

YOU CAN DO IT

**A guide to being a Liberal
Democrat Councillor by
Cllr Sarah Boad**



for Councillors and Campaigners

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The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC) is responsible for promoting, influencing and supporting the campaigning activities and the local government work of the Party at all levels. Its independence within the Party is guaranteed by a governing body that is made up of councillors and campaigners elected by the membership annually. Funding is through membership fees, trading income and Party Grant.

The philosophy of ALDC is to motivate and enable local campaigners throughout Britain to take and use power to act as agents for change in their communities. The ALDC and its staff work within the Party to facilitate campaigning at every level, and to promote the values of 'Community Politics'.

In carrying through this philosophy ALDC seeks to attract the widest possible active membership, retaining both our unique independent role, and by working closely with the rest of the Party.

ALDC is based in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire. The political staff undertake a wide range of support and training for campaigners and councillors both on the telephone and in person. The staff also produce regular members mailings covering campaigning and council activities.

Further information on any aspect of ALDC's work may be obtained by contacting the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, The Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, HX7 8DG. Tel: 01422-843785; Fax: 01422-843036; e-mail mail@aldc.org; www.aldc.org

Published by The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, The Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, HX7 8DG.
Printed by Swiftprint, 3-5 Wood Street, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

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Contents

What is a Councillor?..... 4

But what does a Councillor Actually Do?..... 4

Is It All Talk?..... 4

What about speeches and Civic Dinners?..... 5

Am I Eligible to Stand? 5

How much time and when? 5

HEALTH WARNING 6

Is it a white, middle class man's world? 6

How Much Will It Cost To Be A Councillor?..... 7

Councillors on benefits 7

Election costs 7

Register of interests 7

Will It All Be Worth It? 8

Will It Turn My Life Upside Down?..... 8

Six steps to getting elected 9

Step one - get campaigning..... 9

Step two - get approved 9

Step three - get selected 9

Step four - get nominated 9

Step five - get elected 10

Step six - get stuck in 10

Life on the Council 11

Will I have to do as I'm told by the Group?..... 11

And Later? 11

Contacting ALDC 12

Appendix 1 - what is a council and what does it do..... 13

Appendix 2 - Am I eligible..... 14

Appendix 3 - Glossary of Terms 16

The original version of this publication, "Could you be a Liberal Democrat Councillor" was written by Jackie Ballard who, before becoming the MP for Taunton was the Council Support Officer for ALDC.

This second revised edition has been written by Cllr Sarah Boad. Sarah won her first principal election on May 1 1986 when she was elected to Lliw Valley Borough Council in a byelection.

A job move took her to Leamington Spa where she was elected to Warwick DC in May 1987. In 1994 she won another byelection to become a County Councillor. She is still a member of both authorities, and was group leader on the District Council from 1988 - 1999. Sarah has been a member of ALDC's Standing Committee since 1988 and Chair since 1996.

Her daughter Claire was born in June 1999 - by the time she was 9 months old, both Councils had installed baby changing facilities and the County Council had introduced a Carer's allowance !

Typesetting by Hywel Morgan, original design by Anna Boyer and Ed Fordham. Published by The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC), The Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX7 8DG. Tel No. 01422 843785. Printing by Swiftprint, 3-5 Wood Street, Huddersfield, HD1 1BT

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Who Is This Booklet For?

This booklet is for Liberal Democrat members and supporters who may be (whether they realise it or not!) potential Councillors. You may already be keen, or you may be very sceptical! In any case, we hope to dispel some of the common myths that there are about Councillors, and encourage you to consider seriously whether you could serve the community and the party in this way.

There is a lot of myth and mystique about what it means to be a Councillor.

A Liberal Democrat councillor must genuinely care about his/her local community, both the area and its people. S/he must also have a commitment to the values that underpin our party - and of course must be a member of the party.

“ Why did I Stand - Because I was asked!
To try and help local residents get
their voice heard. ”

**Cllr. Anne Baxter, Swindon
Borough Council**

You don't need to be a good public speaker, nor have a vast knowledge of the workings of local government. Many very successful local councillors rarely speak at meetings but do a marvellous job for their community.

Most people can be successful Councillors if they want to be - and that probably includes you. We try in this booklet to set out some of the duties and requirements of a Liberal Democrat Councillor.

It is not possible to say exactly what will be involved in any one Council, since this can vary enormously according to the type of Council and local circumstances. The workload will vary both from Council to Council and from Councillor to Councillor. We try to set out a minimum or basic standard, but you should ask locally about your own Council. Your Council workload may also be much bigger if you are in a Council group with balance

of power or in administration (especially minority admin), than if you are a 'backbencher' in an opposition group.

One other qualification should be made at this stage. This booklet is about serving on a 'principal Council' - a Borough or District (Shire or Metropolitan), County Council or Unitary Authority.

It does not deal with being on a Parish or Town Council in England or a Community Council in Wales or Scotland. Some of these are nearly as big as some smaller Shire Districts, and may be organised rather like a Principal Council, in which case much of this booklet will be relevant. But they are usually much smaller in size, and require a different sort of commitment. They provide a valuable additional dimension for community action by Liberal Democrats. If you are interested in a Parish Council, telephone ALDC for more information. We have advice and information which is specifically aimed at town and parish councillors - an increasing number of whom are being elected with party labels.

What is a Councillor?

A councillor is a Member of the Council and is elected by the voters in a particular ward or division, usually for a four-year term (although some Councils have three year terms), except at a by-election. Council elections normally take place on the first Thursday in May. Some Councils elect all their members together every four years whilst others 'elect by thirds', with one third of members being elected every year (the fourth year there are no elections).

The Councillors collectively take decisions about how the Council carries out its duties and powers - its "policies" and how they are carried out. Some matters will be "delegated" to Committees and sub-Committees, others to Council officials - the paid staff of the Council. As a rule, it is the staff, appointed and paid by the Council, who

“ ,Why You Should Stand - If you really want to make a difference then you have to stand ! ”

Cllr. Karam Hussain, Kirklees Metropolitan Council

carry out its functions. Councillors do not usually do it themselves! And councillors do not directly order about individual members of staff - we know of more than one newly elected councillor who thought they could instruct the car park attendant not to give them a parking ticket! On the whole, the more polite you are to them, the more helpful they will be to you. The staff work for the Council as a whole body, not for individual councillors.

Councillors also monitor the results of their decisions, make sure policy decisions are implemented, visit premises, get financial statements etc. Each year they are responsible for setting the "budget" for the next 12 months.

All kinds of people can be Councillors, and are. By and large, they are ordinary people. You may look at the present Councillor in your area with some awe (or with scorn, perhaps! - but we hope not if they are Liberal Democrats). But they may seem like a breed apart, perhaps cliquish or aloof, perhaps very knowledgeable; or they may seem to be party hacks, time-servers, bureaucrats, or fanatics, and in any case out of touch with ordinary people.

Don't worry. A successful Liberal Democrat Councillor will have a different approach. Your main job will be to represent the people who have elected you and to further the cause of Liberal Democracy in and through local government.

But what does a Councillor Actually Do?

Some of the things Councillors do are listed on the next page. Different Councillors will give different emphasis to these different tasks. Don't take your top local activist or the aspiring Parliamentary candidate as the necessary model for everyone else!

Councillors have many different skills and a wide range is required in a Liberal Democrat Group - not all people are the same and a balance is needed. Skills at getting casework done successfully, at keeping in touch with what is going on in your local community are just as important as being able to speak at Full Council or to take on the Chief Executive, if not more so!

A broad range of ages, life experiences and expertise is a great strength in a council group - so it may actually be an advantage if you don't seem to "match" the existing Liberal Democrat Councillors you know!

These and many other points about work on the Council are covered in greater detail in ALDC's Success on the Council

Is It All Talk?

No. Grassroots work in your ward (helping with problems, newsletters, campaigning) is at least as important as your work in Committee and Council Meetings. The work you do in your ward is what is likely to get you re-elected, rather than the meetings you attend

For many Councillors the most rewarding part of the job is the knowledge that their behind the scenes casework has avoided a real injustice, brought new hope and relief to someone unable to beat the system without help, and given people the skills and knowledge to be able to beat the system by themselves next time (that's empowerment).

Liberal Democrats really do believe in "power to the people" and this requires frequent communication and consultation with the public. Your local party should be able to help you do this effectively.

What about speeches and Civic Dinners?

The vast majority of Councillors do not go around making big speeches or living it up on a round of dinners and dances. Many never or rarely do these things. Most discussions between Councillors, in committees, are relatively informal, and it is only at Full Council meetings that you need to stand to speak or that people stick to formal rules about time limits on speeches etc. There is such a variety of practices between councils, the best way to find out about your local council's procedures (standing orders) is to go and watch as a member of the public before you stand for election (but don't let the experience put you off!).

“ Public speaking is still daunting for me but I recommend standing up as soon as possible after elected to make a speech at Full Council – dive into the deep end and you'll soon learn to swim ! ”

Cllr. Gavin Webb, Stoke on Trent Unitary Authority. Aged 22 (21 when elected)

Most Councils supply refreshments. There is nothing wrong in tea and coffee, or sandwiches before a meeting, particularly if the Council meets in the evening. If you are provided with food, you won't be able to claim any expenses for a meal taken outside the Council. Many Councils find it is cheaper to provide sandwiches than pay out subsistence allowances.

If you have done a lot locally, lived in the area for years and know a lot of people, it will certainly help. But equally, an outsider can often bring a vital fresh look at local problems. Many Councillors have never been involved in other local groups. What does matter is whether you care about what happens in the locality.

As most residents can't remember your opponents' names, the fact they don't know yours either isn't the end of the world! If you show them that you care, they'll soon remember your name.

You certainly don't need paper qualifications and you can (and most Councillors do) start with very little knowledge about local government. The Council employs specialists on each service it provides, and can easily get expert advice if it needs it on law, finance, computers etc. etc.

You won't be an alternative Chief Officer. What you will be is the representative of your ward and community. Mostly Councillors and Officers will treat you as the 'expert' on your ward. Most of that 'expertise' comes naturally, from campaigning and canvassing and casework. When a big issue looms - school closure, hypermarket etc. surveys, petitions and public meetings will quickly fill the gaps in your knowledge. Your important qualifications are care and concern for the community.

You will also be on the Council on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Plenty of help is likely to be available from other Group Members, the local party, your Action Programme or Election Manifesto and from ALDC on how to put words into action - you definitely don't have to be a walking dictionary of Party doctrine! Your qualification is simply a commitment to the values of Liberal Democracy.

As an active councillor you may do some of the following:

- Goto Council, Committee and Group meetings - lots of reading of agendas!
- Goto meetings of local branch/ward, tenants' associations, parish councils, school governors, any other outside organisations,
- Take up casework - dealing with problems from members of the public (ALDC also has a publication to help you with this - *Coping with Casework*),
- Run Advice Centres or 'surgeries',
- Visit officials at Council offices to discuss problems,
- Campaign on local issues, lead delegations, get petitions signed,
- Setup local action meetings,
- Write letters to officials, press, electors, MPs, etc,
- Produce Focus or ward newsletters (but you shouldn't have to deliver them all yourself),
- Research into local problems,
- Attend (very occasional) outside conferences and seminars (especially ALDC conferences and training events),
- Grace Council events with your presence (sometimes)!
- Spend hours on the 'phone,
- Participate in fund-raising events for Focus and election campaigns,
- Help get colleagues elected to the same or other councils in your ward and to Parliament.
- Pass on information to Liberal Democrats in other wards on council issues relevant to them.

The balance of what you do will depend very much on who you are, where you are, and the situation on your Council.

Am I Eligible to Stand?

There are certain legal constraints (See Appendix No. 2 at the end of this book) on who can stand but basically if you are 21 or over, a British or Commonwealth citizen and live or work in the Council area you are eligible.

How much time and when?

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.

Councils operate on 'cycles', during which each Committee meets (usually once), and which is normally ended by a full Council meeting which reviews their work. Cycles may vary from four weeks to three months on different Councils, but on average you may have one meeting a week, including your Liberal Democrat Group Meetings. Some councils have most of their meetings in the day-time, others meet mostly in the evenings. You probably need to talk to colleagues locally to see what applies on your Council. Don't forget this is extra to time you already spend on other activities.

You may also be put on "outside bodies", such as School Governing Bodies, the Community Health Council, Post Office Users' Advisory Committee... but new Councillors rarely get a lot of such positions, and you can in any case ration them to your time and interest.

The other activities involved in being a Councillor (listed on page 6) will take time, but many can be fitted in when it is convenient to you. In general, the bigger the ward, the more time is need to do jobs properly. (Though Councillors in rural areas covering several parishes might disagree!). However, your workload is likely to vary more according to how hard you are working and how high your profile is.

An average three-member ward at District Council level may have about 4,000 electors, but in Counties and Metropolitan Districts wards are bigger. In a very few areas (large cities) they may

reach 20,000. In areas where there are single member wards the electorate may vary from 1,500 to 5,000.

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

HEALTH WARNING

Being a councillor can be addictive and you need to remember that there are far worse things happening in the world than your failure to stop a supermarket development on a green field site. Keep a sense of perspective.

If you will need time off work to attend council meetings, check in advance that this is possible with your employer. You have rights under the Employment Protection (Consolidation) Act 1978 to 'reasonable unpaid time off to perform council duties'. However, the employer is allowed to take things into consideration such as the effect of your absence on his business. Some unions have negotiated agreements which give guidance over this and most public sector employers will allow one and a half days a month paid time off for public duties.

Most larger firms are happy for employees to play a part in local government - but that can have hidden "costs" if you are a highflyer or constantly away. So establish the ground rules early. It is preferable to reach an understanding with your employer than march in and demand your rights.

Is it a white, middle class man's world?

No! Many women are scared off politics because they see it represented as a man's world. They are put off particularly by the verbal duel they regularly see on television, and which is present in

“ Consider whether to stand carefully – think about the time required and get your employer on your side. ”

Cllr. Keith Lock, West Berkshire Unitary Authority.

many Council Chambers. Also many women feel they want to be involved in matters where they can see tangible results, rather than taking part in a talk shop which appears to lead nowhere. But all women have experiences to bring to Council work and are at least as able to make a useful contribution as men.

The Liberal Democrats have the highest proportion of women councillors of any of the parties - although it is still only around 30%. Many of our Group and Council Leaders are women.

A good local authority should reflect the community it serves – both members and officers

“ I was 5 months pregnant when first elected, and my husband is a councillor on the same authority. I am Chair of the Development Cttee and my husband is a member of the Executive – we are both busy! Harriet, 4, copes remarkably well – she is well behaved enough to come to briefing meetings or on casework visits. I have had no problems from officers or opposition members, and most actively welcome her ! ”

Cllr. Sara Bedford, Three Rivers District council.

Local government can fit in well for men and women who have caring commitments. If there is no council-run creche, it is usually possible to find sitters for the time you are in formal meetings - and ask if the council provides allowances for carers. Many local authorities are currently reviewing their scheme of allowances and may well include a carer's allowance if asked, so get an existing councillor to suggest that one be included. No-one should object if you take a child along on a planning site visit, or if you are meeting an officer informally, and you may be able to take young babies along to meetings for a while, particularly if they are good !

How Much Will It Cost To Be A Councillor?

Being a Councillor nowadays should not normally cost anything in cash. You certainly won't get rich being a councillor, but you should not be out of pocket. All councillors receive allowances (amounts vary from Council to Council) which should at least defray expenses .

One of the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 is that Local Authorities review their expenses scheme, with allowances for each meeting being replaced with an annual allowance, paid in 12 equal amounts.

The level of these allowances will be determined by the Council, usually after independent advice, and you should claim them - even if you don't need the money you can use it to pay for ward Focuses etc.

You can also claim expenses to cover travel to and from meetings, and possibly “subsistence” while away from home and for other out of pocket expenses, caused by your attendance at meetings. Some Councillors also get facilities such as postage, typing, telephone costs, repayment of babysitting costs, research facilities - it all depends on your Council, so ask what is available. Many local authorities are now providing office equipment such as PC's and fax machines – and offering the appropriate training . If offered this facility, do take it up as it will make life much easier.

Committee Chairs, Group Leaders and Convenors may receive a “special responsibility allowance” in addition.

Councillors' allowances are subject to income tax and National Insurance. A standard tax allowance for expenses will be allowed by the Inland Revenue if you remind them often enough! Additional tax allowances can be claimed, provided you have the evidence of spending, for example you can claim relief on your ALDC subscription! ALDC can give practical advice to councillors on this.

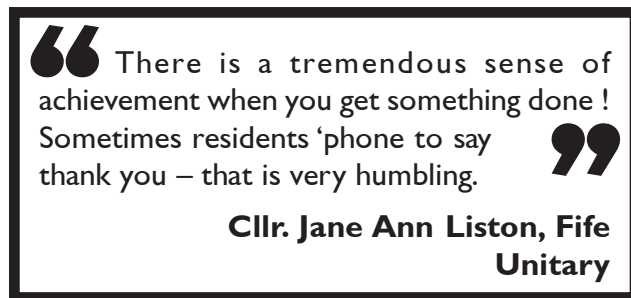
Councillors on benefits

If you are unemployed the position can be quite complicated, basically the allowances you receive as a councillor are treated as income and

are used to offset your benefits although there is a detailed set of different allowances for amounts that can be ignored depending on your circumstances. It may also be possible to offset "out of pocket expenses" - where your allowance makes no provision - against your benefit.

Your council allowances will also be used to offset against Disability Benefit if you are in receipt of that - however you will not lose your eligibility for Disability Benefit because of the work you do as a councillor.

The DETR have produced a very useful booklet on this topic and ALDC can provide basic advice.



Election costs

The costs of the election campaign should be paid by the Local Party or Branch. Whether you wish to contribute is a matter for you to decide in the light of your own financial situation. Your position as candidate or Councillor is not different from that of any other member of the party in this respect.

The main thing to remember is that as soon as you become a candidate you have become a public figure. Make sure you don't let down Liberal Democrats locally, or our local supporters.

Register of interests

It is important that our Councillors should be scrupulous in their honesty and declare any financial interest in any matter before the council immediately as required by law. Currently, the conduct of Councillors is covered by the National Code of Conduct. However, under the Local Government Act 2000, each Local Authority now has a statutory duty to maintain a public register of Members' interests. You will be asked to complete a register detailing your interests – these will include any direct financial interest and any other interest that a member of the public might reasonably think could influence your decision. If you have a financial (or pecuniary) interest in an item on a Council agenda,

you should also inform the rest of your group before they decide which way to vote. You should also tell your local party before nomination, of any financial interest you have. For most people, this is not an onerous task, but it is important if Liberal Democrats should be above reproach in these matters. Once elected you should be very careful about accepting hospitality from an individual or organisation that could be interpreted as trying to influence your vote. If you are unsure about any of this, talk to Councillors on the Authority or to ALDC.

As our success grows we must not commit the same sins as less scrupulous opponents. If you have opinions that conflict with the Party's national or local policy, make them clear before you stand for election, particularly if the campaign is being fought on an agreed local manifesto, or if you feel they are likely to be seen as fundamental or unbridgeable, whether by you or others when votes are cast later on in the Council chamber.

A lot of subsequent embarrassment and ill-feeling can be avoided in this way (whether your disagreements are fundamental or acceptable - none of us agree to everything - is something you can discuss with the local party). If you make public statements as a candidate or local Councillor that do conflict with Party policy (something that is likely to happen rarely in practice) you should make it clear that you speak for yourself and not for the Liberal Democrats.

Once elected, it is important to try to work with your Local Party. Go to branch and constituency meetings and tell them what you are doing and why. Enlist their help in your local ward campaigns and in policy development. In this way you will be more effective as a councillor, and they will be anxious to turn out to get you re-elected at the end of your term of office! (Even if you are not standing again, someone will have to defend your seat; it's your job to make it easy for them.)

“ Always remember to thank the Officers for their efforts whether successful or not. Don't give up if not successful – keep trying ! ”

Cllr. Eithne Goode, Warwick DC

umpteen local families, or changed the way that things are done in your area - all for the benefit of local people. We know - we've tried it - it's definitely addictive.

Will It Turn My Life Upside Down?

Like bee-keeping, budgies and playing at trains, being a Councillor can take over your life completely. Some people are just like that, but most Councillors take their Council work in their stride and there is no reason why you should be different. The important thing is to start at the very beginning by organising your Council work in an effective way, yet prevent it taking over completely. The first thing you will notice is the amount of paper that comes through the letter box, not only from the Council but from constituents and local organisations who want Councillors to know all about them. Many Councils now provide PC's which enable you to download committee papers via a modem. This enables you to keep copies of all the papers electronically, and doesn't cause you any storage problems ! It should also allow you to do your casework via email.

ALDC's Success on the Council has practical advice on how to cope. Subjects such as casework, leaflet writing, campaigning, Election Day are covered in ALDC's Activists Handbook Winning Elections.

Will It All Be Worth It?

We cannot promise that you will have the time of your life, but the chances are that you will. We cannot promise that there will be no snags - there certainly will be. Half the fun is in overcoming them.

Being a Councillor can be a rewarding way of serving your community, of showing your area what Liberal Democracy really means in action, and of getting things done (or stopped) in the area you know best - your local patch. Of course there will be times when it is tedious, frustrating, occasionally infuriating. But what isn't?

The point is - you will probably enjoy your Council work. You will find it worthwhile. You will find that, in spite of your initial doubts, you can learn to be effective in all sorts of ways you didn't know existed. You'll discover abilities you didn't know you had, and even when it seems like hard work, you will get a peculiar sort of satisfaction in knowing that you helped to provide a local amenity, stopped a certain road proposal, helped

Six steps to getting elected

Step ONE - Get Campaigning

It is the hallmark of Liberal Democrats that we inform, educate, and enable our communities to take power over their lives. Which is why communications and campaigning are so important. If people don't know what the facts are, don't know what they can do about it, they'll not see any reason to support your bid to get on the Council. But, it is a two-way process - You need to know what their concerns and problems are. You need to show that your style of action gets them results. If you come across as effective and on their side, and not just "like the others"; "in it for what you can get"; "only round at election time" then you are well on the way to success.

If your ward has a regular FOCUS newsletter, a track record of successful actions, even existing Liberal Democrat Councillors, then much of this can be taken for granted. If not, you'll need to plan from square one with your Local Party and Ward Members. The earlier that you start to campaign, the more likely you are to get elected.

Step TWO - Get Approved

Your Local Party will want to make sure that you would be a satisfactory candidate, and should have a "candidate approval" system, which is likely to be fairly informal. Nevertheless, you will normally be expected to complete a simple questionnaire, probably followed by a short discussion with party members, including an elected councillor. If you haven't yet had a chance to ask what it's really like, now is the time! Don't be put off by this process, it safeguards you, as well as being a common-sense requirement to ensure there is a good basis for the future working of the Party and the Council Group.

Step THREE - Get Selected

The Ward, Division or Branch will now have to formally 'select' you. There may be a procedure laid down in the Party or Local Party Constitution. Whilst it may often be a foregone conclusion that you are the person who will be selected, you should be prepared to explain to members locally why you wish to stand, and what level of commitment you will give - both during the campaign and later on the Council. Ideally this selection will be done several months before the election. You are the Focus Editor, or Clean-up Co-ordinator (avoid 'candidate' or 'prospective candidate').

The ALDC guide to Candidate Approval has all you need to know. Make sure you tell ALDC once you have been selected. You will then receive Election Briefings, which are full of campaigning ideas, and election advice.

Step Four - Get Nominated

There is a strict legal timetable for official nominations. The Local Party or agent will often obtain all the necessary forms for nomination, consent to nomination etc. Otherwise, get them yourself from the Returning Officer at the Borough or District Council. Nominations open about six weeks before polling day – check the details with the Returning Officer.

Whoever does this, the forms must be filled in carefully, as they will be thoroughly checked (and may be rejected) by the Returning officer. So submit them in good time, so that any errors can be corrected before the deadline!

It is sensible to have a duplicate set just in case, and to leave yourself several clear days to sort out problems - Returning officers won't "turn a blind eye", so don't simply hope for the best!

Recent legislation means that additional forms are now required to confirm that the local party is happy for you to stand as a Liberal Democrat – make sure these are also filled in and submitted.

Just one further note on nomination forms - when it asks for a description that is where you put your party label not "5'6", blonde with blue eyes" (and yes it has happened!)

Step Five - Get Elected

Now you have to win! We have produced a Handbook to the election campaign, called Winning Elections. It covers the mechanics of canvassing, polling day and so on.

To fight a Ward really well does require a lot of planning and hard work. If you want to win, the six weeks before Polling Day should be the busiest time of the year - much harder than being a Councillor, once elected!

The more helpers you have in the election campaign, the better, but there is no substitute for personal contact by the candidate. Every possible moment in the evenings and weekends and during the day should be devoted to this enjoyable task. (The first door is the worst - once that is out of the way, it gets better all the time!).

Polling Day organisation is an art (or science) of its own. Again, seeing how it is done at someone else's by-election can be very helpful. Liberal Democrats have a justified and fearsome reputation for success at elections so don't insist on re-discovering the wheel - and possibly losing by a dozen votes!

Step six - Get Stuck In

After Polling Day. Remember to thank your helpers. A post-election party is a good idea. Remember your electors will want to see results. You'll need to tackle casework systematically, to keep them up to date all year round on what you are doing, and on events in the ward, using Focus. And you mustn't forget to listen to them. You don't miraculously "know best" just because you're a councillor!

Then, next time there's an election in your ward, Liberal Democrats will be well-placed to repeat your win.

After the 'count' the Chief Executive Officer (Town Clerk) will ask you to sign an Acceptance of Office which must be done before attending any formal meeting.

In Scotland this does not apply as the acceptance of office forms part of the nomination form. So you get a formal written notice that you have been elected, and are not required to make any further declaration.

You will receive an invitation to the first Council meeting. If there is a Liberal Democrat Group they will meet before this and help you to choose committees and give you other help and advice, so get the post-election group meeting in your diary - and make group attendance a top priority.

If you are the only Liberal Democrat councillor on your Council (an increasingly rare event these days), your Local Party may help, and ALDC certainly will.

You should also plan and provide a regular programme of ward newsletters to keep in touch with your activities; again, ALDC can give advice on how to do it.

Finally, don't forget to join ALDC. You will then carry on receiving regular campaign advice via Grassroots Campaigner and Goldmine.

Why do we stand as Liberal Democrats?

1 It is the only way to turn our talk about what Liberal Democrats would do at local level into action.

- It provides a good platform to promote our policies and ways of doing things, and we can often make a powerful and effective contrast between our way and the stale approach of other parties - even when we lose the vote in Council.
- Electing successful Liberal Democrat Councillors helps to make political progress locally, gets good publicity for our party nationally, and is a good base for campaigning in wards, showing that our style of policies both work and is popular. It can also strengthen our Parliamentary prospects and provide the basis for 'integrated campaigning' with the PPC.
- Experience shows that, time and again, our vigorous campaigning Liberal Democrat Councillors can be the only buttress against the vice-like grip which other parties (and sometimes the officers) try to take on Councils, particularly larger ones, where even the strongest individuals are likely to be squashed or ignored, politely or otherwise!
- Liberal Democrats believe that Big Brother doesn't know best. We want to bring power back to a local level and to encourage communities to take decisions on their own behalf. Liberal Democrats bring a new 'style' of openness, involvement and participation to Council work. No one else will.
- For those whose main motivation is to save the local community, it still remains a fact that the best way to do so is to offer them a clear vision of how that community can develop. Standing as a Liberal Democrat you are giving an indication of how you are likely to react to the many issues that will confront you during your term of office.
- And, of course, if we want to be effective as Councillors, it helps to, be part of a Group of like-minded people who can co-operate on the Council.

Life on the Council

Will I have to do as I'm told by the Group?

In too many Councils, the Labour and Tory Groups impose strict Party Whips on every Issue, big and small.

We do not run Groups in this way. Full recognition is given to personal conscience and beliefs and the interest of our wards and local Liberal Democrat policies. But nor is it right for people to pursue individual whims at the expense of Group unity. The unity has to be won through hard debate and discussion.

The Liberal Democrats' policy will usually be set out in a local policy statement, action programme or manifesto. Obviously it will help if you are broadly in support of it!

“ Too much paperwork, Too many meetings ! ”
Cllr. Gurudea Saluja,
Aberdeenshire Unitary

Larger Councils are almost all fairly or very “political”, at least at Full Council meetings. Some smaller Councils are still hardly political at all. In the case of Councils with no overall control (NOC) where our votes are crucial in fixing Council policy, or where there is a Liberal Democrat majority, there is clearly an extra premium on working together effectively. Indeed, a well-publicised failure might have national impact. Again ALDC provides detailed advice on how to cope with this. Whatever the local circumstances, it is up to Liberal Democrat Councillors to work sensibly together to gain the maximum influence, individually and collectively; and in any case it makes sense for you all to meet regularly to discuss your group's initiatives and other major issues coming up.

The Group should hold regular Group meetings which you will be expected to attend, and these should discuss both major issues on the Council and Ward issues. In most cases Liberal Democrats will work hard to agree a line of action, since it is only by talking things out and agreeing a line of action that the Group can be effective.

What is expected when there are genuine disagreements, and the procedure to be followed, should be laid down in a written set of “Standing Orders” for the Group which will also cover things like procedure for election of Group Leader and other officers etc. If your local party is following ALDC's model approval process then you should be shown the groups Standing Orders at the approval stage.

Most Groups will have these Standing Orders already, but a model set of Standing Orders is available from ALDC.

And Later?

Council work (and political activity in general) can - as we've already warned - get addictive! Often for the best of reasons - there isn't anyone else to do it - gradually the pressure mounts. Unless you are on your guard, family, job and social life can be threatened. And, of course, you start to fail at some of the political jobs, too.

Unless you live on your own, the co-operation of other members of your household is worth a lot. Involve them in your election campaign and they will celebrate (not mourn) your subsequent absence at Council Meetings! They will be friendly when they have to answer the phone and take messages. But, don't force them to be involved if they don't want to be involved!

Your partner's help and understanding will be needed, so discuss the idea with him or her before you stand for election. Once elected, don't drop all your other interests. When your Council work

is getting you down, it's the bee-keeping, stamp collecting, rock climbing or yoga that will keep you on an even keel!

So, do keep a sense of proportion. Do take proper holidays. Pace yourself. If you 'burn out' you will be less help to your constituents, not more. Take advantages of time-saving and stress-reducing ideas from ALDC and others. – e.g. get yourself an answering machine and let it take the calls when

“ I have suffered a lack of respect because of my age – Labour and Conservative Councillors talk down to me. The Officers, on the other hand have been very good. ”

Cllr. Jon Aylwin, Cardiff Unitary Authority. Age 22 (21 when elected)

you are having a meal – if it is important, people will leave a message. Learn to say “No” (politely). And if there does come a time when you recognise that you shouldn't carry on any longer on the Council, plan for it, properly with the local party, so that a successor can be found, prepared and introduced to your electors in good time.

Read the ALDC booklet Success on the Council and remember that we provide all year round services for Campaigners and Councillors. For more details of membership and services please get in touch.

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Appendix I - what is a council and what does it do

A Council is a statutory local authority defined by Local Government Act. It consists of a group of people who have been elected to run various local services. Apart from parish councils (Community Councils in Scotland and Wales), there are:

London Boroughs

Metropolitan Districts

Unitary Authorities - throughout Wales and Scotland and in parts of Shire England

County Councils - in parts of Shire England only

District Councils - in non unitary parts of Shire England.

In both the Mets and London Boroughs some services like fire are run by Joint Boards or Joint Committees.

The list below gives an indication of some of the services and functions of the different tiers. It is by no means a comprehensive list of all the activities carried out by local authorities.

London boroughs

Arts, building control, consumer protection, council tax collection, economic development, education, electoral registration, environmental health, highways, housing, leisure, libraries, licensing, planning, refuse collection, social services. There are also a number of joint boards and committees. By far the biggest of these is responsible for the fire brigade.

Metropolitan boroughs

As london boroughs, but with joint boards/committees for highways, refuse disposal and fire.

County councils

Arts, consumer protection, education, fire service, highways, leisure, libraries, some elements of planning (eg structure plans), refuse disposal, social services.

English districts

Arts, council tax collection, electoral registration, environmental health, highways (through agency arrangements with the county), housing, planning (most detailed development control, local plans and conservation), refuse collection.

Scottish and Welsh unitary authorities

Arts, building control, consumer protection, council tax collection, economic development, education, environmental health, highways, housing, leisure, libraries, licensing, planning, refuse collection and disposal, social services.

Council organisation

At the moment, most councils organise their functions through committees and sub-committees. However, the Local Government Act 2000 replaces the committee system with new way of running things.

The most common new system is to have an Executive or Cabinet which makes the day to day decisions. Those decisions are then looked at by Scrutiny Committees who report back to the Executive and Full Council (this will vary from Authority to Authority).

Other alternatives include a directly elected Mayor or a Council Manager - although these are much less common.

Some Local Authorities already have the new arrangements in place, others are still running with the committee system. English Districts with a population of under 85,000 will be able to keep the committee system.

A number of councils are now using committees based on geographical areas which make decisions on all or a number of functions which affect that area – all Councillors in that area will sit on the committee, which can result in a different political control from the Council.

All committees will report to varying degrees to full council, where any member of the council can speak on an issue. However, some Councils will delegate decisions to Committees so that once taken by the Committee they cannot normally be reversed at the full Council. Such delegation can have the effect of excluding councillors not on the committee.

Councils also often set up working parties (often involving people or organisations outside the council) to look in depth at particular issues like town centre developments, environmental action etc and these working parties disband after their work is complete.

As a councillor you may also be asked to represent the council on outside organisations eg school governing bodies, CAB, Youth Club Management Committees, Drainage Boards etc - the list is endless and when you are first elected you need to resist the temptation to put your name forward for everything that sounds interesting (unless you have unlimited time to spare).

Councillors have duties, which they must perform, and other powers, which they may use if they wish. These are set out by law, mainly in the

Local Government Acts, Public Health Acts, Housing Acts, Education Acts, etc. Councillors may also represent the needs and interest of their areas to other bodies, such as central government.

Local Government has a long history of responding to the needs of local communities. Councillors should be advocates for local citizens, helping with individual problems and mobilising the resources of the Council to lobby for those least able to fight for themselves. More and more councils (especially Liberal Democrat ones) are extending their role into community leadership and are also standing up for their areas against the growing number of unelected 'quangos' eg Health Trusts.

Councils therefore run many local services, but far from all. They don't for example run hospitals and job centres. Other services, such as CAB and Samaritans, are run by voluntary bodies, which may often be supported and grant-aided by the Council.

Appendix 2 - Am I eligible

Qualifications

There are four basic qualifications to standing for election:

A registered local government elector

You are on the electoral roll for that council area. If you should be on the register check NOW that your name will be included when the full register comes out in February - if not, it is possible to get yourself included.

Owner or tenant of land for the whole preceding 12 months

This land or other premises can be anywhere in the area of the authority.

Principal or only place of work

Again this can be at any location within the authority area and must be for the preceding 12 months. (NOTE: The court of appeal has held that a person who is retired, does not live in the council area but devotes all their time to serving as a councillor is qualified to stand for re-election as a councillor. The Court ruled that "work" had a wide meaning and covered the work of a councillor).

Residence

Again this applies to any residence within the authority area but it need not be at one address. It is possible that someone who is not qualified to be on the electoral register, may qualify to stand under this qualification.

These qualifications are alternatives and whilst a candidate may have more than one, only one is necessary.

It is advisable to fill in all the categories for which you qualify because if for some reason you were to “fall off” the electoral register after election (i.e. if your form got lost) and that was the only qualification you had given when elected then you would be disqualified.

Disqualifications

There are also several groups of people who cannot be local government candidates even if they meet one of the qualifications above:

Aliens

Only British subjects, citizens of the Republic of Ireland and citizens of European Union States may be candidates for local elections.

Under age

The minimum age for candidates is 21 (on nomination day).

Bankrupts

Anyone who has been adjudged bankrupt or who has made an arrangement with their creditors is disqualified from standing until they are discharged (or in Scotland had their estate sequestrated by a Scottish Court)

Note: An "arrangement with your creditors" is where you only pay part of a debt but your creditors agree to discharge the full debt. This does not include rescheduling a loan provided the full amount will still be repaid.

Imprisonment

Anyone convicted of a crime within the last five years who has a sentence passed of more than three months (without the option of a fine) is disqualified.

Employees of local councils

Employees cannot stand for election to the council which employs them. There have been some cases recently, where, for example, a supply teacher is employed by an agency and the agency

is contracted to provide supply teachers to the LEA, where it has been OK for the person involved to stand.

Employees of a local authority may stand for a different council provided they do not come under one of the following “politically restricted posts”.

“Politically Restricted Posts”

Headteachers, teachers, college principals and lecturers are excluded from the following restrictions, which are essentially designed to restrict interference ‘at the Town Hall’. The following staff are “politically restricted” and subject to the ban on political activity:

(a) Specified Posts: these will be the top management posts, specifically designated by the Council.

(b) Posts which are authorised to discharge a function of the Authority (see the Council’s Standing Orders and Financial Standing Orders for scope). Again this is largely Chief Officers. However, on a small council lower paid jobs could be affected.

(c) Posts which are ‘politically sensitive’:

(i) Any post which is graded at or above ‘Administrative, Professional, Technical and Clerical’ Spinal Column Point 44 (GNC Grade, SCP 44 or higher). (As at 1st April 2000 SCP 44 is equivalent to a full-time salary of £28,839 p.a.). Please note that this applies whether the post is full OR part time - it is the Spinal Column Point that is important not the actual amount of salary received.

(ii) ‘Sensitive’ posts, even if they are graded below SCP 44:

A sensitive post is one where the post-holder gives advice on a regular basis to the Council or any Committee or Subcommittee of the Council, or to any joint committee on which the Council is represented (this catches Committee Clerks), OR speaks on behalf of the Council on a regular basis to journalists and broadcasters.

(d) Political Assistants appointed under the terms of the 1989 LG&HA (regardless of salary).

The rules for people who are employed by local councils or whose work is closely linked to the local council are complex to say the least and if you are a potential candidate in this situation you should seek advice from ALDC as soon as possible,

There are two more disqualifications although hopefully these shouldn't apply to anyone!

Surcharged

People who have been surcharged by a District Auditor to an amount of more than £500 within 5 years of polling day. (Note: this is not applicable in Scotland)

Corrupt and illegal practices

People who have been guilty of corrupt or illegal practices under the Representation of the People Act are disqualified from being a candidate.

People working in areas other than Local Government

Please be aware that the section above deals with the legislative restrictions on people standing for election. People in other employment such as the Civil Service, Armed Forces or Police Force may not be allowed to stand for election by condition of their contracts of employment.

Appendix 3 - Glossary of Terms

Focus

Regular newsletter put out by Liberal Democrats. 'Focus' is the most common name use, but some areas use other titles.

Local Branch

Smaller than a constituency, a branch will be based on a ward or division or multiples of the same.

Local Party

Usually based on constituencies, or groups of constituencies. Every member will belong to a constituency party, usually the one where they live.

Officers

This is the normal name given to people who work for local authorities.

Standards Committee

Every local authority must have a Standards Committee, under the terms of the Local Government Act 2000. Any member can sit on it apart from the Leader. Its role is to maintain high

standards of conduct of all members, and it will deal with all matters to do with declaration of interests.

Standing Orders

These are the rules by which the Council conducts its business. Every local authority must have standing orders and they cover the conduct of meetings, length of speeches, awarding contracts etc.

Ward / Division

These are the electoral units that make up the Council. Councillors are elected to represent the ward/division and the residents living there. In two tier areas, the District Council is made up of wards and the County of Divisions – there may be more than one ward in a Division, particularly in rural areas.

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