

TOWN HALL

Be a (Labour) Councillor:
**A guide for
disabled members
and local parties**

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Introduction



Councillor Louise Reece Jones, Co-Chair, Disability Labour

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this new guide for disabled members and local Labour Parties.

Five years ago when I first decided that becoming a councillor was something I really wanted to do, I had a long think about my disability and how it would affect me. I am deafened which means that I have good verbal communication but I have to lip read or use BSL so I can understand. I also have physical disabilities and I can't always go out campaigning because of the constant pain I experience.

I have watched how decisions in council affect people with disabilities, and, like many disabled members, I know I have much to contribute. Being disabled should not be a barrier, though we know that often it is.

I can't say it's been an easy ride, but with resilience and finding like-minded people I have been able to achieve my first goal of getting elected to Wirral Borough Council. I am now making a real difference to other people's lives, and as a role model I hope to support many more of you through to become great councillors and MPs.

There are many different organisations and people that can help you build up a friendship and support base. I am co-chair of the newly-formed Disability Labour, which is a fantastic source of support for all disabled members. I have to thank my union, Unite for all their help and support; I am a member of Unite's Disabled Members Committee and receive great backing from my local branch.

But you can also get help from a wide range of organisations; for instance I don't think I would be where I am today if it was not for the Labour Women's Network and the amazing training they gave me; this really set me out on the right path.

I want to see councils up and down the country become more representative of all the community and to do this we have to change the culture from within. This Handbook is there to help you to do that, and to help the Labour Party both locally and nationally to support you to succeed.

Good luck!

Louise Reecejones.

About the Guide

The Government Equalities Office grant-funded a piece of work for the Local Government Association and political groups to look at encouraging more people with disabilities to stand for election. This Guide has been produced by the Centre for Women & Democracy as part of that project.

Whilst it doesn't pretend to be a comprehensive handbook on local government, it does aim to help both disabled people and those running local parties, organising campaigning and events or thinking about making their meetings more accessible find out what they can do to help both themselves and other people.

The Guide is divided into three sections: Part One (Getting involved) contains advice and action points for disabled people thinking

about becoming more politically active or standing in local elections, Part Two outlines advice and action points for local activists and parties to help them make what they do accessible to everybody as well as do more to encourage disabled members to become active and stand, and Part Three lists useful organisations and websites.

In the course of writing this we have naturally drawn on earlier work, and particularly on guidance produced by both Disability Labour (the Labour Party's affiliate group for disabled members) and the Local Government Association. Thanks are also due to Councillor Reema Patel for assistance with the content.

We hope that you find this Guide useful.

March 2015



**POLLING
STATION**

Part One:

Getting Involved

WHAT DO LOCAL COUNCILLORS DO?

Councillors are elected by communities (organised into geographic areas called wards or divisions) to represent them and to run their local authority. Councillors are expected to be active in the life of their local community and act as the voice of their constituents, raising any local concerns with the local council on a range of matters related to the work of the council. This work includes raising income (mainly through the collection of the Council Tax, but also through commercial activity), service provision (e.g., child protection, social services, dustbin collection, highway maintenance) and representing the authority's interests at local and regional level. Councillors are often expected to work with politicians at a national

level and to feed back on issues of local importance which have national implications. Those elected to leadership roles in the council will also be expected to take the lead on strategy for the future of the local area (for example, regeneration and planning) and to articulate a vision for that local area.

There are several different types of authority – district, borough, unitary, county and metropolitan – and each type delivers a different combination of services. If you look at your own council's website you will see the range of services they cover.

In general, unitary local authorities (areas with only one council) will cover everything from waste disposal and management to planning for waste reduction and children's and adult social services.

In other local areas there are multiple tiers of local government (parish, district and county council) – where there is greater division of work across those local authorities and an expectation that councils will collaborate.

Each local authority is controlled by either the political party which has a majority of councillors (overall control) or if no one party has a majority there may be a coalition of parties or a minority administration. In authorities with a directly elected Mayor then overall control rests with them. For information about who controls your local council visit their website.

In addition to attending council meetings and holding surgeries for constituents, Labour councillors are expected to attend regular Labour Group meetings and to play a full part in the life of the Party locally.

ACTION POINT:

Go online and explore your local council's website. Find out what services they provide, who controls the Council and what their budgetary position looks like.

WHAT'S THE TIME COMMITMENT?

Being a Labour councillor is very rewarding, but it does also require time. You will need to balance your council and Labour Party commitments with your personal and professional life, and this can sometimes cause conflict. For this reason, you need to talk to the people around you before you stand and make sure that they understand (as far as possible) what you are intending to take on.

If you have caring responsibilities you will also need to think about how to manage those. That said, there are many people looking after children or dependent adult relatives who are also excellent local councillors, so do not be put off. Help and advice is often available.

ACTION POINT:

Make a list of all the things you currently do. Think about how you could manage your activities and commitments so as to add Council and political work. Is everything you do essential? Could you combine things? Who might help you with some of them? Research any disability specific support that may help.

WHAT'S INVOLVED IN CAMPAIGNING?

People in politics tend to talk as though tramping the streets knocking on doors is the only form of campaigning available or as if phone banking was the only accessible form of campaigning. This is not actually the case; there are many different campaign tasks all of which are of value, and many of which are essential. The best way to find out what works for you is to get involved with your local party, complete any training offered by the Labour Party regionally or nationally, and offer to help with whatever needs doing. It is also helpful to suggest alternative forms and ways of supporting, or to offer to organise sessions where they may not be available (for example, phone banking sessions for those in wheelchairs, and buddying on the doorstep for the visually-impaired).

ACTION POINT:

Make contact with your local Labour party or regional office and ask what you could help with. Offer to do specific tasks, or to help with the kind of work that meets your skills. Remember that you're a volunteer; if you don't feel comfortable with the job

you're asked to do just say no, explain why, and think about alternative forms of support that may achieve the same objective.

WHAT TRAINING DO I NEED?

It is important that councils have councillors who reflect and represent the communities they serve, but also have a broad range of skills and life experience.

You don't have to be highly educated or have a profession. Skills gained through raising a family, caring for a sick or disabled relative, volunteering or being active in faith or community groups can be just as valuable, and the experience of having a disability itself can profoundly shape an understanding of public services as well as instilling in those who are disabled a desire to achieve reform – vital to the work of a politician at a local level. Also, many local parties now organise training for people thinking of standing for election, as well as for candidates, and all councils provide training for both new and experienced councillors.

Although you don't need any particular training to stand for election, you do need to think

about what skills and attributes you have, and how they might help.

For instance, councillors are expected to be available – either at set times at surgeries and/or by email or phone - to enable constituents to come to them with problems. This means that councillors need to have good listening skills, the ability to represent someone, the ability to keep confidences, and to resolve conflict.

Generally speaking, you need to have at least some of the following skills:

- Communication
- Public speaking
- Negotiation
- Problem solving and analytical
- Team working
- Time management
- Community activity
- Political

Remember that knowledge and skills are not the same thing; it does not matter at this stage if you do not have a detailed working knowledge of how local government finance works, because your council will almost certainly make training on that available to you if you are elected. What does matter, however, is that you have a willingness to learn and an ability to bring together many of the different strands and demands that go to make up the annual budget process.

ACTION POINT:

Make a list of the skills (as opposed to knowledge) you think you have. Ask friends and relations what they think. Think about how all the things you do in different areas of your life have helped to develop the kinds of skills listed above. Be honest, but don't underplay yourself - most people have a much wider range of skills than they think they have.

HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE ABOUT A COUNCILLOR'S ROLE?

One of the best ways of doing this is to shadow – or spend a day with

- a current councillor. Some local authorities have formal shadowing schemes, and there are also organisations which run them from time to time. Shadowing schemes are useful because they enable you to get a more accurate picture of what someone's day is actually like, and thus helps you to decide if you can adapt your life to public office. Ask your local party or council if there's anything available, and keep an eye on websites such as Operation Black Vote (see list at end).

But you could also see what you can do for yourself; if you know a councillor ask him or her if you can shadow them for a day. Give them plenty of notice of when you would like to do it, and explain to them why it would be helpful. Many people would be very happy to help in this way, or, if they can't, to suggest to you other ways of achieving what you want.

Increasingly, many councillors, particularly councillors who balance their commitment alongside a full-time job, will work weekends and evenings, attending to duties outside the traditional work-week.

It may therefore, be helpful to suggest or arrange a series of separate shadowing sessions that are structured over a period of time (these may include observing a councillor's surgery, a ward or estate walk, a council meeting, a resident's forum or resident's association meeting or a Group meeting).

ACTION POINT:

Find out whether there are any shadowing schemes available locally; if not, think about approaching a councillor and asking if you can spend a day with them. Be clear about what you want out of it before you talk to them, and remember that there are some things you may not be able to be present for (e.g., a confidential meeting with a constituent, where the constituent does not give consent).

WHAT'S THE PANEL OF CANDIDATES, AND HOW DO I APPLY?

The Panel of Candidates is a list of people whom the Local Campaign Forum (LCF) believe reach the standard required to be candidates. Each local Labour Party branch

selects its candidates from this list, so getting onto it is the first step you need to take.

The process is straightforward; you fill in an application, and are then interviewed by three people, at least one of whom will be from a neighbouring Local Campaign Forum rather than your own. They will make a decision quite quickly, and if they decide not to put you onto the Panel you will have the right of appeal through your Labour Party Regional Office to the Regional Board.

Some Local Campaign Forums offer training sessions in advance of either the application or the interview stage, and in a few cases attending these is mandatory. You can find out what applies in your area by asking your branch secretary or contacting the LCF Secretary direct.

In local authority areas with elections every May the LCF will contact all members annually to invite them to apply for the Panel. This is usually in June or July, but may be later, depending on circumstances. As always, if you want to make sure you don't miss

deadlines ask someone what the timescale is likely to be. The application form will ask you about your knowledge of local government, the political situation in your area, and your campaigning experience. It will also ask you to agree to accept the Labour whip (i.e., to maintain collective responsibility and discipline if you're elected as a Councillor), as well various questions around probity issues (see below).

The interview will follow much the same lines, so be prepared to expand on whatever you have said in your written application rather than just repeat it.

Campaigning is a really important part of what the Party is looking for in its candidates, so if your experience in this has been limited you will need to explain why. Most Labour Party people are keen to be understanding and helpful, and also want to see as wide a diversity of people standing as possible, so don't feel that you have to gloss over this.

ACTION POINT:

Find out what the timetable for accepting applications for the

Panel of Candidates is in your area. Start making notes for your application form and identifying your strengths and weaknesses - for instance, if you don't know much about the challenges local government faces in your area do some research to find out.

HOW DO I BECOME A CANDIDATE?

Once you've been accepted onto the Panel of Candidates your name, contact details and statement will be circulated to all the branches in the area who are looking to select candidates for the next set of elections. In a number of cases branches will have existing councillors who are likely to be reselected, but others will be looking for new candidates.

You will need to think about whether or not you want to be selected for a winnable seat (one in which you can have a reasonable prospect of being elected) or a seat Labour is less likely to win, but which would give you good experience of being a candidate. Many people choose to do this first, especially in areas where there are annual elections,

but remember that every year candidates who didn't expect to get elected are, so be prepared!

Like the Panel application process, the selection process is straightforward. Branches meet and draw up a shortlist of people from the Panel of Candidates. Anyone shortlisted is then invited to a meeting at which they will be asked to make a short speech and answer questions from members. Members then choose their candidate by secret ballot and the result is announced straightaway.

Your speech is your opportunity to tell people about yourself, your achievements, and why you would be the best person to represent the Labour Party in that ward, so make sure that you prepare it thoroughly. Ask relatives and friends to help you with it - successful speeches are rarely solo efforts. You will have been told a time limit for the speech (usually five minutes, though it may sometimes be more) but you do not have to use up the whole time. Just make sure that what you do say counts!

ACTION POINT:

If you're not used to making speeches find someone who can help you to practice. Remember that you don't need to be an inspirational professional speaker, but you do need to be able to get your point across clearly and show people why you would be a good person to be their candidate or councillor. Think, too, about the kind of questions you might be asked; what are the important issues in the area, and what kind of challenges is the Council facing? You don't need to know all the answers, but you should be able to demonstrate that you understand the question, and that, on key issues, you have an opinion.

HOW DOES THE ELECTION WORK?

Unless you are a candidate in a by-election, the election will happen in May, usually on the first Thursday unless there is also a national election such as the European election, happening at the same time. Between your selection and election day you will be expected to lead campaigning and, in particular, to talk to voters. This can be done on the doorstep or by phone, and there

are various kinds of events you can hold as well as leaflets and letters you can distribute. You will have an agent (or campaign manager) chosen by you in consultation with branch members or alternatively, by the Labour Group, and that person should be responsible for organising the detail of the campaign. As polling day approaches things will get busier, and more will be expected of you, so remember to be proactive in making sure that you still have time for family and work.

If you are elected you will be expected to start pretty much immediately, so make sure in advance that people know this. If you need special adaptations or equipment raise this with the Council immediately and be clear about what will and will not be acceptable. Make sure that your Group Leader and Chief Whip know what will be necessary, and be polite but firm in insisting on getting the right levels of support. This may be easier in some local authorities than others, but should be possible in all.

ACTION POINT:

Get involved in an election and get a picture of what's involved.

Find out about elections that are in the news, and get a feel for the practicalities and points of interest.

COSTS, LEGAL ISSUES AND PROBITY

People talk about politics being an expensive business, and if you're standing for Parliament it can be. But getting selected and/or elected locally need not be, and usually isn't. There are no expenses or payments for being a candidate, but once elected councillors do receive allowances, which increase as the level of responsibility they assume increases.

If you think that you need extra financial support with being a candidate you might be eligible for a grant from the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund. This can help you to meet any additional support needs associated with your disability, and details of how to contact them are in the Useful Websites and Contacts section of this Guide.

There are some legal constraints on who can and can't be a local councillor. By and large these are fairly obvious, and most local

authorities publish them in the Elections section on their websites. In addition, the Labour Party has some requirements for candidates, but, again, these tend to be straightforward.

One of the things that everyone expects of public representatives (at every level) is that they are open and honest about their financial dealings. You will be asked to complete forms declaring your financial and property issues both when you are selected and elected, and the main thing to remember is: if in doubt, declare it. Both the Party (at the point of selection) and the Council (at the point of election) are able to advise you about this, so that, provided that you have been careful and honest, and don't try to conceal things, you should not find this process difficult.

ACTION POINT:

Check what the legal requirements for being a councillor are and that you meet them. Think about what interests you might need to declare and make a list of them; don't forget to include your home, particularly if you own it.

A man in a wheelchair is seated at a table in a meeting room. He is wearing a light-colored, patterned shirt and tan trousers. He is looking down at a yellow notebook on the table and writing with a red pen. Other people are visible in the background, but they are out of focus. The room has a white wall with some papers and a red string hanging from the top.

Local party organisations can do a great deal to support and encourage disabled people to play a full part in the life of the party and to stand for public office.

Part Two:

What Local Parties Can Do

Local party organisations can do a great deal to support and encourage disabled people to play a full part in the life of the Party and to stand for public office. This is not hard to do, but does require a little thought; getting into the habit of doing this will make both your meetings and your campaigning more open and welcoming, as well as broadening the range of people who can get involved in the Party's work.

WHAT DOES 'DISABILITY' MEAN?

People often talk about 'registered disabled', but in fact this is a misleading term, since although some categories of people may register for some services, there is no requirement for all disabled people to register as such.

The term 'disability' may actually cover a wide range of areas, but is defined in the Disability Discrimination Act of 2005 and the Equalities Act 2010 as 'someone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.'

A disability may be physical, such as hearing or visual impairments, speech impediments, or issues with mobility, but may also, as the definition says, be mental health problems such as depression or learning difficulties.

It is up to disabled members themselves to decide what challenges their disabilities present them with; other people should

beware of making judgements about what disabled people can or cannot do, or what they would want to do.

Most Party organisations and Labour Council Groups will have members who have a disability of one kind or another, and it is important to know what the legal obligations are as well as what can be done to make sure that all members have access to meetings, social events and campaigning.

A good first step is to have someone in your organisation whose responsibility it is to make sure both that disabled members are able to participate fully, and that your organisation is carrying out its responsibilities.

There is lots of advice available about how this should be done, so make full use of it. A good place to start is with advice produced by the Labour Party and Disability Labour, both of which are available through MembersNet.

ACTION POINTS:

Making Labour activism more accessible

- Accept people at their own valuation. Disabled people are not a homogeneous group, and vary widely in their attitude to their own disability as well as in their opinions. Don't make assumptions about what people think or need, or what they can or can't do. And remember that many people are likely to be members of more than one under-represented group; disabled people may also be women, members of BAME communities, lesbian, gay or transsexual, etc.
- Check with disabled members themselves what form of support they need. Don't try to second-guess this; however well-intentioned you are you are unlikely to make as good a job of assessing need as the disabled person him/herself.
- Only hold meetings in fully accessible venues. This may exclude places like the upstairs rooms of pubs, but as a general rule Party meetings should in any case never be held in places which members can't get to, or which might make them feel uncomfortable or excluded.

- If you're not sure what needs to be done, and you have no disabled members who could help you, ask someone else to help. Contact Disability Labour or a local organisation of disabled people, and remember that, even if you have no disabled members now, you should organise things so that anyone could take part at any time, rather than having to make special arrangements if a disabled person joins.
- If you have a disabled speaker, ask them what they need rather than waiting for them to tell you.
- Be honest about what you can and can't do. Ask for advice on how to meet people's access needs if you are unsure. If you are a councillor, make sure that both your Labour Group and your Council are doing everything they should be, especially in terms of the Council's legal responsibilities.
- Seek advice from national organisations like the UK DPC, DRC, RNIB and RNID. Their websites may be particularly helpful; see the 'Useful Websites' section of this Handbook. Some of these organisations also provide services for a small fee,

such as producing easy read or Braille versions of materials.

ACTION POINTS:

Encouraging disabled members to run for election

The most common reason people in under-represented groups give for not putting themselves forward for something is that nobody asked them. There is therefore a lot that can be done to encourage and support disabled members to stand for selection and election.

- If you are a councillor, offer the opportunity to shadow you for a day. This is one of the best ways of giving people a good picture of what a councillor does, the time commitment, and so on, and is also a good way of de-mystifying the job. You will need to think about access issues, and these are best discussed with the person shadowing you. You may also find it helpful in changing how you do things anyway; for instance, if you are holding surgeries in a building without disabled access, perhaps you should change the venue

permanently and not just for the day's shadowing.

- Offer to mentor someone. This can be as large or small a commitment as you and the mentee agree, but can be very rewarding on both sides. Make sure that you agree beforehand what you can and can't do, so that both of you have realistic expectations, and it's usually wise to put some kind of time limit on it (e.g., until after the elections), but it is well worth doing and often makes a great difference to people's confidence

and their ability to achieve their aspirations.

- Have good relationships with disabled groups in your ward or division and talent spot potential members or candidates. Invite good community activists to meetings or social events and work with them on specific projects. This will not only make a difference in local communities, but also enable you to get a much better understanding of both the challenges disabled people face and their achievements.



Have good relationships with disabled groups in your ward and talent spot potential members or candidates.

Part Three:

Useful Contacts and Websites

Local Government Association Labour Group

Local Government House
Smith Square
London
SW1P 3HZ

020 7664 3263
lgalabour.local.gov.uk

LABOUR PARTY:

Labour Party

The Labour Party
One Brewers Green
London
SW1H 0RH

0845 092 2299
www.labour.org.uk

Association of Labour Councillors

Contact councillors@labour.org.uk
for more information

Membersnet

members.labour.org.uk

Labour Party Regional Offices:

East Midlands

www.eastmidslabour.org.uk

Eastern

www.easternlabour.org

London

www.labourinlondon.org.uk

North

www.labournorth.com

North West

www.labournorthwest.org.uk

South East

www.labour-southeast.org.uk

South West

www.laboursouthwest.org.uk

West Midlands

www.westmidlandslabour.org.uk

Yorkshire & Humber

www.yorkshireandhumberlabour.org.uk

Disability Labour

www.disabilitylabour.org.uk

BAME Labour

www.bamelabour.org.uk

LGBT Labour

www.lgbtlabour.org.uk

Labour Women's Network

www.lwn.org.uk

Fabian Women's Network

fabianwomen.org.uk

CAMPAIGN & SUPPORT GROUPS

Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund

www.access-to-elected-office-fund.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss

www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Asian People's Disability Alliance

www.apda.org.uk

British Deaf Association

www.bda.org.uk

Centre for Accessible Environments

www.cae.org.uk

DIAL UK

[www.scope.org.uk/support/
disabled-people/local-advice](http://www.scope.org.uk/support/disabled-people/local-advice)

Disability Rights UK

www.disabilityrightsuk.org

Equality & Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Mencap

www.mencap.org.uk

National AIDS Trust

www.nat.org.uk

National Federation of the Blind

nfb.org

National League of the Blind and Disabled

www.community-tu.org

People First

peoplefirstltd.com

Regard

www.regard.co.uk

RNIB

www.rnib.org.uk

Spinal Injuries Association

www.spinal.co.uk

SCOPE

www.scope.org.uk

Terrence Higgins Trust

www.tht.org.uk

UK Disabled Peoples Council

www.ukdpc.net

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