

Finding the X factor: the premier guide to recruiting local government talent in your area



Now more than ever, rebuilding public confidence in politics requires raising the game of politics locally.

Local government is only ever as vibrant, effective and relevant as the people elected to run it. That is why investing energy in recruiting talented and diverse candidates is such a vital task. To get councils that are genuinely representative of and connected to their local communities requires casting the net much wider than just choosing candidates from a small number of committed activists.

If you ask people how they got involved in politics they usually give one of two answers; either it was through a local campaign around something important to them, for example a school, sports facilities, street-lighting or anti social behaviour, and politics provided a way for them to address this concern.

Or, they got involved because somebody asked them.

We are aiming to encourage anybody involved in recruitment to modernise this ask, a powerful, but often underrated tool. Since 2008, the 'Be a Councillor' campaign – encouraging people to stand as a local councillor – has resulted in hundreds of new candidates for London's 2010 local elections – and has been rolled out and led by the parties nationwide throughout 2009. The Leadership Centre is publishing this guide to recruitment in your area to complement this initiative and offer practical advice to refresh and strengthen the approach to recruitment of councillors across the country.

Message to leaders and selectors

Over the next few years local government has to face up to a very real challenge: how to make sure it connects to the aspirations and needs of its citizens, especially critical in such a harsh financial climate.

To meet this challenge, one of the things local authorities must do is to ensure they each represent their place. This is not just a case of encouraging more diversity – although harnessing the talents of the young, professionals, women and people from ethnic communities will certainly make councils more vibrant.

We also want to have the best quality councillors. We need different kinds of people willing to put themselves up for election, so that parties get a choice of quality candidates to select from.

To do that, parties have to go out and find new talent: people who are ordinary enough to be representative, but extraordinary enough to be representatives. It's time to get rid of the 'buggins' turn' mentality of councillor selection, where candidates are chosen from within a small number of committed activists.

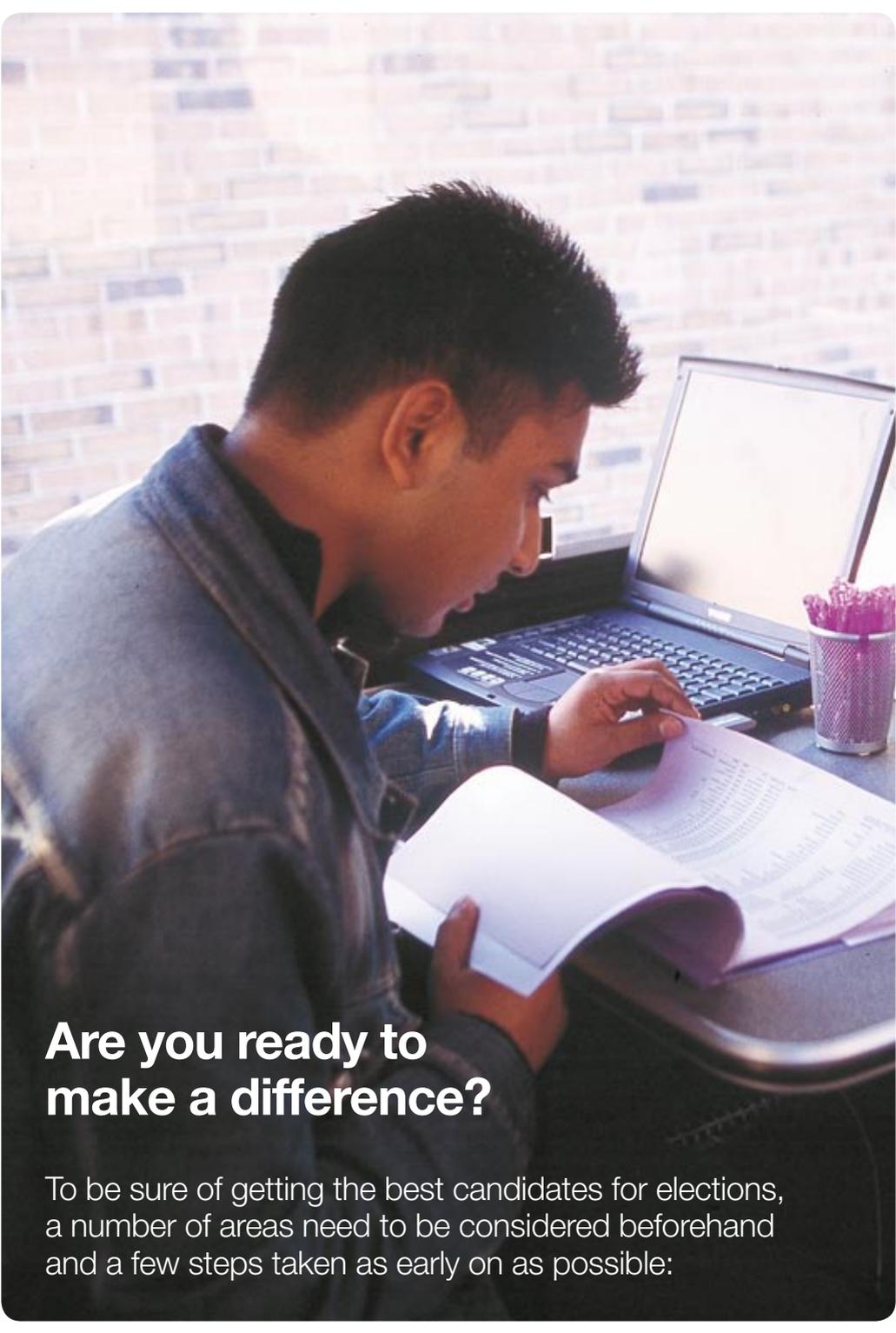
Political parties should be more entrepreneurial in the way they approach councillor recruitment. As in industry, to get the right people, leaders and parties need to do more talent-spotting and to get those involved in selection to think more creatively about how to widen the talent pool.

Parties will have to get out in the world, keeping eyes open for committed, enthusiastic people willing to do their bit for their communities. This isn't the way many parties usually approach the issue, and there will have to be a change of culture, for selectors to think outside their usual circles and for political parties to become more outward-looking in the way they approach councillor recruitment.

In the end, it is the electorate who is in control – but we can make sure that the quality and diversity of all candidates means that whoever is elected will be effective representatives for their localities.

This publication outlines how we can achieve this, how talent can be found, and who can help you.

Ideally it takes between 12 and 18 months to select, train and embed a new council candidate – it's vital that councils and parties start to focus on the need for new blood as soon as possible.



Are you ready to make a difference?

To be sure of getting the best candidates for elections, a number of areas need to be considered beforehand and a few steps taken as early on as possible:

The decision to do it

To find good candidates, get them selected, establish them in the ward and train them up to be part of the team, takes time. It's a process best done over at least 12 months so it needs to be started as soon as possible.

A gap analysis

Look at the current team and work out what the gaps are.

What talent is lacking on the council – is it missing professional people, women or members of black and minority ethnic groups (BME), people from a particular area or community from within the locality?

Are you looking for future cabinet material, and are there particular portfolios that require expertise?

Or does the team need some of the energy and dynamism that comes from the quick turnover of people who are elected for a term and then move on?

Publicising and promoting the role

One of the reasons people don't put themselves forward as candidates is that they don't have a clue about what the council does, what being a councillor entails and what sort of people can be councillors – i.e. people like them.

Start an education campaign:

- Articles in the council magazine and on party leaflets on being a councillor; councillor of the month column
- Party and council-led open days
- Question time events with councillors
- Information on the website
- Advertise the date for application

Getting the party inside

Political parties need to become more outward-looking if candidates who break the usual mould are to be encouraged and welcomed, but changing the way things are done can be upsetting and create resistance.

Start by looking at party structures such as the constitution and selection process to see how they can be made more open.

Then look at other roles: is there someone who could be asked to have an external focus so that it becomes their job to encourage more people to get involved?

Who is going to be the person responsible for preparing potential and actual candidates for the job?

Systems analysis

Take a good look at the systems in place for supporting potential and actual candidates – do they help to develop confident, team-minded councillors?

What the council can and cannot do

While the council cannot involve itself in the politics it does have a corporate responsibility to make sure the organisation is run properly – so it can get involved in recruitment and training of councillors, with cross-party support.

Finding the talent



Unearthing the stars of the future takes determination – if it were straightforward everyone would already be doing it. First must come the understanding of why it is necessary, then a commitment to doing things differently, followed by a plan of how to achieve it – being clear about what you want to do and why will make it easier to spot the talent when you come across it.

Consider the following questions:

Who are you looking for?

Who are the under-represented groups in the community?

Who should be talent spotting?

- **Councillors:** every councillor should be thinking in terms of where the next intake of talent is going to come from
- **Political groups and local parties:** members will know other people who share their views
- **The council:** it should also be concerned with how to make sure there is a vibrant selection process in all parties in all seats, as it is competition that will raise the quality of councillors and keep standards high – this obviously has to be done with cross-party consent; officers must not be encouraged to influence politics

Why aren't talented people coming forward already?

- It can be as simple as never having been asked
- People don't know anything about the council and have strange ideas about what being a councillor means
- They don't know anything about politics and how it works
- They've never thought of themselves as councillor material

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

Council teams need a range of skills, and very few of them are about academic achievement or material success. But there are a number of personal qualities that potential candidates do need to possess – most of the other skills councillors need can be developed in them before and after they are elected.

Look for:

- Raw energy and the desire to improve things
- Team player
- Reliability
- Loyalty
- The ability to communicate

At the moment too many council candidates are selected from a small pool of people who are already active, which in some areas can mean a number as small as the party members who go along to meetings. To be properly democratic, the field needs to be opened up to include a much wider range of people who have the potential to be exciting and committed councillors. This should not be left to chance.

While many council leaders are already in the habit of asking star performers they meet in the course of their activities to stand for election, it can be more difficult for those in opposition, even group leaders, to do so as they tend not to come across as many people. It is also not necessarily enough just to ask those they happen to meet, and effort and imagination needs to be put into thinking who are the people they don't meet who might make good candidates.

Where to find potential councillors

Where to start the search

In the local party

How many members on the party roll never come to meetings? These are people who may not find the monthly meetings a rewarding way to spend their time but are at least interested enough to pay for a membership. Write to every member and invite them to an event to learn about becoming a councillor, and ask them to bring friends or family they think could be interested. Or focus on a particular segment of the membership.

At the surgery

People who come in to complain about something that's not right in the area are people who care enough to voice their opinion. Their enthusiasm for change makes them potential councillor material.

From the business community

Most councils are short of councillors of working age. Talk to local businesses via the chamber of commerce or other forums.

Among local volunteers

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

Anyone with a passion

These may be people who come along to consultations or neighbourhood committee meetings. Tap into their passion and persuade them that they can have more influence as a councillor.

Local faith groups

These can be both a source of recruitment and support for those selected.

Already active members of society

School governors, street wardens, neighbourhood watch co-ordinators, members of legal boards, learning and health trusts, JPs.

Schools and colleges

Young people often have lots of energy for changing the world, but don't know where to begin. By talking to sixth formers and college political groups, councillors can let them know that there are opportunities for them – and that their participation is welcomed.

At public events and places

Council open days, fairs, even the local farmer's market or street market, leisure centres and libraries. Getting out, meeting people and talking to them about the job, what the council does, what it is responsible for, is crucial to promoting the profile of councillors.

Advertise

There will be people out there in your local community who aren't perhaps active currently, but either have been in the past or would like to be in the future. They need to know that local parties are looking for people just like them.

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

- Activists in community groups
- Any local party member or known person retiring from a public service position (*eg civil servant, teacher etc*)
- Any of your deliverers who read the leaflets and comment on them
- Any woman on any council estate who is worried about the quality of life and services for her and her family
- Aspiring parliamentary candidates even those just starting the approval process
- Chairs of local voluntary groups
- Chairs of tenants' associations
- Charity workers
- Contacts and supporters of former/retiring councillors (*especially if they are an ethnic minority group*)
- Former candidates who only stood because they knew they would lose
- Local business men or women
- Local party activists
- MPs' political assistants and other paid party political officers, neighbourhood forums or area committees etc
- People who complain about the council
- People who move into your area and who are party members already
- People who put up posters and then do a bit more
- People who respond to party political broadcasts
- People you meet on the doorstep, on the bus and in the supermarket queue
- People you think could do the job well (*and don't forget to tell them that*)
- Regular attendees at local community meetings
- School governors
- Someone one of your councillors knows (*from Church, from a community group, from a charity or from work*)
- Student activists

Persuading people to stand

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

First step – ask them	A 2007 survey showed that two-thirds of candidates in the local elections stood after being asked to do so – people tend not to think of themselves as councillor material until someone else sees it in them.
Follow them up	People who do not particularly see themselves as potential councillors will need to be actively encouraged before they get the confidence to commit themselves.
Tailor your approach	For example young people may be worried about how much time they will have to devote to being a councillor.
Invite them to an event	That explains exactly what a councillor does and what the expected commitment will be.
Arrange for them to shadow a councillor	They need to see evidence that they won't be wasting their time, and can really get things done.
Observe them in a number of informal settings	Take them out campaigning to see how they interact with members of the public; hold an informal policy workshop or do some role play to check they have a common sense approach.
Reassure them	That there is no formal qualification and that all individuals do the job differently.
Assure them	That support and training will be available before and after election (and make sure this is true!).
Emphasise the benefits of being a councillor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unique opportunity to change people's lives • Support from the council to do the work • Wide experience of people and place • Professional development • Small but significant level of remuneration • The sense of belonging to your neighbourhood

Signing them up

Once a potential candidate has been talent-spotted, and expressed an interest in becoming a councillor, it's time to seal the deal.

This is the stage to make sure that people understand what they are letting themselves in for.

What should they be aware of?

- That agreeing to stand as a council candidate via the party route means committing themselves to becoming a member of a political party
- The amount of time they will need to put into getting to know their ward and campaigning in the 12-18 months prior to election
- Any other demands on their time, such as group meetings and training sessions
- What you will do for them – for instance, identify their training needs, pair them up with an experienced colleague or help them with campaigning

Make sure they understand politics

Not understanding the politics of local government can be a real barrier to people even beginning to consider themselves as possible councillors. People can't be expected to work the system unless they understand the system.

Be aware that at any stage in the process between the original suggestion to become a councillor and selection, people may drop out, and you may find yourself investing time in people who don't stay the course – or worse, decide to stand for the opposition!

Try not to lose those people. Encourage them to take on another public position such as school governor or member of the learning trust or hospital trust. This way you may get them to stand the next time round.

Preparing candidates

Potential candidates – particularly those who are not long-term members of a political party – will need careful preparation to make it through the complexities of the selection process:

Briefing them – so that they are clear about what is entailed in getting selected is vital. They will need to understand the ward they are up for, and be confident about writing and delivering a speech to the selection panel. They may also need help in how to answer particular questions, especially about their party values, and be briefed on what the panel is looking for. A party or group member should be nominated to guide new candidates through the process.

Matching party values – it is important to make sure potential candidates understand and share the values of the political party they are representing, and what it means to be part of a political group on the council – such as the need for team loyalty, following the whip and collective responsibility.

This isn't about having an encyclopaedic knowledge of party policy – a large percentage of the work councils do is determined by central government legislation. Local councils vary widely because of their style and the approach they take to delivering these central government programmes, and it is here that party values come to the fore.



Running a successful selection process

The selection process is crucial to diversifying the intake of new councillors – because putting the right candidates in the right seats is the only way to ensure that a more representative set of councillors is actually elected.

Every party has its own way of doing these things, but all parties have learned the hard way that selecting an unsuitable candidate can cause great misery within any administration or opposition. It is much harder to stop people being councillors once they have been elected than it is to weed out the misfits at the selection stage. Any selection process works best when there are more applicants than places – one of the aims of this handbook is make sure that there are sufficient high calibre candidates to make for a vibrant selection.

- Ask searching questions when vetting candidates:
 - Do they pass the Sun test (i.e. is there anything embarrassing in their past that the Sun would be interested in)?

This will include: rent arrears, council tax arrears, county court judgements, previous convictions, being on the sex offenders' register – in fact anything that could inflict damage on the party and other candidates if it were highlighted in the media.
 - Are they fully signed up to the party, and do they understand the meaning of party loyalty and following the whip?
 - How will they react if the party wants to do something they personally disagree with?

- Upsetting the old order, and changing the way seats are dealt out might put 'noses out of joint' – so it makes sense to have the party on side with the new aspirations very early on
- Selectors are often more cautious than electors, and may only want to select obvious winners in any particular seat – often this results in newer candidates being given the least winnable seats
- Balance the ticket in three-member wards
- Could the selection process be refreshed? In some ward parties, selections are in the hands of a very small number of people. Opening up the selection process by inviting all ward members, or considering the use of open primaries – where all the residents of a ward are invited to attend – will mean that candidates are selected by a wider range of people

Supporting candidates

The more support candidates receive before election, the sooner they are likely to be up and running as councillors.

Building an esprit de corps in the early stages will also pay dividends in terms of team building and loyalty later on.

Mentoring

Set up a mentoring system: pair up new candidates with experienced councillors, either within the ward or across the council.

Training

Talk to each new candidate to find out what his or her individual training needs are – and then provide the right training. Put on party training programmes that cover campaigning, policy formation and political knowledge.

Networking

Bring all new candidates together frequently before the election so that they can get to know each other and form a support network among themselves. Introduce them to current councillors and put on activities that involve both new and seasoned candidates.

Practical experience

Set up the ward groups as action teams in the period up to the election to campaign. Invite candidates to sit in on a council meeting, so they know what to expect.

Team building

Get to know the prospective candidates, find out what they like, where their interests lie, so that you can start to form a team of all the talents and make sure that if they are elected they have a clear role.



Now it's up to you...

Less than 1% of the total population is a member of any political party in the UK, and an even smaller percentage are active within them. From this small proportion, almost every elected politician who exercises democratic power is drawn.

Statistically, we know that this small group cannot include all the best, or the brightest, in our community, or truly reflect the people they represent. We risk ignoring the greater potential of our local population if we confine our councillor candidate recruitment to local party members, party activists, safe pairs of hands and 'friends'.

When local residents see a photo of their new council they'll want to pick people out of the photo and say: "That one looks like me". However this is not just about diversity by race and gender, but also by age, experience, education, and 'electability'. It's about talent and ability, potential and ambition.

Before you start looking, conduct a skills audit of your current group. Audit the whole group as well as ward by ward. This is a useful tool when you recruit candidates. It should give you a list of the types of people to consider approaching. You need to consider the qualities that matter. The party line comes over more in how you do things than in what you do. So a close working knowledge of party policy over the past 15 years might not be essential.

Whilst it is important to communicate with your local electorate, a lengthy track-record of leaflet delivery, or attendance at party meetings, is not necessarily an essential qualification either. Other qualities may resonate more with the community each new councillor represents. The desire to improve people's lives is vital. Being ambitious (for their area, their colleagues, their council and even for themselves) is important. Loyalty to colleagues, to the area, and to the Party values is a definite must, as is a willingness to work as a team. Develop a list from your previous good – and bad – selection experiences. Passion is also critical. People who complain about the council are usually people who want do something about making it better. They are already half way to becoming active. Harness that passion and you are there.

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

Good luck.

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Local Government Association

Conservative group office

www.conservativegroup.lga.gov.uk

Labour group office

www.labourgroup.lga.gov.uk

Liberal Democrat group office

www.libdemgroup.lga.gov.uk

Independent office group office

www.independentgroup.lga.gov.uk

Improvement and Development Agency

www.idea.gov.uk

Electoral Commission

www.electoralcommission.org.uk



Be a Councillor

For more information on the public facing campaign encouraging people to stand as local councillors, and the individual's stories visit www.beacouncillor.org.uk.



Is your politics fit for the 21st Century?

The Leadership Centre's manifesto for a modern local politics is aiming to raise the game of politics locally through focusing on the 10 key challenges that define the new direction of local government, including revitalising recruitment. For more information visit www.21stcenturycouncillor.com.



Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



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