

Be a councillor: encouraging people to become councillors

A regional campaign to encourage more people to become councillors was piloted in London starting in June 2008. The London pilot focused on three particular groups that are under-represented in London's council chambers: women, people aged under 45 and people with an ethnic minority heritage. However, the campaign was careful to appeal to the target audience without alienating existing councillors or non-target groups.

The message underpinning the London pilot campaign was "people like you are councillors". By introducing personal aspects of existing councillors' lives people were shown that councillors are simply ordinary people who volunteer to do an extraordinary job.

The website, www.beacouncillor.org.uk, which was set up by London Councils for the London campaign is being revised to remove the London focus so that it can be used as a resource by other councils and regions.

A free information booklet that accompanies the England-wide website will be available soon.

The statistics in England

- Women, who make up more than half the population, occupy less than a third of council seats
- People under 45 make up just 13% of councillors although 48% of the adult population is in this age group
- In terms of ethnicity, different regions of the country vary but in areas with a relatively high proportion of ethnic minority residents, they are under-

represented in the council chamber. In London, for example, 18% of councillors describe themselves as belonging to a non-white ethnic group, despite over 30% of the capital's population describing themselves in the same way

Timing a campaign

To be considered as a candidate for a political party, an individual must be a paid-up party member and have been active in their local constituency party for some time. Constituency parties are, in essence, a club of willing volunteers and any potential candidate will be expected to show their commitment to the local party by leafleting, or undertaking administrative jobs. In London, the campaign was launched in June 2008 which was just before the political parties started the long process of deciding who to choose as their candidates in the 2010 London-wide local elections.

Key learning points from the London pilot

- The key to the success of the London pilot has been the involvement of councillors from across the political spectrum and, because it was a regional campaign, from councils throughout Greater London
- Six councillors representing the target markets were selected to be the 'faces' of the campaign and appeared on all the literature but many other 'ambassador' councillors, signed up to the campaign's ethos and had their personal profiles put onto the campaign website
- All these councillors were prepared (and briefed) to spread the message in a non-political way by talking to their local media and residents about why they became councillors and their own experiences.
- Although the campaign had to be firmly non-political, the engagement of the local political party groups in the campaign was critical to ensuring they were

prepared/able to respond to the interest generated (see later section: Buy-in from the parties locally)

- Information seminars were much in demand and feedback showed that people particularly valued the chance to hear councillors speak about why they became involved and their experiences as a councillor in a non-political manner.
- The information booklet 'People like you are councillors' was really popular even though it basically reiterated what was on the website. A range of organisations requested copies to distribute at their events or to their members.
- Paid for advertising (we took ½ page adverts in local newspapers and some council magazines) was expensive but extremely effective in generating enquiries.
- Analysis of the kind of people who attended seminars or requested information booklets revealed a good percentage were under 45 (75%), from a black or minority ethnic background (52%). However, the male:female balance was 50:50 so with hindsight, we should have put more emphasis on working with women-focused media or interest/support groups to reflect our campaign aim.
- We found that it was important to ensure councils' democratic services team and the communications team were involved or aware of the campaign. In some councils democratic services took the lead, in others it was the communications team. Usually when democratic services were involved it meant that the council committed to a larger and proactive programme of work locally – eg seminars, information stands at local events - rather than using the London-wide campaign publicity.
- Valuable data about individuals showing an interest has been collected when they request information booklets (postal/email addresses, gender, age, ethnicity, political leanings). This data has been used not only to evaluate the success of the campaign but as a way to convert expressions of interest into activity, such as contacting local party branches. To avoid being open to

criticism that the campaign was recruiting on behalf of the political parties, enquirers were simply asked if they were interested in any particular party and if so if they wanted their details passed on. Details were then passed to the political advisers employed by the group leaders of the three main political parties at London Councils and the LGA's Association of Independent Councillors who then made contact with the enquirers.

Implementation

Survey

At the outset of the campaign, an opinion survey was commissioned to gain a better understanding of Londoners' local political awareness. Results are available at <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/lobbying/campaigns/2010resources/survey.htm>.

Website

The website www.beacouncillor.org.uk launched at the start of the campaign and was, at that time purely focused on London. It featured profiles of councillors and information about the role of local councillors and how councils work.

Free information literature

Free information booklets are available, the content of which mirrors the website. A4 and A5 sized posters and postcards are also available for use by local libraries, festival/event organisers, church halls, GP surgeries etc.. Popup displays were used by various councils at their own information seminars and at borough festivals.

Seminars and film

A series of seminars have been run for people interested in becoming councillors. Generally, these seminars featured four councillors (one from each major party and an independent) speaking about their experiences and answering questions – all strictly on a person versus party political basis. At the end of q&a's the councillors

went to separate tables and attendees were able to talk to them about their specific political party. The seminars were held on a weekday evening and one during the day on Saturday – both times seemed to work equally well. A film of one of the seminars is available at www.beacouncillor.org.uk/howto/seminarvideo.htm.

Telephone enquiry hotline

A dedicated telephone hotline number for the London campaign was published on all the literature and the website. Calls to the number occurred mainly during the advertising period (over 100 calls were taken over the four weeks from when the adverts first appeared) but petered out over time. Most enquiries are now received via email.

Paid-for advertising and editorial coverage

London was fortunate in having a budget that allowed for an advertising campaign using local newspapers and council magazines to run during the summer of 2008. Although an expensive option, the newspaper adverts proved very successful in generating enquiries to the hotline and visits to the website.

Three 'ad vans' featuring the campaign message toured all 32 London boroughs, providing a photo opportunity for councillors and advertising the campaign to the general public (see below).



Cllr Anjana Patel, one of the 'faces' of the campaign in front of the ad van at the launch

Press releases were tailored to local newspapers' geographical coverage; 32 different press releases were produced, each one quoting a councillor living in the borough covered by a particular newspaper(s). A similar approach was taken to targeting ethnic media and women's media.

Coverage in council residents magazine was fairly effective but more so when the council undertook supporting work, eg. stalls at summer festivals, putting posters or booklets into public reception areas, or undertaking their own press work with their local media.

Understanding of how to get involved in local politics

London's experience shows that providing detailed information about being a local councillor is not sufficient. A large number of people who received information and, most importantly, subsequently decided that being a councillor was something they want to commit to, got back in contact with the campaign asking what their first step should be. Indeed, one of the most common questions asked by people attending the seminars was "ok, I'm interested – what do I do now?".

For people not in contact with their local constituency party, there is a lack of awareness that a) there is a local constituency office and b) it is through this structure that candidates are selected by parties to represent them.

Frequently, people who came into contact with the London campaign said their motivation was a desire to improve their local community and that they want to be an 'independent' councillor. When further questioned they often revealed that their desire to be an 'independent' candidate was based on an indecision as to which party they would want to represent rather than a desire to be truly 'independent' of any political party, and/or because they did not see themselves as 'politicians'. This should be of concern to those of us involved in encouraging participation in local democracy and to the political parties themselves who may struggle to identify local people who are willing to stand but who are not motivated primarily by politics.

Buy-in from the parties locally

The way that the local party treats people who are encouraged to enquire at their local constituency office about getting involved in political life is really important.

People may make an approach to their local office but, because of their lack of confidence in the way 'politics' works, become disheartened if the reception they get is lukewarm or indifferent.

There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that some local party members are not prepared to consider people who are different from their norm. To some extent this is always going to be the nature of the world and there is a degree of self-preservation that is perhaps unavoidable. However, the level of public interest in the London *be a councillor* campaign suggests that if local selection committees are outward looking, they may find the pool of potential candidates bigger than they expected.

A sister project to the *be a councillor* campaign, called Project 2010 is being run by the Political Skills Forum and the Leadership Centre for Local Government. This project has been examining how political parties select candidates. The project has involved working with local party groups examining how they can identify local talent to serve and highlighting examples of good practice in encouraging a wider range of the local population to become councillors. For more information about how this has been achieved, contact Charlotte.Eisenhart@localleadership.gov.uk on 020 7630 2180 or Jo.Simpson@localleadership.gov.uk on 07711 675600 (both at the Leadership Centre).

Thinking of running a similar campaign in your area?

The Leadership Centre is providing free support and advice to councils and regions interested in conducting a *be a councillor*-type campaign in their area, so it would be worthwhile contacting them. Contact Charlotte.Eisenhart@localleadership.gov.uk on 020 7630 2180 or JoE.Simpson@localleadership.gov.uk on 07711 675600

The website www.beacouncillor.org.uk was set up by London Councils for our London campaign but is now a national resource, profiling councillors from different parts of England. If you would like to use the website as a basis for your campaign but want to see your own local councillors profiled, or local contacts listed, please get in touch with the Leadership Centre who can discuss how to accommodate your information on the website.

For more information about the London pilot or for free use of the London campaign material/artwork, please contact emma.stewart@londoncouncils.gov.uk (020 7934 9754)

Appendix A

The six images that form the London campaign posters and postcards. The personal details at the top of each poster reinforce the campaign message that “people like you are councillors”.

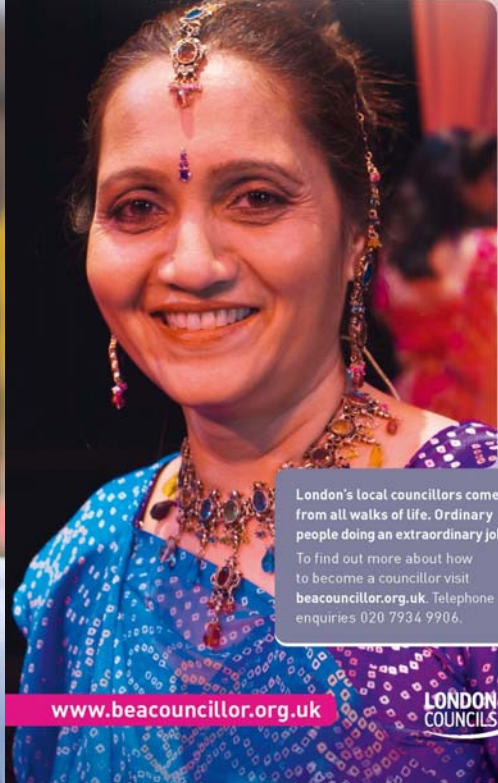




- Marathon runner**
- Music lover**
- Enjoys nights out**
- Local councillor**

London's local councillors come from all walks of life. Ordinary people doing an extraordinary job. To find out more about how to become a councillor visit beacouncillor.org.uk. Telephone enquiries 020 7934 9906.


www.beacouncillor.org.uk

- Amateur dancer**
- Mother of two**
- Keen volunteer**
- Local councillor**

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- Loves shopping
- Sound of Music fan
- Fundraiser
- Local councillor

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- Dress designer
- Mother of two
- Saxophonist
- Local councillor

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