



# Local Government

Young at Heart?

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New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this Policy Brief as part of its innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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## Local Government: Young at Heart?

*"[We] have to inspire young people to become involved in shaping their local communities. When they do it is of benefit not only to young people, but also helps the council with new ideas to improve and shape its services."*<sup>a</sup>

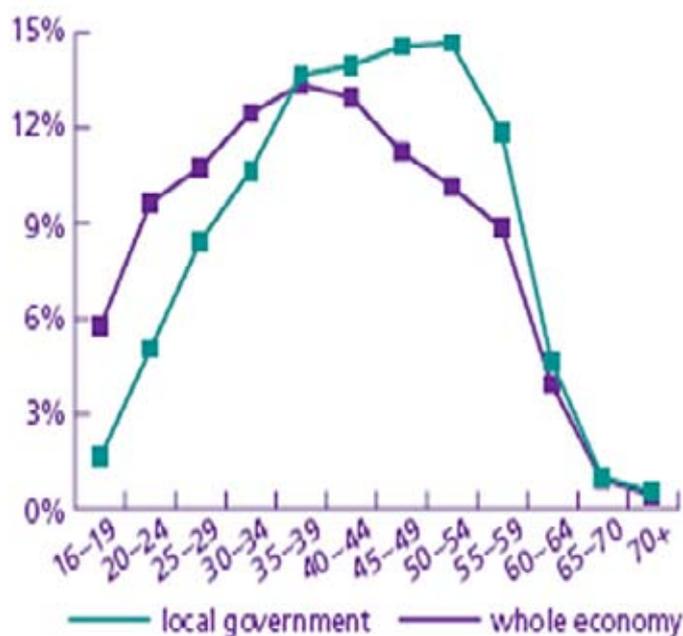
**Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart,  
Chairman of the LGA, 2006**

The youth of today, who'd have them? Well, government would for one. Much work has been done to help young people find a voice and reconnect to the democratic process, from youth councils to blogging and image-sharing between councillors and students.<sup>b</sup> But we need young people to be involved at the heart of local government itself, not just standing on the outside looking in.

A dearth of young blood in local authority roles must be addressed if local government is to sustain and develop its new and challenging role serving increasingly diverse and complex communities, as outlined in the recent White Paper. As strategic commissioners of public services, taking a lead in 'place shaping' their localities, the members and officers of the future will need to be able to call on a very different skill-set from their more delivery-focused predecessors.

Legislation is set to devolve more powers to local government<sup>c</sup> so councils need to think about how to achieve the right balance of people and skills to ensure these new powers are used effectively and a broader spectrum of citizens engaged.

In 2004, the Employers' Organisation warned that local government needed to increase the 8% of officers who were currently under 25 to prevent a future labour crisis.



workforce age distribution (v)

Employers' Organisation<sup>d</sup>

The demographics of council membership are of even greater concern. In 2004, 70.3 per cent of local councillors were men, 96.5 per cent were white and only 62 from almost 20,000 councillors were under the

age of 26. There is an urgent need to seek a mix of candidates that is more representative of the communities they serve; a focus on increasing the proportion of under-thirties should also bring greater diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity.

### Why does this matter?

*“Current levels of under-representation of certain demographic groups on local councils is both a symptom of, and a contributing factor to, the democratic deficit.”<sup>e</sup>*

**Local Government Association, 2001**

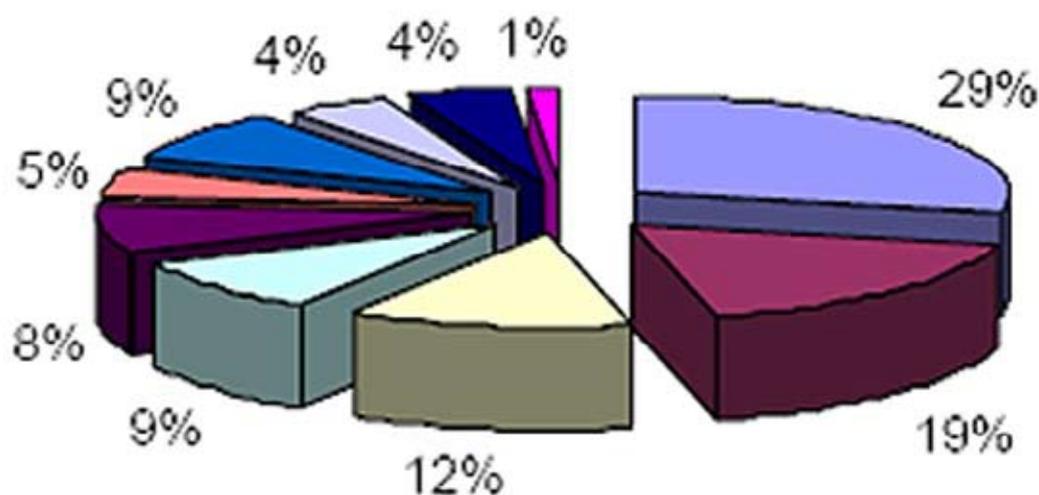
Voter turnout among 18-24 year olds is 20-30 per cent lower than the (already low) national average.<sup>f</sup> The idea that people vote more as they get older is losing credence; disenfranchised young people have the potential to become disenfranchised older people, permanently outside the electoral process.<sup>g</sup> A driver of this low turnout among young people is the feeling that candidates do not represent them and do not understand them or their concerns:

*“When I see politicians campaigning on TV, I get the feeling they’re talking to someone else not me. I don’t know their reality and they don’t know mine.”<sup>h</sup>*

49 per cent of 16-24 year olds thought their views were not taken seriously because of their age<sup>i</sup> and the same percentage of young voters in Ireland said that they would be more likely to vote for a young candidate.<sup>j</sup> The answer seems clear. A new cohort of young councillors could rebuild the links between local government and young people, encouraging a new generation to participate actively in local decision-making. They would act as a conduit for the political views of young citizens, able to understand and act effectively on their needs and priorities.

If an increase in the number of young councillors can increase the number of young voters, this could have an impact in two key areas. Firstly, it would ensure more representative and wide-ranging views are taken into account. Mock elections across schools have shown clear differences between the way in which young people and their adult counterparts vote.<sup>k</sup> Raising turnout among the young would mean local government better reflected public opinion. Secondly, it would reduce the democratic deficit that many feel exists now. Voter turnout is low by European standards and research suggests that, if local government is able to strengthen its bond with a younger generation, future voting and participation across the political system is more likely.<sup>l</sup>

## How do you think Politics could be made more interesting for younger people?



- More Youth Issues on the Agenda
- Involve us more in the Political Process
- Simple Courses in School Curriculum
- More Young Politicians
- Ask us our opinion
- Youth-orientated Political Media
- Let us Vote
- Other
- Celebrities
- Politicians come into School

e2000 (June 2001) Campaign X

*An investigation into youth apathy conducted during UK General Elections 2001*

Younger politicians have the potential to encourage the public to interact more with their council, reaching out to people disillusioned and distanced by the traditional face of local politics. More research is needed, but indications are that younger candidates are seen to offer a refreshing change, appearing more approachable and more sincere about their desires to change things.<sup>m</sup>

By encouraging young councillors, local authorities can show the electorate that they are receptive, 'in-touch' and forward-looking. This in turn can breed a greater trust and faith in local government and its ability to stand up for local views, enhancing democratic legitimacy.

*“Society need[s] young people who were well informed, critical and involved with their communities.”<sup>n</sup>*

**Sir Jeremy Greenstock, 2002**

Inside local government, young councillors believe they are more willing to make bold suggestions, to “think outside the box” and to suggest new approaches. There is a wider acceptance of the advantages of youth when it comes to exploring new and creative ideas.<sup>o</sup>

*“Young people [are] inventive, vigorous, enterprising, at home with the IT revolution and prepared to take a more global view.”<sup>p</sup>*

**Sir Jeremy Greenstock, 2002**

The fresh ideas, different perspectives and difficult questions that a younger outlook brings can challenge policy and encourage debate, resulting in more balanced, inclusive and relevant decision-making.

This aptitude for questioning policy and the accepted norms of governance could further increase the capacity for scrutiny now central to many councillors' role. NLGN's *Pacing Lyons* report argued that scrutinising expertise and power must develop to hold the council executive to account more effectively. Why not involve and encourage a group that are inherently predisposed to this way of working?

## How do we do it?

There are two elements to this process.

- 1) Getting younger people in
- 2) Keeping them there

## Getting people in

Most commentators now recognise that younger people are not apathetic and uninterested in politics, but are just not engaging fully with current democratic processes. Online political forums, anti-war marches and environmental and global poverty pressure groups are often dominated by young voices. Ideas such as Youth Parliament, the young mayors scheme and local 'connecting

to the young' committees are growing in strength and popularity, but few people under 30 are putting themselves up for election to the local council.

The ODPM report *Understanding youth participation in local Government* offers an explanation for this: a lack of understanding of the local government role amongst young people.<sup>9</sup> Although the issues at the heart of local government are important to young people (personal safety, leisure facilities, the environment, job opportunities etc.) there is little awareness of the impact local government can have on them. There needs to be more and better information available to young people, potentially delivered through existing education and IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) systems, highlighting the important role a local councillor plays in shaping the community.

*"[Narrow] conceptions of local government ..... [mean] that the issues local government dealt with were viewed as mundane and localised in comparison with those dealt with by national government.."*

**ODPM, 2002**

Local government has long been seen as the poor relation to its glamorous Whitehall counterpart, conjuring up images of stuffy back offices, institutionalised inertia and long-winded letters about the bins. A recent

Guardian article asked why:

*"any bright, ambitious young person would join, local government, and [face] a lifetime of managing decline, amid a climate of derision and suspicion... lack of money.....[and] a "can't do" culture."*

**Peter Wilby, 2006**

But there are some positive messages. 65 per cent of 15 to 24 year olds feel very or fairly strongly attached to their local communities, a compelling indication of commitment that local authorities need to harness.<sup>1</sup> Becoming a councillor is an opportunity to focus on the community issues that matter to people, to analyse the policies at work and make recommendations. If 'pitched' well, this can be a powerful incentive for participation. 'The state of the bins' isn't going to re-engage people but just re-thinking the language used might make a difference. After all, the bins are just one element of a wider and far more important subject – creating a clean, safe and sustainable environment.

Not enough emphasis is placed on selling the role to a younger audience. Phrases such as "place-shaping powers" and "community building" rarely get beyond the confines of Government reports when they should be translated into a manifesto for attracting young, enterprising individuals. Further development of the scrutiny role, empowering councillors inside and outside the executive,

would make the job description for a local member a much more appealing prospect.

As part of this, a mandatory scheme should be established to guarantee a “PPS” role for any councillor under 30. This mentoring role should ideally be represented by an Executive member of the authority, with the young councillor being able to shadow their work. This would give mentee an opportunity to better understand a council portfolio and the structures of local government, in a similar manner to which Government ministers employ their own PPS.

More could also be done within youth forums such as the British Youth Council and local area youth committees to highlight the benefits and potential of the role. The pathways from participation in these groups to seeking election as a councillor should be made clear and the ambitions that these forums foster channelled into local political careers.

The transition from interested young person to potential candidate has not always been made easy, but small steps in the right direction have been made. During his time at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, NLGN Director Chris Leslie helped develop the 2006 Electoral Administration Bill, which lowered the minimum age for local government candidates from 21 to 18. This put an

end to the paradox of being old enough to make a decision on who runs local services, but too young take on that role yourself.

Party politics also plays a part in alienating potential young candidates, with little room in local government for a young hopeful running on an independent ticket. Candidates usually need party backing but the number of young party members has declined as young people find official party lines increasingly difficult to identify with. By 1997, only one party member in 20 was under 25,<sup>u</sup> significantly reducing the pool of young talent. In the 2004 councillor census, 92.4 per cent of Councillors were affiliated to a political party, however, just under half (49.5 per cent) cited political beliefs as their reason for wanting to become a Councillor.

LGA research has proposed some ‘depoliticisation’ of the local role,<sup>v</sup> to give local members some scope for departing from the party line where local circumstances require it, and to enable prospective young independent candidates to access better advice and support. However, the main conduit for political participation will continue to be political parties, which themselves need radically to raise their game if they want to re-engage citizens and re-invigorate local democracy. MPs and councillors make great claims about reaching out to young people, but more needs to be done. Closer involvement in curriculum

segments on citizenship is one option, explaining how local democracy works, what councils do and what parties stand for at a local level.

NLGN's *Pacing Lyons* report suggested that if the Prime Minister spent more time with local politicians the profile and popularity of local government positions would be enhanced. We should also ask whether such an approach would foster a commitment to local government or rather act to encourage the publicity-seeking, self-serving ambition that can cause disenchantment about politics amongst the electorate. What is needed is a focus on the very real role of local government in improving people's lives, selling the distinctive nature of the role to a young audience.

### Keeping them there

Enticing young people in is not enough. Too many leave council posts after short tenures feeling dispirited and frustrated at their lack of impact.

<sup>w</sup> A recent NLGN survey of young councillors found most were unsure about how long they would remain in post, and 18-30 year olds were more likely to leave within one or two terms than their older counterparts.

There may be several reasons for this. The perception amongst young members is that older councillors do not like to be challenged and regard

younger members as naïve. Our survey suggested that around half of young councillors felt excluded from important decisions and unable to make a real impact in their community. It seems that younger councillors are expected to 'serve their time' before being welcome into the inner sanctum of the council executive.<sup>x</sup>

Some steps have already been taken to address these issues. For example, IDeA's Fastrack training programme provides young councillors with the skills to take on more senior leadership roles at a younger age. But we must simultaneously promote a shift in council attitudes towards a recognition of the benefits of younger representation both to the council and to the electorate. We must break down any them-and-us rivalry between older councillors or the executive and younger 'boat-rocking' members.

The current reward system is also a barrier to the retention of young councillors and favours private sector recruitment of young talent. Retired members have the time and resources to dedicate to the role without the added pressures of simultaneously developing a career. Over 85 per cent of young councillors in our survey found it difficult to balance employment commitments with their council roles, and the same proportion supported guaranteed salaries for councillors. A councillor can be earning under £5 an hour, less than the national minimum

wage. Furthermore, the rules that prevent conflicts of interest also create a glass ceiling that significantly limits member career progression in other local government roles. Voters do not want councillors on 'fat cat' salaries but a new settlement is needed to get the best people running local services.

There is an argument for member pay limits being set centrally, removing the temptation to fix allowances artificially low to avoid potentially difficult public debate. An average of 18 hours every week is spent by councillors attending to constituency needs; only the most unreasonable electorate would begrudge a decent wage appropriate to circumstances, ability and potential. A public debate on councillor remuneration, which councils try hard to avoid, is just what is needed.

Younger candidates also need to have an eye on their personal development and future career prospects. Improving the training and development offer to members is a key task not only to boost retention but also to ensure councillors can meet and continue to meet the demands of modern local government. NLGN's recommendation that councillors be rewarded with one local government interview in any role for each year of service could play its part.<sup>y</sup> This not only keeps the career options of a councillor open, but it also helps to retain and promote talent within local government.

## Summary

There is no doubt that experience is an invaluable asset, but only a balanced and representative local government can meet the needs of twenty-first century British citizens. This means re-examining the role of young councillors, recognising their unique skills and contributions and marketing these to a wider audience within local government, to the public and to the next generation of councillors.

This is a task made critical by the demographics of council membership. If nothing is done to encourage younger talent into local democracy it will face a crisis by 2020. Although challenging, tackling it should generate a virtuous circle. Attracting and rewarding young, dynamic councillors makes local government a more attractive place to be, which in turn brings in more of the same, spreading the word that you can "make a difference" to your local community. The councillors we already have make a valuable contribution, but the current situation is unsustainable in the long term. As the role of local government evolves so must also the people who make it work. If we are serious about re-invigorating local democracy we must also be serious about getting young people involved and keeping them there.

## Recommendations

- A mandatory scheme should be established to guarantee a 'PPS' role (equivalent to a Parliamentary Private Secretary to a Government Minister) for any councillor under 30. This role should ideally be represented by an Executive member of the authority.
- Direct time and resources to marketing the role of councillors to a younger audience, moving away from the traditional 'stuffy' image of local government to an emphasis on a more dynamic place-shaping role.
- Make the most of existing channels of youth involvement to ensure enthusiastic, passionate and politically-minded young people can learn about and get experience of local government.
- Focused IAG and support for young people wishing to stand as independents as well as enhanced work by local parties to engage with young activists as potential candidates.
- Continue and extend programmes that develop the skill-sets of young councillors to allow them to take on more senior positions earlier in their political careers. Couple this with a focus on cultural changes within councils to make the most of the unique skills of young councillors.
- Offer a more competitive reward system factoring in the need for young people to maintain careers and support families in addition to their political commitments. This includes:
  - Looking at the current ceiling on councillor career progression within local government with a view to incentivising staying in the sector.
  - Offering a menu of available benefits, such as subsidised childcare or enhanced training and development, which can be personalised to remove obstacles to retention.

## Endnotes

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- XXV. NLGN (2006) *Pacing Lyons: A route map to localism*

## NLGN Survey of young councillors

Between October and December 2006, NLGN interviewed 118 elected councillors in the UK below the age of 40 about their attitude to aspects of local government. The results are below:

How many years have you been an elected representative in local government?

less than one year	<b>28.81%</b>
1-2 years	11.02%
2-3 years	11.86%
3-4 years	21.19%
4-5 years	6.78%
5-7 years	8.47%
7-10 years	7.63%
more than 10 years	4.24%

How many years do you intend to stay in local government?

0-4 years	11.86%
5-8	16.95%
8-12	7.63%
More than 12 years	12.71%
Don't Know	<b>50.85%</b>

Into which of the following age ranges do you fall?

18-21	2.54%
22-25	17.80%
26-30	26.27%
31-35	<b>27.12%</b>
36-40	26.27%

On a scale of one to five, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Executive councillors should be paid salaries.

Disagree Completely	3.39%
Disagree Slightly	5.93%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	5.93%
Agree Slightly	31.36%
Agree Completely	<b>52.54%</b>
Don't Know	0.85%

Frontline councillors should have simpler and more significant compensation for the time they give.

Disagree Completely	3.42%
Disagree Slightly	8.55%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	17.09%
Agree Slightly	31.62%
Agree Completely	<b>39.32%</b>
Don't Know	0.00%

All councillors should receive child care support and a pension scheme.

Disagree Completely	6.78%
Disagree Slightly	11.02%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	13.56%
Agree Slightly	22.03%
Agree Completely	<b>46.61%</b>
Don't Know	0.00%

Executive councillors should be guaranteed one interview for a public sector job for every year of service.

Disagree Completely	<b>47.90%</b>
Disagree Slightly	11.76%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	21.85%
Agree Slightly	5.88%
Agree Completely	4.20%
Don't Know	8.40%

I find it difficult to work in full-time employment and perform my duties as a Councillor.

Disagree Completely	4.27%
Disagree Slightly	4.27%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	5.98%
Agree Slightly	27.35%
Agree Completely	<b>56.41%</b>
Don't Know	1.71%

Central government targets seriously hinder my ability to perform my duties as a Councillor.

Disagree Completely	5.08%
Disagree Slightly	11.86%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	16.95%
Agree Slightly	29.66%
Agree Completely	<b>33.90%</b>
Don't Know	2.54%

I feel I have the power to make a real impact on what happens in my authority.

Disagree Completely	11.86%
Disagree Slightly	24.58%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	7.63%
Agree Slightly	<b>44.07%</b>
Agree Completely	11.86%
Don't Know	0.00%

I feel excluded from too many important council decisions.

Disagree Completely	14.41%
Disagree Slightly	15.25%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	11.86%
Agree Slightly	<b>31.36%</b>
Agree Completely	27.12%
Don't Know	0.00%

An increase in the number of councillors under 40 would be beneficial to the council as a whole.

Disagree Completely	0.84%
Disagree Slightly	4.20%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	10.08%
Agree Slightly	26.05%
Agree Completely	<b>57.14%</b>
Don't Know	1.68%