

Localist

News for Labour Councillors from the LGA Labour Group

Spring 2007

Representing the future: the Councillors Commission

By Dame Jane Roberts

I've always thought that for a local authority to be successful, it needed to have able members, high calibre officers and a good working relationship between the two. So I was glad to chair the Councillors Commission that emerged from the 2006 Local Government White Paper.

The Commission was an independent cross party review, looking at the incentives that encourage, and the barriers that deter people from becoming councillors. We were charged with looking at how a greater number of talented, able and more representative people could stand as councillors, as well as how we could seek better public recognition for the work that councillors do.

It has been a fascinating experience to speak to a wide variety of people up and down the country about their involvement in local democracy. This, together with a wealth of research evidence from both the UK and further afield, culminated in the report of the Commission, *Representing the Future*, launched in mid December 2007.

We found that in order to properly address our remit, we had to look at the wider context of disengagement and disconnection from

political representatives. This is obviously a complex area and there are no easy answers but the Commission did come strongly to the view that local government was a key part of the solution to a wider democratic malaise – and not, as some have suggested, part of the problem. But there is much to do in order for local government's position as a key link in the governance chain, to be realised.



We made a large number of recommendations and not everyone will agree with them. That's as it should be. We need to have a vigorous debate about how we can open up local government much more widely. Underlying our recommendations were five key principles:

- Local government is key to promoting local democratic engagement;
- Promoting a sense of efficacy - the feeling that people can influence what happens around them - is

key to better engagement;

- Councillors are most effective as locally elected representatives when they have similar life experiences to those of their constituents;
- Key to effective local representation is the relationship and the connections between councillors and their constituents;
- It should be less daunting to become a councillor, better supported once elected, and less daunting to stop being a councillor.

The recommendations that we made stem from these principles. We strove not to be prescriptive for the most part, recognising that these principles can and should be given effect differently in different areas. But we were clear in the first recommendation that all local authorities should be charged with a new statutory duty to facilitate local democratic engagement - from disseminating clear and accessible information on how local governance works to facilitating more active participation in a range of different areas.

The rest of our recommendations covered a range of issues from more proactive engagement with young people both at and

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beyond school; all out four yearly elections in multi-member wards; experimentation with incentives to vote; easing existing restrictions on who can stand; encouragement to political parties voluntarily to comply with equalities legislation; and far better support to councillors to enable more and better contact with constituents. As for remuneration, we made a number of recommendations including a modest parachute payment for senior councillors who lose their seat. Given that all MPs, already with generous pension payments, can rely on one year's salary to tide them over, you'd have thought that this could at least have been seriously considered. But no, a shadow minister couldn't quite resist the temptation to put the boot into local government in the tabloid press.

Ignore the tabloids, read the argument, debate the recommendations... ■

Why did you become a councillor?

We asked a selection of councillors about their motivation for standing and their reflections on aspects of the job...

JAMES MURRAY, 24, ISLINGTON LBC

Why did you become a councillor?

I wanted to put my Labour Party values into action - and I thought being involved with local politics and becoming a councillor would give me the opportunity to do that. And it has - in lots of small ways every day, and occasionally in big ways.

What are the best and worst things about being a councillor?

I like getting stuff done - so the best thing is when I can help get individual problems sorted, or when the Labour Group wins a policy fight. It's frustrating when people come to you with a problem like a flat that's overcrowded, and you know the shortage of social housing means there's not much you can do in the short-run.

Is there anything you would change in order to help you fulfil your councillor role more effectively?

It would be good to have more support with casework, from a person who was employed specifically by the Labour councillors. It's hard with a full-time job to keep chasing up casework replies

- it takes a lot of time, which means you have less time to focus on new projects.

What achievement as a councillor (or Labour Group) are you most proud of?

Our group has been doing great work on affordable housing in the council, on the doorstep, in the papers, and on planning committees. Labour councillors on the planning committee I vice-chair demand 50% affordable housing in new developments; The Lib Dems call us reckless, but they've been left red-faced by some of the key battles we've won when developers appeal.

James was elected in 2006. He is also part of the Leadership Centre for Local Government Next Generation programme.



MAHROOF HUSSAIN, 39, ROTHERHAM MBC

Why did you become a councillor?

I was doing voluntary work with many local community groups and advocating on their behalf with local statutory bodies. I dealt with many problems but got little or no support from the powers that be at the time. I was a member of the Labour Party already, and decided to get politically active and become a councillor in order to change things for local people.

What are the best and worst things about being a councillor?

Resolving local ward issues gives me the greatest satisfaction. It's the little things that sometimes make the biggest difference for people in their community. The worst thing is not being able to switch off - always being in councillor mode!

Is there anything you would change in order to help you fulfil your councillor role more effectively?

As a full time worker and Cabinet Member I am doing excessive hours. I would like to reduce meetings and have the correct IT tools and permissions to do my job.

What achievement as a councillor (or Labour Group) are you most proud of?

There are many achievements but on a ward level, working closely with the new Neighbourhood Policing Teams features highly. These teams have had a significant impact on crime and anti social behaviour in the ward. On a borough level it is the PFI project to rebuild our primary and secondary schools so children can get their education in new and modern buildings.

Mahroof is the Cabinet Member for Communities and Involvement on Rotherham MBC. He was elected in 2002, and is also a member of the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, as well as being a graduate of the IDEa Leadership Academy, and Leadership Centre Next Generation programme.



PETER NURSE, CHESHIRE CC**Why did you become a councillor?**

I became a Councillor because I was interested in the politics of where I lived. I enjoyed debate and argument about public affairs. I was, and am, a committed member of the Labour Party. My father was an active trade unionist and I owe a lot to him.

What are the best and worst things about being a councillor?

The best thing is helping people win a case, learning about their circumstances, extending common humanity often to people who have had a bad deal from life. The worst things are the interminable meetings that drone on and on in the Council and in the Party.

Is there anything you would change in order to help you fulfil your councillor role more effectively?

I would increase support for Members. Cheshire has strengthened the Members Secretariat which has made me more effective. There should be less centralisation to enable local councils to make a more effective contribution to their communities. Local government should be part of a constitution with rights vis a vis central government.

What achievement as a councillor (or Labour Group) are you most proud of?

Strangely the proudest moments were when we resisted the

Thatcher government. It sought to crush local government by reducing powers and budgets. I was convinced that the leadership role of the LEA had to be maintained. In Cheshire we managed to retain that role by working with the schools who are more effective working together rather than as wholly independent units.

Peter Nurse was elected to Cheshire County Council in 1981 and before that was a member of Staffordshire CC. He was Chair of Education in Cheshire for 15 years. He is now Chairman of Cheshire Police Authority & is Deputy Leader of the Labour Group on the County Council.

**SHARON TAYLOR, 52, STEVENAGE DC****Why did you become a councillor?**

Having grown up in a new town, we have a culture of involving ourselves in community activity and I am pleased to be carrying on that tradition. Also, it's a great way of getting out of the housework!

What are the best and worst things about being a councillor?

The best thing is finding out what people think about the town and being able to do something about it. The worst thing is people being rude to my daughter when they phone because they don't realise it is our home number that is published and they think they are talking to a council officer.

Is there anything you would change in order to help you fulfil...**your councillor role more effectively?**

A Star Wars transporter so I can get to places quickly (beam me up Scotty!) and a 30 hour day.

What achievement as a councillor (or Labour Group) are you most proud of?

Keeping Stevenage Labour since 1971!

Sharon Taylor was elected in 1997, and has been leader of Stevenage DC since 2006. Until recently she was also working full time as Head of Executive Support for Hertfordshire Constabulary.

**NARGIS KHAN, 35, HACKNEY LBC****Why did you become a councillor?**

I loved living in Hackney and wanted to do something to improve local amenities and get more for the area. It helped that Hackney Labour Party actively encouraged people to come forward and supported members through the selection process.

What are the best and worst things about being a councillor?

The best bits are when you are able to help people and make a difference to their quality of life. The worst are those moments when you are up against the reality of a

situation such as the need for more affordable housing.

Is there anything you would change in order to help you fulfil your councillor role more effectively?

It would help if the role of a councillor was more widely understood and attracted more women and young people. A time machine would also be very useful!

What achievement as a councillor (or Labour Group) are you most proud of?

Being part of the Labour Group that has delivered a 3 Star Hackney.

Nargis was elected in 2002 when she was 29 and is the Cabinet member for Community Services on Hackney Council. She was also a member of the Government's Commission on Integration and Cohesion.



A view from Wales

Cllr Derek Vaughan, leader of Neath Port Talbot CBC and the WLGA

Councillors in Wales today face challenges that would not have been imagined by their counterparts 10 years ago. Since devolution, and under Labour's broader modernisation agenda, there are heightened expectations on councillors to undertake a diversity of roles to an increasingly professional standard, in a competitive political environment and in the full glare of public and media attention.

Many Labour councillors fulfil these roles, with a level of remuneration that remains questionable for being in charge of the largest workforce in the

locality, providing services to every citizen and accounting for budgets anywhere upwards of £300m in the Welsh context. Many members have to balance this challenging career with a professional career, caring responsibilities and attempting to maintain some semblance of a personal life.

The traditional role of a councillor being a part-time volunteer has been consigned to the history books. Under the executive constitutional models, office holding members are held individually accountable for performance more than ever before. These expectations and the growing

"professionalisation" of the roles require improved levels of support for members from their councils and other support agencies.

A major issue for the party, and one not unique to Wales, is recruiting and retaining talented individuals, particularly younger people and women, to stand as



Cllr Derek Vaughan

councillors. Despite proactive efforts from the WLGA, local authorities and political parties, councillors in Wales are still largely drawn from the older male population. Similarly in some rural parts of Wales over 50% of seats are uncontested.

2008 could be one of the most challenging years yet for Wales' Labour councillors. Not only will we face the ballot box in May, but also the inevitable political repercussions of the local government settlement. We will need to redouble our efforts to maintain mutual trust and ensure that our successful track record of partnership deepens and that any creeping centralism within the devolved context is avoided. ■

Looking ahead to May 08

Sir Jeremy Beecham, Leader of the LGA Labour Group

Despite a tight financial settlement (though better, let's not forget, than under the Tory Government) there are significant opportunities for Labour local government in the run up to May's elections and beyond. The newly signed Concordat between the LGA and the Government recognises the leadership role of councils. There is a renewed emphasis on Local and Multi Area Agreements reflecting local priorities as well as a limited number of key national objectives. These moves increase the need for a dynamic strategic approach transcending the pavement politics of the Lib Dems and the Tory thirst for cuts.

Labour's distinctive values of equality and social justice remain as crucial as ever. They can only

be delivered by an active state at both the national and local level, working with the private and voluntary sectors. Now is the time for Labour councillors to assert those values and to press for ambitious objectives to be set in LAAs, harnessing the contributions to be made by all the relevant partners working alongside councils.

We must also encourage councils to make use of the powers to promote economic, environmental and social well-



Sir Jeremy Beecham

being; to trade; and to use prudential borrowing. Years of command and control - malevolent under the Tories, largely benevolent under Labour - have perhaps stunted local government's self-confidence and willingness to innovate. We should not be afraid of new approaches which could lead to better quality services and generate savings to be invested in the front line.

There are many challenges and changes ahead – councils will be playing a role in house building; issues of adult social care, recycling and climate change are being addressed; and Government is looking to us to play an active role in promoting community cohesion and community safety. Labour must take the lead locally. ■

Stop Press

The LGA Labour Group is organising a series of seminars at this year's Spring Conference (29th Feb-2nd March). Full details on our website: <http://labourgroup.lga.gov.uk>

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