opportunities for party members and the local community to enter into dialogue on current local government policy issues and ideas for the Party's future programme and manifesto with the Labour Group. Coupled with the development of a party-wide political education programme about the roles, responsibility and funding of local government this would help create a more open and transparent member-led forum for discussion of local issues and policy direction. To ensure that the programme put forward is deliverable within the local government framework, the final decision on the content of the manifesto must remain with the Labour Group.

5) Respecting councillors as elected representatives

It is a vital and long-standing principle in the Labour Party that local Labour Groups are sovereign – that they alone have the responsibility to make local decisions on policy. This is vital to the independence of local government, is underpinned by the legal framework under which local government operates, and was recently reaffirmed and endorsed by the National Executive Committee. These key accountabilities and legal requirements extend to the importance of ensuring that individual Labour councillors and Labour Groups retain the right to elect their leaders, and to have the final say on manifestos. There are also a host of practical and organisational reasons which make the concept of 'directly-elected' leaders unworkable, and the existing rules that set out how Labour Groups elect their leadership should be retained.

6) Ensuring our councillors reflect our communities

A diverse Labour group, made up of people from all ages and backgrounds within the local community, and of councillors who bring different skills, perspectives, and experiences is better equipped to make the difficult decisions that face councils today. This is why it is so important that Labour continues to select and elect more women, BAME, disabled, LGBT and working class councillors. We would encourage the Labour Party to be more pro-active in collecting and sharing data related to selection of candidates, and election of councillors, so that local and national parties can monitor improvements and take appropriate positive action where necessary.

Local Campaign Forums that have been most successful in increasing the diversity of members have a commitment to identify, train, and support talented people interested in local government, have used all-women shortlists (AWS) and other ways of positively influencing selection outcomes. The Review should consider how this best practice can be rolled out to all local parties.

7) Labour Group rules that support modern working patterns

Being a councillor is a demanding and often thankless role, and the considerable demands that are placed on local councillors (including council meetings, casework, campaigning), combined with often archaic council working practices and unsocial hours, are significant reasons cited by councillors who choose not to seek re-election, and is a major contributory reason for the disappointingly low number of women and people with disabilities in senior leadership positions in local government. Councillor contracts are a fair and transparent way of ensuring that councillors meet their varied responsibilities, but adjustments can and should be made to take into account caring responsibilities or differing physical abilities. Labour Party rules should require all Labour Groups to include a statement promoting access and participation for all members, and should be required to adopt a parental leave policy. The Labour Party should agree to implementing all recommendations of the LGA Women's Taskforce when reported.

8) Candidate selection procedures

Candidate recruitment and selection is a difficult and time consuming process, and considering the thousands of Labour council candidates that are required to be interviewed and approved each year, it is unsurprising that are occasional claims made that decisions have been made on political grounds. But when investigated, there is rarely any supporting evidence to substantiate the claim.

Councillors already face an open selection every time they seek to be re-elected. Recent procedural guidance that has allowed branches to choose to follow a 'trigger' process, has helped reduce the number of meetings needed when there is majority support amongst local members, and there is no practical reason why it should be removed. Overall, the rules governing selections have proven to be fit for purpose when followed correctly. Problems with selection processes have only emerged where procedures have not been applied consistently, and in accordance with the rules. This is ultimately the responsibility of Regional Directors, and the Review should consider whether they are sufficiently resourced to be able to carry out this important task.