

Political recruitment

How local parties recruit councillors

Paul Wheeler

This report looks at how the three main political parties in England currently select and recruit local councillors.

The three main political parties provide more than 95 per cent of all councillors, but, argues Paul Wheeler, they are failing to recruit from a broad cross section of society, affecting the ability of local councils to be representative of all their communities. This report examines how political parties select candidates, looks at how other areas of civic society identify local talent to serve in local governance roles and highlights examples of good practice in encouraging a wider range of the local population to become councillors. The author identifies barriers in attracting councillors of working age and recommends a five-point improvement plan that can assist political parties in broadening their recruitment practices.

At a time of considerable change for local government, this report will be of interest to those involved in political recruitment at both a national and local level.



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Foreword

In 1997, shortly after the landslide victory of New Labour, I was invited to speak at a conference for young politicians from South and Eastern Europe. Full of enthusiasm for the new politics, I explained to this audience of predominantly local politicians how it was possible to reach out from your core vote and build wider alliances for electoral success. It went down well with all the audience except one who became increasingly agitated during my presentation. When question time came he was the first to contribute. Politics wasn't about building alliances or even electoral success. For him it was much more simple – it was defending 'his people from the Serbs'.

It made me realise that politics means many things to many people. For those who believe that politics is war by another means or a passionate pursuit of ideology above all else this short document is not for them.

Between 1999 and 2004 I was employed by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to introduce a comprehensive range of member development programmes suitable for all councils and councillors. It was an ambitious project and as part of this I was able to visit over 150 councils and meet many hundreds of councillors. The experience I gained from this huge work programme has influenced this current study by providing me with detailed knowledge and understanding of the councillor role.

I have my own passions – that local politics is fundamentally different from national politics and that local councillors can more easily tap into the growing awareness of civic pride and belief in the possibility of local solutions than their national counterparts. Above all else, I believe that local democracy has a great future as well as a great past and that it can become more aware and inclusive of local talent.

Local councillors are the unsung heroes of the political process. By and large they are a secular lot but if they wanted a patron saint I would suggest the 'Good Samaritan'. Not only did he stop to help but he had the means to do something about the situation as well.

I wish local councillors well for the future, both those who currently serve and the future ones we can and should attract.

Paul Wheeler, Director of the Political Skills Forum

Executive summary

Local democracy, or the combination of local political intelligence provided by elected councillors and high-quality service delivery provided by professional managers, is one of the most effective forms of local governance.

The three main political parties in England provide over 95 per cent of all councillors. At a local level the parties jealously guard their independence and powers of selection from outside influence, including their own national parties.

This project aims to persuade political parties to take the issue of local councillor selection more seriously, and to provide examples of local initiative by political parties and effective examples of 'talent scouting' by other organisations that recruit 'civic governors', such as health and housing trusts.

The project will focus exclusively on possible improvements to the recruitment and selection of councillors but also acknowledges that other factors, such as the existing powers and funding arrangements of local councils, may well influence the willingness of many to become councillors.

The existing selection processes of all the main parties are similar in that they operate a 'closed selection' with a preference for existing active members. The system does have merits, as it focuses on the party connection of local councillors, encourages complex leadership rather than simple advocacy and has provided a number of excellent political leaders.

However, the existing selection systems fail to provide a diversity of candidates with a severe bias towards white, middle-aged, male candidates. There are also related problems with the reputation and visibility of local politics. As the exclusive source of candidates, political parties, with declining and ageing memberships and limited resources, cannot provide a range of candidates, offer effective role models or effectively challenge the performance of existing councillors.

Political experience in other parts of Europe indicates similar problems but with a much greater willingness to challenge them. More political parties operate voluntary quotas and in a number of countries there are also statutory quotas for all parties. In France the introduction of statutory quotas in 2001 increased the number of women councillors from 25 to 47.5 per cent in one election.

In England the recruitment of civic governors has also addressed the issue of diversity more positively. A number of organisations have run imaginative targeted campaigns to increase the number of people under 40, women and those from ethnic minorities. These organisations are more willing to positively profile the role of their civic governors and provide clear descriptions of the work and time involved.

If the political parties are willing to change, there is a five-point plan that can assist them to attract a wider group of active citizens willing to be councillors and also to more effectively promote and define councillor roles.

- 1 *Open recruitment* for candidates going beyond the activist member base and looking at both 'talent spotting' and direct advertising. The opportunity for 'political group reviews' to bring advice and guidance to the party selection process in each locality and to examine the support that local authorities can offer to elected councillors. Open recruitment will lead to consequential changes to the screening process for all existing candidates and a clearer definition of the time required to be an effective member, and will provide 'performance pressure' on existing councillors.
- 2 *Party selection*: a willingness to consider changes to the present selection rules, at both councillor selection and nominations to executive positions, to ensure that selection is based on merit and that small and possibly unrepresentative groups do not dominate selection meetings. A willingness by political parties to consider voluntary changes to their selection processes to improve diversity of the councillor population.
- 3 *'Roles and responsibilities' – selling and defining the role more effectively*: the need to define more clearly the role of councillors at a non-executive and executive level, and the skills needed to perform these roles effectively. Such definition will allow the councillor roles to be better promoted. The political parties can learn from other sectors in positive promotion of the governance role and help sell the role as 'political entrepreneurs' – activists who, with the support of their parties, can work as informed advocates for their local community and effectively support and challenge a range of local agencies.
- 4 *'Restoring civic pride'*: a recognition that local democracy is a combination of political and civic leadership. This provides a challenge for councillors to work with a wider range of local interests and to champion the citizen over the provider. It also offers leaders the opportunity to provide effective and visible leadership for a range of local public sector agencies.

- 5 *Improving the supply of candidates of working age:* discussion with business organisations and government to provide more support for candidates of working age. Draw on the experience of the Industry and Parliament Trust and trade unions in encouraging more MPs of working age. Emphasise the skills and experience gained from the role so that being a councillor becomes a 'career enabler'.

While there are several reasons why political parties will not properly define the role of councillors and advertise more widely, the consequences are damaging to local democracy. There is no self-correcting mechanism in the current party selection process. At a time of competing claims for community leadership and the need to build greater social cohesion, local government may not be able to make the best case for greater devolution of powers and funding if its councillor population continues to be drawn from a narrowing section of society.

Political parties bring many advantages to local government. If they are willing to respond to the need to be fully reflective of their local communities in the recruitment and selection process and change the perception of the role of a local councillor, they can gain access to a much greater source of local talent and provide reassurance to central government and local partners in any bid for increased powers and funding.

1 Introduction and overview

All politics is local.

(Tip O'Neill, Former Speaker of US House of Representatives)

For those looking for an academic review of the selection of councillors by political parties this isn't it. By way of assistance, if that's what you want, type in 'local political parties and their selection of local councillors' into Google and you get 48,000 listings.

My ambition is slightly more down to earth. I want to help the political parties help themselves and build a wider platform of activity and inclusion for local politics. In its own way it's an ambitious project and not a short-term one.

To an extent the profile of local councillors and our main political parties are interrelated. Both suffer from a poor image and reputation, and both are failing to recruit from a wider cross-section of the population.

Of course this is part of a much wider problem for all 'civic society'. The rate of fall in membership for the Anglican Church is greater than that for political parties and the Blood Transfusion Service frequently has problems in attracting enough blood donors.

It is in this context that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has commissioned me to look at the current recruitment practices of political parties for their local council candidates. Specifically:

- how political parties currently select candidates to be local councillors
- the emerging practice in other areas of civic society in identifying local talent to serve in local governance roles
- examples of good practice in encouraging a wider range of the local population to become local councillors.

My work starts from the premise that local democracy has a great future. The combination of local political intelligence provided by elected councillors and high-level service delivery provided by professional managers is increasingly seen as one of the most effective forms of local governance. If we can properly promote the

benefits of the local councillor role we can enthuse existing councillors and attract a new generation to this public service.

However I also approach this project with a necessary degree of caution. Political parties are voluntary organisations and are, at a local level, managed by volunteers who jealously guard their independence and powers of selection from any outside influence, including their own national parties. We also have to accept that some existing councillors do not acknowledge that they have a 'problem' (see case study 3). If we want to see real change at a local level then we have to be very mindful of this independence.

What is also interesting is that the selection process for local councillor candidates is rarely if ever mentioned in all the debate on local government modernisation and reform. Again this may be down to an understandable reluctance for local and central government and their agencies to become involved in or comment on local politics. It is also true that, for the national offices of the main parties, the recruitment and development of local councillors is not seen as a major priority and is always subsumed to the greater prize of general election victory.

However, the end result is that the principal recruitment process for local councillors is ignored, underfunded and left to local discretion to deal with the urgent issues of attracting members of talent and ambition and ensuring that councillors are representative of their local communities.

I have three ambitions for this project.

- 1 Influence national party organisations to take the issue of recruitment and selection of local councillors more seriously and, where appropriate, to consider rule changes for adoption by local parties.
- 2 Point to examples of initiatives by local party organisations that have led to a more inclusive group of candidates being offered for election and, subsequently, supported by both the political party and local authority.
- 3 Provide examples of 'talent scouting' by other organisations, such as magistrates and housing associations, which can be used by political parties and local authorities to make a case for appropriate funding and support for the recruitment and development of local councillors.

Having outlined what the project is, it is also probably useful to outline what it isn't. The project will not comment on:

- existing powers and funding arrangements for local councils
- political structures of local councils and the ongoing debate on directly elected mayors
- the current voting system in local government, although noting the introduction of a PR voting system for local elections in Scotland in 2007
- present levels of councillor remuneration and desirability of full-time councillors
- total number of local councillors
- existing range of elected positions and desirability of direct elections for school boards and other positions
- current regulation of member behaviour and conduct.

This is not to say that any of these are not important issues. Indeed, any discussion will often cite one or more of these as reasons why people are unwilling to become councillors. This may certainly be true but those who care about the continuing health of local democracy also need to focus on ‘supply-side’ issues. I do accept these issues are intimately connected. However, if in the first instance political parties cannot attract new and more diverse talent into the role of local councillors, they will not be able to provide the necessary confidence to local partners and central government that local democracy has the people with the skills, contacts and knowledge to undertake new roles and responsibilities, and to merit higher levels of support and remuneration.

One definitional clarification – the study refers to ‘political parties’. In England over 95 per cent of all councillors are representatives of the three main political parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats). This is not to underestimate the role that new and smaller parties can contribute to local democracy, in particular attracting new talent into local government. The Independent Group at the Local Government Association (LGA) represents the variety of smaller parties and independents. While naturally focusing on the three main parties, given their overwhelming presence, I also acknowledge and welcome the contribution that other parties, committed to the Nolan principles of open government, can make to healthy local democracy.

2 The current selection process

Existing selection processes

All three main parties have formal processes for the selection of local councillor candidates. Each party operates a similar system of 'closed selections'. The essential principles are as follows.

- *A preference for applicants to be existing members of the party:* the Labour Party tends to be the most stringent in this respect. Until recently the one-year membership rule was strictly applied for potential councillors. There is now discretion for this membership rule to be waived in exceptional circumstances. Both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives are more flexible, although it is evident that in areas of high demand (e.g. the Liberal Democrat Group in Manchester) some kind of membership rule is applied.
- *Approval for group list or panel:* all parties operate a system of approval by a party executive or local government panel. This is partly to ensure that candidates meet the legal qualifications to be councillors and also to satisfy some party criteria.

Again the Labour Party tends to be the most specific.

Case study 1 Model selection process for Labour Party for local government candidates

Setting the assessment criteria

There are two types of criteria – essential and desirable.

- Ideally, in order to carry out the role properly, a nominee must meet all the agreed essential criteria. Normally, only if they meet all the essential criteria should s/he be recommended by endorsement by the Local Government Committee.
- Desirable criteria are good extras – useful to have but not essential.

Continued

Essential criteria

1 *Legal and Labour Party qualifications*

- Be qualified and not disqualified to stand for election to office.
- Be willing to abide by the Labour Party rules, group standing orders, the national code of local government conduct and the Nolan Principles in Public Life.
- Agree, if elected, to join the Labour Group on the council, become a member of the Association of Labour Councillors and pay party membership by direct debit at the standard rate.
- Be willing to declare all personal and pecuniary interests, and complete the declaration of interests forms and keep them up to date.
- Be willing to have his/her financial and other relationships with the local authority scrutinised.

2 *Commitment to the Labour Party*

- Membership of the Labour Party for at least one year (may be waived in exceptional circumstances).
- A track record of involvement in party activities on a regular basis, including campaigning, membership recruitment and retention, policy discussions and fundraising.
- Observance of party rules and discipline and a commitment to conduct him/herself at the highest standards in public life.
- Knowledge and experience.
- Knowledge of local authority area and the issues that matter to residents and other stakeholders.
- Awareness of local government issues and priorities.
- Understanding of Labour Party policy on local government.
- Experience outside the Labour Party, e.g. household or caring responsibilities, voluntary sector experience, work with residents and tenants' groups, youth work, community work, parent–teacher association, school governing body, charity work, involvement in a faith community.

Continued overleaf

- Understanding and commitment to the principle of equal opportunities, with involvement in initiatives and campaigns promoting equality of opportunity.

3 *Skills*

- Communication skills – able to communicate clearly both verbally and in writing, to demonstrate an ability to read and critically appraise a written report, to compose and write letters, and to use the telephone and email in representing constituents.
- Community and leadership skills – able to work with and motivate others including officers of the authority, members of your branch Labour Party, and local residents and community groups.
- Interpersonal skills – able to listen, communicate and relate well to others and to demonstrate an ability to work with a wide variety of individuals and groups of individuals.
- Representative and problem-solving skills – able to represent others and to construct and present a case effectively.
- Decision-making skills – able to demonstrate decision-making skills.
- Time management skills – able to make the necessary time commitment and to manage and prioritise time to handle casework and attend meetings within both the authority and the community.
- Confidence of the party – be someone in whom the party can have confidence in being seen as a representative of the party.

Desirable criteria

- Communication skills – confidence in public speaking or a willingness to learn.
- Knowledge of information technology or a willingness to learn.
- Media experience and awareness or a willingness to learn.
- Recognition of the importance of development and training of elected members and a commitment to undertake it, especially when elected to office in the group or on the council.

Source: Labour Party (2004).

Selection of candidates

All parties have a selection system by party members. Both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties prefer selection by the smallest party unit (the relevant branch or ward where the candidate is likely to stand). The Conservative Party allows the greatest discretion in the selection system of council candidates.

Case study 2 Model selection process for Conservative Party

Selection of local government candidates

In the selection of local government candidates the Executive Committee shall either:

- maintain an approved list of potential candidates for local government candidates and submit suitable names to branches for selection by the branches whereupon the branch may proceed to adopt one or more of the candidates or
- allocate candidates to fight particular wards or divisions or
- allow branches to select the candidates of their choice but shall approve such selection. Thereafter, the general meeting of the branch shall adopt the candidate.

Source: Conservative Party Constitution 2004, section 15.

Selection of existing councillors

Both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives expect sitting candidates to go through a selection process with other candidates. With Labour the rules are more permissive and existing councillors are not subject to automatic reselection. They are usually only referred for selection where there are concerns regarding performance and behaviour.

Scope for innovation within existing selection system

While not a consistent feature of the present selection system, there are examples of innovation within all parties when it comes to recruiting candidates from a wider cross-section.

Political recruitment

The Conservative Party in Ealing advertised for candidates for the local elections in May 2006. The initiative allowed them to recruit from supporters as well as members. According to Cllr Jason Stacey, Conservative Group Leader (and subsequent leader of the Council), the process has ensured that they were able to identify a group of working-age supporters who were willing to become councillors and had not been known to the local party.

For the Labour Party in Lambeth the problem was a different one. In a borough of large minority ethnic communities with a tradition of supporting Labour they had very few councillors from these communities. One of the existing councillors, Jackie Meldrum, has worked within the wider party membership (approximately 2,000 across the borough) to identify a group of members from black and ethnic minorities who were interested in becoming council candidates but who were not necessarily attending local ward meetings. For the last two years this group has had a range of briefings and development opportunities, and has maintained a membership of approximately 15 potential candidates. Critically the support continued during the oncoming selection process (October to December 2006).

Of all the main parties the Liberal Democrats are seen to have the greatest tendency towards recruiting from outside their traditional party membership. Certainly the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC) publishes a range of publications to encourage its local parties to seek potential candidates from a wider cross-section and become more active 'talent scouts'.

Manchester Liberal Democrats have a long-standing policy to recruit from across the City's diverse population and in particular have a significant number of members under 40. In Islington there is also an active recruitment process led by the Leader, Cllr Steve Hitchins, to identify potential Liberal Democrat councillors from across the community and positively target and support candidates from under-represented groups.

Do we have a problem?

'If it isn't broke don't fix it' or this is as good as it gets

It is important to recognise that the view that local politics is in a poor state is a contested one. While many external commentators have reflected on the poor state of local democracy, there may be an alternative view.

Over the last 40 years the number of uncontested elections has fallen, which on one level may indicate a growing competition for the role of local councillor. Additionally, in terms of overall numbers, the representatives from the three main parties continue to dominate the council chambers with over 90 per cent of all councillors. Where attempts have been made to introduce new choices to the electorate, such as Robert Kilroy-Silk's Veritas party at the 2005 General Election, the electorate have generally rejected them.

Furthermore, as the recent comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) inspection process by the Audit Commission has indicated, local politics provides for excellent political leaders in areas as diverse as Manchester, Westminster, Gateshead, Blackburn, Kent, Norfolk and Kirklees.

There is also the related view of many existing councillors that the present system works so why change it (see case study 3).

Case study 3 Willing to contribute

If you have a full-time job and a family you are hardly likely to wish to spend 3 nights a week on council business. My husband and I are both councillors and until recently self-employed. But many self-employed people are paid on an hourly rate, so if we are not working there is an opportunity cost associated with council work that can never be compensated for financially.

We are councillors because we believe that we have a lot to contribute.

What is wrong with councillors being older? Many of them have children and grandchildren and a wealth of business and life experience that younger people do not have. As long as we are ready and willing to contribute, and still have something to offer then we should forget all this rubbish about age, colour creed and sex – let's just pick the best from those who are willing to make the sacrifice and get on with the job in hand.

(Letter in *First* – a Local Government Association magazine for councillors)

Party matters

While it is true that independents can bring a welcome local perspective to local government, it is also important to recognise the value of local party politics. When they work well local parties bring:

- informed choice for the electorate
- internal discipline and leadership
- an arena to develop political skills and leadership
- the ability to bring excluded groups into local democracy
- a ladder of opportunity to allow those without power or influence to improve their communities.

All of the models of local government in Europe that work well rely on the existence of local parties (nearly always linked to national organisations) to provide the electorate with a range of capable candidates and informed policy.

‘Things can only get better’ – a moderniser’s view

While there are undoubted strengths to our present system of local politics, any realistic advocates of local democracy also have to recognise its limitations. The first step to any form of recovery is to accept that there is a problem to be solved.

‘Government for the people, by the people’ – the diversity question

The question that is most difficult for the existing selection system to answer is its continuing inability to select from a representative section of the community.

All forms of democracy have an understandable preference for experience as reflected by age. However our current party selection system has an overwhelming bias towards both age and gender. This is partly a reflection of the current party membership of the three main parties and a profile of their activists (who currently are those most favoured to become council candidates).

The latest Census (EO and IDeA, 2005) indicates the scale of the bias (see Table 1).

One statistic perhaps more starkly than most sums up the problem for the existing councillor population. Forty-five per cent of the total population is under 45 yet only 13 per cent of councillors. The danger for local democracy is that the councillor population is not only unrepresentative but also becoming more so over time.

Table 1 Census of Councillors

Councillors	1997	2004	Overall Census
Male (%)	72.1	70.3	48.0
Average age	55.4	57.8	
Proportion under 45 (%)	18.4	13.1	45.0
From ethnic minorities (%)	3.4	3.5	8.5
One or more caring responsibilities (%)	34.2	25.0	
In full-time paid employment (%)	30.2	24.7	40.0
Retired (%)	34.1	38.7	22.5

Source: EO and IDeA (2005).

Moreover there is no self-correcting mechanism within the existing system to provide confidence in significant change in the near future.

As the councillor population becomes less representative, it is difficult for other groups to break through and stay. As an example, nearly all county councils now have meetings during the day, which places severe difficulties for those of working age to serve as county councillors (it may well be no coincidence that the average age of county councillors is 62). Daytime meetings are not an integral part of local government. As an example, a change of control in the Isle of Wight in May 2005 saw an instruction that all meetings should as far as possible begin after 5.00 p.m., which indicates that change is possible.

The need and benefits of a diverse councillor population may be an issue for debate. However, at a time when the issue of alienation of significant groups from the democratic process is frequently discussed, it is instructive to know that the three million citizens from black and minority ethnic communities have just 674 councillors to represent them and in a diverse area such as Kirklees there is just one woman councillor from the large Muslim population of 45,000.

As well as the possible benefits in having a diverse councillor population to represent all sections of the community, there is also the related issue that other parts of civic society are making strenuous efforts to attract under-represented groups. This will be examined in more detail in Chapter 3.

In terms of the overall reputation of local government with central government and partners, the present position in local politics is difficult to justify. Where there is competition for new roles and resources, those civic organisations that can show greater diversity and contacts with all communities are likely to have significant advantages with central government and with the wider media and public over those who cannot demonstrate similar inclusion and diversity.

Case study 4 The three Rs

The three Rs can best describe the world of the elected councillor – rich, retired and redundant. Last month I attended a meeting of my local council and I was really surprised at the number of wealthy elderly gentlemen.

There were only two councillors under the age of 45 and just one woman. Regrettable, it might be felt, for a council whose responsibilities include play centres, toy libraries, nursery schools and parent and toddler groups.

I am a 27-year-old professional. Can someone tell where is the incentive to stand for local election when the present councillors are so reluctant to stand down and make way for new blood?

(Letter in *First* – a Local Government Association magazine for councillors)

Electoral mandate

While it is true that the number of uncontested elections has fallen and the representation by the three main parties has increased, electoral turnout rarely exceeded 40 per cent across all local elections for the period 1960–2000 (LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, 2001).

While the reasons for this weak electoral support may be varied, it does undermine the wider case for local democracy against the nominated state.

Reputation and visibility of the local councillor role

Recent MORI surveys have indicated that over 90 per cent of the electorate cannot name any of their local councillors and, in the case of its survey in Birmingham, over 40 per cent had no idea what councillors actually did.

A group of active citizens who were surveyed by MORI for the LGA gave the following reasons for not standing as councillors:

- time pressures

- a lack of awareness of the council's procedures, sometimes leading to marginalisation

- feelings of frustration and powerlessness within the political structures
- the observed need to conform to party policy on all issues
- the culture of backbiting and nastiness inherent within councils
- lack of good role models
- negative image of local government.
(LGA, 2001).

While these are probably not new issues, what is evident is that there has been little sustained effort to remedy them. *In particular, there has never been any serious attempt to quantify the amount of time needed to satisfactorily perform the role of councillor.* Most surveys merely ask councillors to record how they are spending their time rather than whether they feel their time is being used effectively. In terms of public service, the local councillor role is unique in that, for most, there are potentially three demands on their time – from their electorate, their party and their council. All can provide huge time demands in their own right. The latest *National Census of Local Authority Councillors* (EO and IDeA, 2005) indicated that the average member spends 21.5 hours per week. However, what is lacking is any template to measure this against and specifically to differentiate between the executive and non-executive roles of councillors. This issue will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4, but it is a critical area to address if we want to see more councillors from the working population.

Succession planning

Politics is a competitive sport and it is always difficult to predict or prepare for political change. However, as identified by Charlie Leadbeater (2003), the vast majority of existing council leaders are in their fifties or sixties, and equally clearly there is little thought on who could succeed them from within their own parties. Given the overall age profile of councillors, it is potentially a serious issue and one that the existing party and group selection process does not seriously address.

Local government at all levels is a 'people business' and its future success in both performance and public perception will depend on its ability to attract candidates of ambition and talent to senior management and political roles. For political parties, it is interesting to look at the record of successful organisations in other parts of the public and private sector. As an example, KPMG has for many years had a Director of Diversity at partner level. Put simply, political parties need to attract members of talent and ambition from all sections of society to fulfil their potential at local level.

The party problem – transparency of selection process

In 2001 the Local Government Association commissioned BMRB International to provide qualitative data of the experience of current and former councillors within under-represented groups on their experience of the party selection process (LGA, 2001).

What was interesting about these interviews was how the selection process itself was seen as a barrier:

If you don't have support from your local branch ... if you haven't got your big teams out, showing the colour, knocking the doors, you don't stand a chance.

(Female councillor)

I found that there was a terrible problem for selection. As soon as you are Asian, then you were an immigrant, no matter when you came.

(Focus group participant)

People who had 30–35 years' service don't like being challenged.

(Young councillor)

Most respondents from these groups (which as women, people under 40 and those from ethnic minorities represent the vast majority of the population) felt that a major need was for people like them to be encouraged to stand for selection in the first place. Where support had been given *at this early stage*, participants felt that the selection process had been straightforward and easy.

The inconsistencies in the way people were selected (from being 'approached' to 'self-selection') and the general confusion about the role, and the skills and attributes required suggest that more could be done to make the selection process open and transparent, and the actual requirements of the councillor role more clearly stated.

Despite the undoubted benefits of the party system, local parties find themselves in a double bind. Based on my own personal experience of providing member development in over 150 councils between 1999 and 2005, they are failing to recruit a more diverse section of the local community while at the same time retaining some councillors who are not able to adapt to the changing councillor role. There is a clutch of councillors in every party who have lost interest in the role and are instinctively hostile to any new initiative – from use of the internet to different forms of service delivery. Harmless in themselves, they allow the enemies of local democracy to portray them as typical.

Even where councillors or party officials want to improve their range of candidates they face two major problems.

- 1 *Membership*: while it is important not to exaggerate the decline in party membership in comparison to other civic organisations, it is equally important to recognise its consequences in terms of the available pool of candidates and also the diversity of the 'selectorate'. The Labour Party's membership has effectively halved since 1997 to 200,000 and, while not declining, the Liberal Democrat Party membership has remained consistent at approximately 100,000. While the Conservative Party remains the largest political party in terms of membership, it is noteworthy that 198 of their constituency parties have fewer than 100 members and over 200 have no discernible sign of electoral activity (Conservative Party, 2005). As with councillors, the party membership of most parties is overwhelmingly white, male and middle-aged, with a noticeable tendency to select in their own image.
- 2 *Influence within party*: if political parties had a Cinderella service then the selection and support of local councillors would certainly be a strong contender. This is partly because of the 'Londoncentric' nature of the main political parties and also because of the overwhelming desire to focus money and staff on the General Election and success in parliamentary elections. While the Liberal Democrats may be an honourable exception with the free-standing nature of the Association of Liberal Democrats based in West Yorkshire, there is little evidence that the role and purpose of local councillors feature prominently in party policy development or support for diversity programmes or succession.

Even where political parties wish to improve their councillor selection process, the sheer scale of the task often defeats them. With over 21,000 councillors in over 7,000 electoral wards, the current level of resources and staff available mean it is often impossible to provide anything more than a 'care and maintenance' service to party groups. Inevitably this often means concentrating on the 'political' rather than on the 'civic leadership' role of councillors.

3 Is there an alternative?

Recruitment and selection in other civic governor roles and the experience overseas?

The problems regarding lack of diversity, and in particular the lack of involvement in civic life by those under 40, are common in all forms of civic governance, both here and in most of Europe. What is different is the willingness of political parties elsewhere to respond positively to these issues.

Political recruitment of councillors – the overseas experience

Politics is a function of many social and economic factors in different countries. However what is evident is that the issue of diversity is addressed more positively through a combination of party initiative and legislative change.

In general, Scandinavia and North West Europe have higher levels of participation, with Sweden having the highest number of female local representatives with 43 per cent. This is clearly linked to a willingness within political parties to seek equality of representatives. In Germany all political parties have adopted a voluntary quota to ensure fairer representation at local and national level – SPD 40 per cent, PSD 50 per cent, CDU 33 per cent and Greens 50 per cent (Council of Europe, 2005).

Elsewhere, other European countries have adopted national quotas to ensure fairer representation. The 1994 Equality Act in Finland states that neither gender may hold less than 40 per cent of seats on any public body including municipal government. On a greater scale the French Parliament passed the Parity Act, which required all political parties to nominate equal numbers of men and women as prospective councillors for all towns with a population above 3,500. In one election (2001), the proportion of women councillors rose from 25 to 47.5 per cent.

Legislative quotas are not restricted to Europe. In 2001 President Pervez Musharraf, despite objections from a range of religious parties, introduced a policy to reserve one-third of all council places for women as part of an overall programme to inject 'enlightened moderation' into Pakistani politics.

What is clear is that there is a more positive story to tell about local politics, as the remarkable story about Louise Gadd, Mayor of Aarhus, indicates. Louise Gadd was elected as Mayor of Aarhus, the second city of Denmark, in her late twenties. She now leads a 31-strong council and is in charge of a budget of £2.2 billion. Among her achievements is a positive role model, which has encouraged more people of working age to become councillors in all parties (IDeA, 2004a).

The recruitment of civic governors in England

Councillors are usually not plucked from thin air. As well as being party members they generally have a record of community activity of interest. Recent research by the Office of Public Management (OPM) for the IPPR indicated that there are approximately one million 'active citizens' who perform some kind of civic duty or interest (IPPR, 2004).

Both political parties and other forms of local civic government need to recruit from this existing pool of 'active citizens' as well as develop new active and engaged citizens. However the biggest difference is that most forms of civic governance are regarded as a 'public good'. As such they benefit from wider public approval and also an ability to access public funding on a significant scale.

This general perception may actually add to the problem of political parties in recruiting more widely. The Home Office announced 2005 as the 'Year of the Volunteer' and established a whole variety of initiatives to encourage people to contribute 'a billion minutes of voluntary time'. The website maintained by Time Bank (yearofthevolunteer.org.uk) even indicates a range of activities including politics. However its definition does not include political parties but single-issue campaigns by Greenpeace and Amnesty International.

The elements of recruitment and development for civic governors have some similarities but also critical differences with political recruitment.

Open advertisement

Perhaps the biggest single difference between civic and political recruitment is that nearly all forms of civic governance openly advertise for vacancies. This is certainly true for all appointments conducted by the Public Appointments Commission and increasingly evident for members of housing associations and Local Strategic Partnerships.

Political recruitment

Some of these campaigns can be extremely imaginative, as with the recent recruitment campaign for local magistrates (see www.magistrates.gov.uk).

In another instance Huddersfield Civic Pride assisted the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in recruiting community members of the LSP in 2001. The process, which involved local advertisements in the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, attracted an overwhelming response with over 1,000 enquiries.

As well as open recruitment there is also an emphasis on targeted recruitment to ensure greater diversity of representation. The Department of Constitutional Affairs has worked with Operation Black Vote as part of a £2 million recruitment campaign specifically designed to widen the current intake of local magistrates.

Sometimes targeted recruitment is an overt part of the recruitment. The NHS Appointments Commission was established in 2001 with responsibility for over 4,000 appointments on Health Trusts and Primary Care Trusts and set specific targets for the recruitment of these appointments. The result over four years (2001–04) has been impressive:

- 50 per cent of all appointments women
- 40 per cent of chairs women
- 12.3 per cent of appointments from ethnic minorities
- 3 per cent of appointments disabled people
(NHS Appointments Commission, 2005).

As part of the emerging changes in the roles of charities, the National Council of Voluntary Services has established an online trustee bank, which, among other services, lists brokerage agencies and professional bodies that can match charities with trustees. Examples include Bar in the Community, the minority ethnic group CEMVO and the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators. It is common for charities to employ consultants to identify skills gaps on the board and conduct formal or informal 'executive search' for suitable trustees.

Description and definition of the role

Another clear difference between political and other forms of civic governance is that there is ample information provided on both the nature of the role and the skills

needed. This even applies to activities that are shared with elected councillors. The role of non-executive member of the Newham ALMO (broadly equivalent to an elected member role on the board) was openly advertised with a range of information about the role and also a 'skills analysis' of what was needed for the role and a request for evidence from the applicant.

Case study 5 Newham Homes – application for board membership

The Board needs to ensure that collectively its members have the skills necessary for it to manage the organisation. Please indicate your own assessment skills and experience against each of the headings below by ticking the appropriate box and complete the evidence/comments section.

We are particularly looking for people with the following skills and experience: Audit and Accounts, Public Relations, Property Maintenance, Housing Law, Housing Management, and Risk Management. If you have limited experience in other areas specified (Knowledge of Local Authority Housing and General Business and Management) then training will be provided.

Level of Skills and Experience

Good A	Reasonable B	Some C	Little/None D
Good		Understand the area well having had personal experience of it, up to date on current issues and developments and able to take the lead in any discussion on the area	
Reasonable		Understand the area and able to contribute to discussions with knowledgeable observations and questions	
Some		Understand generally the area and able to contribute to discussions with common sense and observations and questions	
Little/None		Unfamiliar with the area and able to contribute to discussions with clarification	

Source: Recruitment to Newham Homes Board, July 2005, Newham Council.

With such clear definitions, there is a greater willingness among those who volunteer, and are successful, for civic governor roles to accept that there is a job to be learnt and skills to be acquired to do the job well.

Critically for many of the target audience, there is a clear definition of the likely time involved. Indeed in the case of magistrates, as part of the campaign to widen access, it was explicitly recognised that the time commitment would have to be reviewed. This review saw a consequent reduction in the minimum number of sittings on the bench from 30 to 15 a year, which made the prospect of magistrates of working age coming forward much more realistic.

Nationally, charities have recently (September 2005) launched a campaign to boost the recruitment of younger and minority ethnic trustees after years of relying on support from an almost exclusively white and ageing population.

There are currently 900,000 people running the 190,000 charities regulated by the Charity Commission. Half of them report difficulties in recruiting new trustees and research indicates that only 15 per cent are under 40, and 5 per cent are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Get on Board Campaign (getonboard.org.uk) is part of a well-funded appeal offering those interested a range of choices on how to become involved and providing location-specific information.

Critically part of its appeal is the claim that time spent as a charity trustee will not only make a contribution to the community they serve but also help them gain new skills and improve their own career prospects. It cites a survey by Reed Executive commissioned by the charity Turning Point in September 2005 that almost 75 per cent of employers would choose a candidate with voluntary experience rather than one without.

Screening

Most of the civic governor vacancies at a strategic level (health, housing and criminal justice) have a clear recruitment policy, usually involving a written application, initial screening based on essential criteria and an interview. As a consequence, screening of potential applicants can be operated in a consistent and transparent manner, often with feedback on how a candidate performed for use in subsequent applications.

The charity Turning Point, as part of a wider review of its corporate governance role in 2003, recruited for its board of ten trustees through a range of national and specialist publications. It received more than 250 requests for applications and 37 completed applications. As part of this process an independent review panel held interviews with all the existing board as well as new applicants – only two of the board were reappointed.

An explicit part of the new process was to build a board who could work together and not just recruit a set of talented individuals.

Term limits and performance appraisal

Most of the vacancies within the Public Appointments Commission are for clearly defined terms (usually between three and five years). Reappointment is on a number of criteria but one of the most important considerations is on the performance and contribution of the individual as defined by the Chairman and Chief Executive.

While magistrates are appointed for longer periods there is one important restriction. All magistrates have to 'retire' from service at 70.

Civic and political appointments systems – which is best?

There are a number of clear benefits to the emerging good practice in the appointment and development of civic governors. The process is open and transparent to the potential applicant, with a clear definition of the role involved, skills needed and likely time commitments. As considerable attention is paid to the formal and informal screening process, it is likely there will be a threshold of ability, knowledge and experience that will make the role of governance more achievable.

While both civic and political governance suffer from a lack of diversity, it is particularly striking that there is a *much clearer recognition of the problem within the civic governance role and a willingness to do something about it.*

However it is important not to overstate the benefits. In 2002, the Office of Public Management conducted a major survey of non-executive members of a number of public bodies in health and housing (Steele and Parston, 2003). What was evident from the study was a shared frustration with the role of the non-executive, particularly in terms of influencing decisions and gaining appropriate information from the professional managers who worked in the organisations. The critical question raised is around the 'mandate' of the appointed civic governors and in difficult times whose interests they are seen to be representing.

Indeed there have been several documented cases, of which Homes for People Housing Association was the largest, where difficult questions from non-executive members resulted not in answers but in removal from the board as evidenced by the

Political recruitment

treatment of David Brindle, Editor of *Guardian Society* and former non-executive member of Homes for People.

The answer is that the civic and political governors perform different roles. The former have a specific remit to work for a particular organisation or interest, and the latter have a more demanding role, balancing competing demands on resources and often making difficult decisions, which have to be justified locally. However both forms of governors are recruited from the same pool of active citizens in each locality. It is in the recruitment and selection process that political parties have much to learn.

4 A route map for change – ‘the five-point plan’

‘Something must be done’

My own personal experience and the recent Census of Councillors (EO and IDeA, 2005) indicate the existing system of recruitment and development by political parties is failing to provide the electorate, local government and the wider world with a consistent set of councillors of ambition and talent who represent all sections of the local community. In a Keynesian sense (and with apologies to non-economists) we have a market (for councillors) that is operating at a suboptimal level with no automatic ability to self-correct.

It is precisely because local democracy is so important that the political parties have to live up to their responsibilities and reform their approach to recruitment and selection. There are several reasons to do this.

When the public and private sectors are spending a large amount of money and resources on identifying recruitment policies to attract a diverse workforce, political parties can ill afford to lose out on the talent and knowledge of similar groups currently under-represented in local politics. The present composition of local councillor groups presents a ‘hostage to fortune’ for those who prefer central direction and government appointment of civic governors and also for those who think there are simply too many councillors.

Above all else, political parties at the local level must recognise that they have to justify their position as virtual monopoly suppliers of local councillors if local democracy is to gain wider support for greater powers and responsibilities and councillors legitimate acceptance as ‘community leaders’.

However those who want to see change have to accept that political parties are voluntary organisations. While there are options for legislative change, all options rely on encouraging volunteers to change their behaviour in the way they select and support candidates. Change may ultimately have to be enforced but it also needs to be explained and justified if it is to be really sustainable.

Point 1: open recruitment

If there is one change that could fundamentally affect the profile of the existing councillor population it is willingness for political parties to consider more inclusive and open recruitment to the local councillor role. Open recruitment can be defined in a number of ways:

- provide information to a wider group of members or supporters on the selection process for local councillors
- provide support and advice to all those interested in the role
- willingness to explain and justify local party values and discipline
- transparent selection process based on agreed skills for role.

In terms of the process open recruitment can be seen in two related ways.

First, *talent scouting/executive search*, where local parties are encouraged to actively seek potential candidates from within their membership and supporters in a systematic manner rather than waiting for volunteers to come to them. Many local parties already undertake this work but it is neither systematic nor well resourced, often depending on enthusiastic councillors who may well have other responsibilities. Clearly such work can be linked to finding and supporting more council candidates from under-represented groups. It allows party groups to work with 'brokerage agencies' in a similar fashion to charities that can undertake this work for them. The Conservatives have used access to the MOSAIC group classification to identify likely councillors for further targeting.

In order to make this a more systematic process for local authorities this could be promoted as a 'political group review', which could assess the current selection processes of all party groups and, through the deployment of experienced party peers and other independent experts, offer advice and guidance on how to improve this process locally and how the local authority could promote and support the role of local councillors.

Second, *direct advertising*. As the title implies, this would be open advertisements in local newspapers to identify potential councillors from a wider population. As indicated earlier, this has already been tried by a small number of local political groups and also used extensively by a range of civic organisations with positive results. High-quality copy and supporting material, possibly linked to editorial support

from local newspapers and other media, could significantly increase response rates and provide each party with a range of interested applicants.

Needless to say there are reservations within political parties about open recruitment. Often these revolve around concerns about whether open recruits will understand party values or accept party discipline. However the selection process will remain with the local party membership and these views can be tested as part of the overall selection process.

What may well happen is that some of the existing party values and discipline may need a clearer justification in respect of the local councillor role. What perhaps we should increasingly be asking for is a willingness to work in a local team and learn common local values. A wider selection process may well differentiate local and national politics and recruitment policies. We can also overestimate the political passions of existing councillors. According to the latest Census of Councillors (EO and IDeA, 2005), less than half of those surveyed became councillors for political reasons. More common were a desire to serve the community and local issues.

Some of the reservations about open recruitment are also linked to the wish to protect existing councillors from more effective competition in terms of candidate selection. Such concern is often couched around the electoral support for existing councillors and the potential for defections and independent candidates. Such concerns are understandable in a political context but also overestimate individual support and avoid any wider responsibility for diversity and a search for talent.

However, to avoid open rebellion, it may well be desirable in the first instance to work with those local parties who are willing to improve and be challenged. The lessons learnt from such pilots may have implications for party rules on both recruitment and selection (see next chapter).

We should not underestimate the benefits of moving to a more open form of recruitment. It increases the available pool of talent for the councillor role from the current combined membership of just 500,000 to a much wider group of supporters and voters. Some beneficial changes from a larger pool of candidates may include:

- the opportunity for more systematic screening and filtering of potential candidates
- a clear review of time needed to undertake the councillor role
- performance pressure on existing councillors.

More effective screening

A greater number of applicants will increase the pressure on what is already an insecure screening process. Most parties and local authorities apply only the basic investigation of an individual's qualification to be a councillor. If we desire to increase the quality of councillors we do need to provide a more systematic check. This can be achieved in two ways.

First, *individual declarations*. With nearly all appointments to public boards, candidates are asked to declare 'other relevant information'. This includes convictions not yet spent in accordance with the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, disqualifications from acting as a company director or in the management of a company and the general question 'any other information which you would consider relevant to your assessment of your suitability as a public appointee, for example business interests or personal relationships which may lead to an allegation of conflict of interest'.

Parties should be willing to make amendments to their candidate applications to provide such information.

Second, *national screening*. Councillors occupy positions of trust. Parties and the wider community need to know that trust is justified. We should expect prospective councillors to be screened in the same way that prospective teachers are screened by the Criminal Reference Bureau. To ensure consistency, we should consider vesting this responsibility with the relevant local authority as part of the pre-nomination process.

As well as these individual screenings, local party groups need to be given assistance in the more general screening process for suitability as a council candidate prior to any formal selection process. This can involve briefings on the role of councillors and their understanding of 'team work'.

'Member time'

Perhaps the biggest single reason why many people are reluctant to become councillors is that no one is willing to quantify the time needed to be a councillor.

Partly this is because it's a difficult question to answer in any general way:

You could spend your whole waking life on council work, but most people have jobs, families, homes and other interests which place a limit on the amount of time they have to spare ...

The answer to the question ‘how much time and when’ is different from every councillor, depending on your type of area and how big a team you have, whether you are Leader or a humble backbencher in opposition and how much time you want to spend on it.

(ALDC, 2002)

However, it also derives from a view within local authorities and political groups that member time is a free resource and also limitless. As such there is often no realistic analysis about whether the existing demands on member time are necessary or effective.

The latest Census of Councillors (EO and IDeA, 2005) indicated that the average time per week spent on council and political business was 21.5 hours. However 42 per cent of councillors spent 15 hours or less, whereas 9 per cent did 40 or more hours.

What perhaps needs to be more explicit is the difference in commitment depending on role. For the 10 per cent of councillors in executive positions there is clearly a major commitment, which in the larger authorities may extend to near full time (and almost certainly for the leader role). However, for the 90 per cent in non-executive roles, it is perfectly possible to combine the role with a home and work life, and we need to be more positive about providing some baselines about what an average councillor should commit in each authority.

While such baselines may well vary, these would be achievable in every authority if local parties and councils worked from a basis of, first, what is available and, then, what they needed from non-executive councillors. It would provide for a rigorous assessment of the current methods of political and council decision making. Many authorities and parties have simply not recognised the existence of the modern age in terms of new technology and the ability for telephone and video conferencing. We need much more imagination in the ways that the member role is performed and supported. Other areas of civic life have shown that often doing less but doing it more effectively can achieve more.

A professional review of member time in a political and council context should hopefully allow the majority of members to focus on their community leadership and local role – a desire that has existed since well before the Local Government Act 2000 (see Young and Rao, 1994).

Performance pressure on existing councillors

Often councillors and local parties claim they have little choice but to reselect councillors because of the absence of any alternatives. While this may be currently true, it does mean that it is difficult to make demands on existing councillors in terms of performance. Legislation is extremely permissive in that the basic requirement is one council meeting every six months. One council leader admitted that she could move on poor performers only when an influx of new candidates gave local parties a choice that had previously not existed.

Performance measures do exist in several councils and local parties. Tameside expects every councillor to produce a monthly report on what they have achieved, which is published on the council website. Manchester has a service-level agreement with every councillor, with results published monthly. An increased level of interest in the councillor role will allow all parties to use this information as part of their selection process.

Point 2: the party rule book

As indicated earlier, all the main political parties have remarkably similar provisions in their rule books in relation to council selection processes. A willingness to change the current rules of selection needs to be part of any major review of the selection process for local councillors. Too often an impression is created that party processes are immutable.

Most parties prefer selections to be made on an individual ward basis to maintain a link between the council candidate and electoral ward. However, at a time of declining membership, this often means that decisions on candidates can be made by very small numbers of active members. It can, and does, result in 'family selections', where members of the same family can control the selection process, or in undue influence by external organisations.

If we are to attract new talent into the role of councillor then parties will have to be willing to review their selection processes and challenge some of the very local vested interests.

On another level, parties have to reconsider how members are nominated and elected to council executives. There is at present no quality control or vetting of these applications, which now attract substantial special responsibility payments in most authorities. At the most basic level, potential candidates could be asked to

submit an application of what they wanted to achieve, which could then be used to review their progress.

Each party quite rightly will want to approach this in different ways but it has to have serious consideration. There are some encouraging signs that parties are willing to do this. All mayoral candidates are selected on a borough wide (or in the case of London city wide) basis and usually by postal ballot. The Labour Party in Newham conducted its selection process for the 2006 elections on a borough wide rather than an individual ward basis and the Conservatives have put up for active consideration a ‘primary form’ of selection for candidates.

Where there is greater reluctance is in providing national quotas/guidelines to ensure greater diversity of candidates. Many political parties throughout Europe have opted for quotas of both national and local selections. This has not been the case in England with only the Labour Party committed to this route (at least a third of all council candidates have to be women).

The wider public has a right to expect political parties to review their selection processes, to challenge local vested interests and bring in new talent. This could be combined with national change, such as bringing in the same maximum age at which councillors could serve as local magistrates (70).

Point 3: ‘roles and responsibilities’ – promoting and defining the councillor role

Being a councillor is one of the most complex forms of community leadership. At its best it’s one of the most demanding but worthwhile forms of public service, with a need to balance competing community and political interests and the ability to significantly improve local services and the well-being of large numbers of people. Yet we simply fail to sell or define the role effectively.

A number of councils have done an excellent job in profiling the role of councillors. These include the following.

- Stroud District Council has done an excellent job over a number of years in holding open days for all interested candidates and producing a video for those who want further information.
- Bristol Council in co-operation with Operation Black Vote has operated a shadow scheme for interested candidates from ethnic minorities.

- Camden Council produces excellent briefing material and holds open evenings for interested candidates.

However these councils are very much the exception. Perhaps understandably, there is reluctance for most councils to become involved in what is seen as a 'political process'.

This has to be compared to the recruitment process for other civic governors. The Department of Constitutional Affairs has sponsored a £2 million publicity campaign incorporating high-quality advertising, targeted campaigning involving effective role models and excellent briefing material including a DVD on the role of local magistrates.

An earlier career in Unilever taught me that no one buys a product that many criticise and few understand. We need a high-profile 'mission to inform' about the role and potential of councillors. There are hundreds of hard-working and successful councillors, and we need to ensure that these positive role models get the profile they deserve. We should also publicise that there are different roles and levels of commitment for councillors.

If we are to restore the reputation of local councillors and attract even the initial interest of talented individuals, the advocates of local democracy, endorsed by the LGA, need to think of promoting this high-profile campaign.

Similarly it is important to articulate more clearly the role of councillors and the skills needed to be effective. From time to time, individual councils introduce 'member competencies' or job descriptions in an effort to fill the gap. However these are often not sustainable, as they fail to recognise the political environment that councillors also operate in. Any discussion on the skills required has to take account of the need for political values and intelligence for it to be relevant to existing and potential councillors. Wisdom is just as valuable as knowledge.

However the lack of any kind of national template means that often the role can be framed to suit the incumbent or the lazy to the disadvantage of new talent.

The issue is particularly relevant to those councillors who serve on the executive and the council leader role. Increasingly, these executive roles are attracting high special responsibility allowances and often become full-time positions. Yet, in all too many councils, they are decided on the basis of special favours within a political group or by local or party tickets. While always accepting that 'politics is different', it is my personal view there should still be the possibility of some rational criteria for party groups to nominate and select for executive positions and senior scrutiny roles.

Steve Bundred (2004), Chief Executive of the Audit Commission, wrote an interesting essay focused on the political roles needed for a modern councillor. These roles included

- settling conflicts
- acquiring legitimacy
- building community capacity
- upholding non-governmental organisations
- prevention rather than cure
- negotiating the funding maze
- structural change.

While these role definitions may have greater relevance to councillors in executive roles, they also apply more generally to all councillors. In particular it is only councillors of all civic governors who can aspire to settle local conflicts about resource allocation of public funds and resources. The voluntary sector has had considerable success in promoting the concept of ‘social entrepreneurs’ to bring in a new generation of community activists. We need to be equally ambitious for the role of councillor and promote the idea of ‘political entrepreneurs’ – activists who, with the support of their parties, can work as informed advocates for their local community and effectively support and challenge a range of local agencies.

One example of defining political skills is the work undertaken for the Work Psychology Partnership for the ODPM and IDeA. This study (IDeA, 2004b) resulted in the identification of nine skill sets for the role of councillor and three additional skill sets for the executive and leadership role. In particular this political skills framework explicitly recognises the value of political skills and understanding.

With goodwill from the main political parties, such role definitions and skills frameworks could be used as part of a national template for the councillor role, which could then be adapted for specific local circumstances, both at entry level as a new councillor and for those who want to progress to senior executive positions. It would then be able to help provide an answer to the increasingly asked question – ‘what does a councillor do and what skills are needed to do it well?’

Point 4: restoring 'civic pride'

Dr Tristram Hunt (2004) in his fascinating book *Building Jerusalem* showed quite clearly how 'civic pride' was a strong motivating influence for becoming involved in public affairs in the Victorian era. It was also a period characterised by 'muscular municipalism' with a strong reforming zeal and provision of basic services such as gas and water.

While politics is essential to local democracy, it is also indisputable that it is not viewed with interest or favour by a large part of the electorate. It is also in danger of becoming a 'bland product' with little opportunity for difference or variation depending on local circumstances.

To gain a wider interest in the councillor role it is therefore vital to reassert the civic leadership and public service aspect of the role.

Mathew Taylor (currently senior policy adviser at 10 Downing Street) wrote in his book *In Defence of Councillors* of the need to take account of the wider community responsibilities of councillors.

He suggested an oath (along the lines of the oath sworn by newly qualified doctors), which would address the issues of representation, leadership and responsibility:

As a servant of the people I pledge to represent all my constituents and to put their interests first. I hold this duty to all my constituents. I pledge to consider all issues and cases brought to me on their merits regardless of the status and opinions of the constituent or constituents that approach me.

As an elected politician I will judge which causes and complaints I deem to be legitimate or important and will be accountable through the ballot box for these judgements. I will act according to the highest standards of probity in carrying out my various duties as a representative of the community. I also accept the responsibility not only to be available to represent my constituents but to seek the opinions and interests of those who may not have the resources or knowledge to approach me.

(Wheeler and Taylor, 2003, p. 45)

This could form part of a 'swearing in' ceremony of local councillors after each election that would reflect their wider community and civic responsibilities.

A greater emphasis on ‘civic pride’ presents both challenges and opportunities for existing councillors at non-executive and executive level.

The challenge for the non-executive councillor comes from recognising the need to create new alliances and coalitions of support for local democracy. Too often local councillors are seen as part of the problem rather than champions of citizen rights and access to good services. As the range of service providers becomes more complicated, local councillors can develop their role to represent the electorate to a wider range of providers. This role can be exemplified by allowing local councillors specific access to meetings and information from these providers, even to the extent of providing a ‘councillors’ warrant card’ to guarantee access.

The opportunity for the executive councillor, and especially the leader, comes from the emerging trends towards local partnerships of public services recognised in delivery terms through Local Area Agreements and organisationally through Local Strategic Partnerships. If these arrangements are to succeed they will need effective and visible local leadership. The elected leaders of local councils can provide this visible leadership, especially if they are designated as such by the local partners and central government.

One aspect above all else puts local leaders in a strong position. The provision of local services is likely to see massive changes in the next few years with the need to realise the efficiency savings envisaged by the ‘Gershon Review’. One possible way to do this is for the Local Strategic Partnership to explore the opportunity for ‘horizontal integration’ of back-office services and combined targets for service provision. The ability to pool funds across institutional boundaries, jointly commission services, dispose of surplus assets and lever in more funds from other sources at a local level needs a local mandate and leadership to overcome vested interests in all organisations.

Moreover, visible and effective local leadership can begin to influence social behaviour and the community response to social issues according to an electoral mandate. Already there are distinctive differences in localities over the implementation and operation of Anti Social Behavioural Orders (ASBOs) between cities like Liverpool and Manchester.

Point 5: ‘improving the supply side’ – attracting more recruits of working age

If we want more councillors of working age we need to change the attitudes of employers large and small to those wanting to take up public service. For a number

of years the IDeA promoted a Good Employers Award and it is amazing the levels of support that good employers are willing to give to those members of their staff who want to be local councillors. However this has to become more widely entrenched and imaginative. Some companies will offer four-year secondments for staff becoming MPs. Why not the same for council leaders?

Trade unions have for many decades supported their members who wanted to become MPs and councillors (albeit only for one party) and, where they had representation rights, often ensured additional support above the statutory minimum for all those who wanted to undertake public service. The Industry and Parliament Trust (ipt.org.uk) promotes the idea that parliament benefits when those with business experience become MPs.

We need to apply the same logic to councillors, and especially those willing to be executive members, and offer the opportunity for secondments and combined business and local political careers. The precedent already exists with the Territorial Army where employees are entitled to 29 days' paid leave and it is recognised by most employers as a 'career enhancer' for those who participate.

The Government will have an opportunity to comment directly on the encouragement of those of working age to serve as councillors. Last year it announced a review of the restrictions on political service on employees in local government (generally known as 'the Widdecombe restrictions'). The announcement of the findings of the review will allow the Government to make a more general statement on the role of local councillors and the value of those of working age being able to serve in this role.

A wider issue is the perception that active involvement as a local councillor is a detriment to an individual's career progression. There is no doubt this is part of a wider public disdain of politics and is also linked to lagged perceptions of the councillor role from the 1980s. However any objective analysis of the councillor role, especially at an executive level, would indicate a demanding and challenging role, which would inform many management and professional careers. In a similar way to charities we need to work with industry organisations such as the CBI, TUC and Industry and Parliament Trust to move the perception of the councillor role from being a 'career destroyer' to a 'career enhancer' for those of working age.

5 Conclusion

There is no place in the Government more laborious, more anxious, more thankless, more cloaked with petty and even squalid detail, more full of hopeless and insoluble difficulties.

(Winston Churchill on being offered the Local Government Board in 1906)

If there is a serious criticism about some of the suggestions contained in this study then a naive view that politics is a rational and objective pursuit is one that can be levelled. After 30 years involved in politics at local and national level I would prefer to be called an optimist.

The proposed improvement plan provides a real opportunity for political parties, local government and other advocates of local government to work together, both to support existing councillors and to attract a future generation of councillors and leaders.

However I do accept that there are major challenges contained in the 'improvement plan for local politics'. There are dozens of reasons for political parties at local and national level to carry on and indulge in the petty politics so notably characterised by Winston Churchill in 1906. The danger is that they will be painting themselves into a corner where the enemies of local democracy will be able to focus on the failings and create an impression that the role of local elected councillors is one that has a great past but not much future.

Yet, if local democracy is characterised by any quality, it is its ability to respond to adverse events and provide creative solutions. There is also an emerging opportunity where an imaginative response could win over many new allies and advocates. There is a growing disillusionment with 'big government' and the centralised direction of our major services. There is a real opportunity to create a modern-day equivalent of the 'gas and water municipalism' of the early twentieth century. Surely it is worth political parties sponsoring a range of new methods of recruitment and selection in a number of local authority areas over the next year to assess the potential for change.

Commentators – as diverse as Simon Jenkins, Alan Pike, Max Hastings, Jackie Ashley, Paul Ormerod and Tristram Hunt – have correctly interpreted the public desire for something different and more locally responsive and accountable. Moreover such local solutions could actually lead to a greater diversity of public service delivery and

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improved public support for these vital public services. Central governments of all political persuasions need to see local democracy as part of the solution to the need to create popular government and popular politics.

For this to happen the recruitment and selection of councillors – the front line of local democracy – has to change and become more inclusive and attractive to a much wider group of the population. To attract more local talent, win the perceptions war and gain a wider group of local and national advocates, local politics has to become a game for all the family.

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Appendix: List of individuals and organisations consulted

John Annette – Professor of Community Leadership, Birkbeck College

Cllr Simon Ashley – Leader of Liberal Democrats, Manchester

Mike Bennett – Assistant Director General, SOLACE

Cllr Paul Bettison – Leader, Bracknell Forest

Judi Billing – IDeA and Leadership Academy

Steve Bundred – Chief Executive, Audit Commission

David Clarke – Director General, SOLACE

Liz Cross – Executive Director, Harvest Housing Group

Christina Dyke – Former Director of Selections, Conservative Party

Margaret Eaton – Leader of Conservative Councillors Network

Ceri Edwards – Head of Communications, ALG

Colin Everett – Welsh Local Government Association

David French – Chief Executive, Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Tracey Gardiner – Local Government Information Unit

David Gardner – KPMG

Sue Goss – Director, OPM

Julie Grimble – LGA Labour Group

Cllr Malcolm Grimston – Executive Member, Wandsworth

Bridget Harris – LGA Liberal Democrats Group

Martin Horton – Director, IDeA

Cllr Richard Kemp – Leader of Liberal Democrats, LGA

Howard Knight – Former councillor and Head of Labour Local Government Unit

Cllr Chloe Lambert – Leader of Independent Group

Cllr Aston McGregor – Tower Hamlets

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Cllr Jackie Meldrum – Lambeth

Sanjay Mistry – Operation Black Vote

Oona Muirhead – Director, LGA

Margaret Mythen – Director, New Health Network

Rachel O'Brien – Director, IPPR

Paul Ogden – LGA Independent Group

Ben Page – MORI

Anna Randle – New Local Government Network

Cllr Selma Rashid – London Borough of Hackney

Nick Raynsford, MP

Ann Reader – Head of Local Government Labour Party

Cllr Jane Roberts – Leader, Camden

Cllr Bryony Rudkin – Former Leader of Suffolk County Council

Jo Simpson – Director, Local Government Leadership Centre

Jason Stacey – LGA Conservative Group

Cllr Howard Sykes – Chief Executive, Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors

John Williams – Adviser, CBI

Sam Younger – Chairman, Electoral Commission