

Be a councillor seminar



AP = Councillor Anjana Patel, a Conservative councillor in Harrow

CB = Clarence Barrett, an independent councillor in Havering

BM = Cllr Bassam Mahfouz, a Labour councillor in Ealing

RP = Ruth Polling, a Liberal Democrat councillor in Islington

AP: What I would like to say to you is how actually I became councillor and where I actually come from. I was born in East Africa so I had part of my education in Africa and part of my education in India and then I came to the UK. In the UK I haven't had full time education but I obviously did the courses and then joined Barclays and then worked for Barclays for many years and while I was working at Barclays, I also sort of educated myself, did the courses and did part time studies as well. How I became councillor was actually by accident, like most of the councillors here become councillors here because either they're passionate about something or because something has happened in their life. What happened in my life is there were two issues that really concerned me; one was a car park issue in Brent which was to do with one of the Temples and I thought that because there wasn't enough representation in the council, people were not able to put their case forward and people did not understand the requirements that the community wanted. The second thing happened is when I actually moved from East London to North London and I moved because of the education in Harrow, I wanted my son to go to a particular school and that did not happen because I was told that it is too late, your son's name will be on a waiting list and he can't go to school this term or whenever the vacancy will arise I'll get the chance. I wasn't prepared to accept that because I actually asked for the place a year in advance and I was told I couldn't apply at the time.

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I thought that nobody was listening to me at the time when I was communicating with the admission department; I thought that there was nobody there who was actually listening to me and that really got me annoyed. I'm a person who doesn't give up easily because I guess I have struggled quite a lot in my life and as you can see, I have moved from country to country and when you have that kind of a background, you automatically learn to sort of not take no as an answer but to kind of fight. So I said to myself, I think the only thing I can do is that when the opportunity arises, I'll have to actually stand for myself. I obviously contacted my local councillors and they did not respond either; none of them actually came back to me when I was actually a really desperate single mother, looking for a school for her son. At that time, I decided the consortiums are looking for ethnic minorities and I said to myself I think I can do that job and I put myself forward. To my surprise, I actually won in a ward that nobody would have thought that I would win but actually won. I won because I took to the doorstep what a mother would want for her children in the environment; good education, safer streets and everything that is value for money as well and that somebody listens to you and not just ignore you and I think this is what I took to the doorstep. I said to people that if I became a councillor, these are the issues that I'll take forward. At the time, there was no sixth form in Harrow and I said that that is something that I will fight for as well because I always believe in sixth form education. Touch wood, this is something that's happened during my time that I have been a councillor and now that I'm a school portfolio holder, it is happening so I'm really pleased about that but this is how I actually became councillor.

Okay being a councillor is not always very easy, you might ask questions but before you ask questions, I'll actually give you a little brief. It is a job that requires a lot of time and effort, the most important thing is that you have to

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like to serve the community; you must have the feelings for the community, want to do something for the community and if only you have that in your heart, in your mind, I think you will be successful in being a councillor because it does take a lot of your time. A lot of your social life as well but the benefit is that you can actually go to bed like I do every night and I have helped somebody and it makes me so happy that at least I made a difference to that person's life, even though I wasn't able to change a lot but at least I made a difference. I listened to that person and I'm trying my best to solve that problem and that makes me happy and I can go to sleep peacefully. That's what it's all about.

CB: Thank you very much. Yes, I was elected in 2006 and I have a background as an accountant in the public sector which is very useful for being a councillor. I became interested in local politics when I moved into Upminster, Essex; the London Borough of Havering and the local Resident's Association in that area are very strong and so I was attracted to what was going on there and how I could be involved, how I could improve the area and how I could make it a good and safe and happy place to live. Luckily for us, we have a very good newsletter that goes out to something like 17,000 residents in Upminster and the surrounding areas and so we have a very powerful way of communicating with our residents. I was fortunate enough to be selected as a candidate, as I say, in 2006 and of course because of my background in finance, as soon as I was elected, which I was very thankful for, I got put on all the finance type committees and pensions and investments which is very, very important. Earlier on this year, our leader of our group stood down and I was, again, very, very fortunate enough to be selected to be leader of the Resident's Association in Havering, which is also the principle opposition in Havering. I think looking back over a short time, it's been a fantastic, fantastic experience and it's so fulfilling to be able to feel that you're doing something

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for the community. It doesn't matter what flavour you are or what colour or flag you're wearing; what you're doing is that you're doing it for the community and I think it's a very rewarding thing you can do.

BM: As Claire mentioned, I'm shadow cabinet member of the Environment and Transport in Ealing and what that means is essentially what it means for quite a few councillors, actually holding the party or the group in control of the council to account. For many councillors, that means going to scrutiny committee meetings or going to the full council, reading your paperwork in time to find out what the council is up to and making sure that they're doing it in the best interest of the residents that you represent. It's a really strong role for back bench councillors and for many of you, when you do get elected as a councillor for the first time, you'll be what's termed as a back bench councillor. Don't let that put you off, actually being a back bench councillor can be an incredibly fulfilling role to start off with and actually to continue with. One of the most important roles of being a councillor is actually being that ward councillor. Last week for instance, I saved two people from being evicted when their Housing Association and Housing Benefit and so on wasn't going quite right and you can step in there, speak to the right people and actually make sure that justice prevails and that the bailiffs don't knock on that person's door.

There's new powers that we're giving back bench councillors, talk a bit about that and there's these new ward forums as you might have heard or area committees as they're known in some boroughs. Probably between now and the next two or three months, probably the first thing you can do is if you haven't already been to one, is make sure that you find out where your ward forum or area committee is in your area and make sure that you attend

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because they will be your local councillors, they'll be your local Safer Neighbourhood Police team, there will be lots of other representatives of Resident's Associations and other people who are politically active with a small p in your ward. If you haven't already gone to it, make sure you do go to the next one to find out what the big issues are in your ward. Obviously one of the other things is we hear from cabinet members what they're delivering for the borough, for the borough that you live in, the borough that you represent but clearly as a ward councillor, what you can say to them is making sure that that is delivered at ward level because sometimes the argument is always that you deliver perhaps for the centre of the borough but not on the periphery and there's always the groups that sort of feel neglected on the edge of the borough. It's really important that you can voice that opinion and actually make sure that the council's delivering at every level and in every part of the borough that you represent. One of the things about politics in general, whether it's at borough level, at the sort of cabinet level or as a ward councillor, it's partnership working and I've already mentioned resident's groups, the police teams, church and faith leaders locally. You, as a local councillor, have a lead with those people, you can bring those people together, there's so many questions that people have locally, you can't just provide the answer, click your fingers and make it happen. You've got to work with the local police, you've got to work with the local resident's associations, bring them on board and be able to deliver what you need for that local area. Church, faith leaders, other group scouting movement and so on; they're all out there, they're all doing voluntary work in the same way that you would be as a councillor. You're all essentially aiming for the same thing. You see, at national level, such a big division on some of the big issues but at local level, there's actually a lot that brings political parties and councillors together because essentially, they're all working to try and improve the local

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area and there might be, you know, a planning application here or there but essentially, you're trying to achieve that same goal, it's just about how you're going to get there and making sure you've got the money to deliver it.

One of the other things I'd just ask you to do, if you're not this already, is become a school governor. Now many of you will hopefully already be school governors but if you're not, get in touch with your local group leader or somebody who's on the council already and say that you would like to become a school governor. As with being a councillor, it's a very rewarding task, it's absolutely fantastic when you go there and you can see an improvement that you've made with the school, as well as at council level. Just to repeat what everybody I'm sure will say; being a councillor, whilst it can take some time and so on, it's an incredibly rewarding job. When you see you've made that difference, the first thing that anybody came to me politically when I was a member of a Resident's Association was you know, a little old lady that lived down the street and I was 17 years old and she said 'I can't cross the road properly' because there wasn't traffic lights, there wasn't anything to stop, it was quite a busy road and I got a zebra crossing installed for her, you know, got a petition together and all the rest of it, did that when I was 17. Something small like that can make a real difference for people so you can imagine as a councillor, your day to day role as delivering cleaner streets, better value for money and so on, how much more of an impact you can make.

RP: Thank you, and I must reassure you to start with that I barely recognise my biography. It does make me sound like the complete political professional, these are dubious people that we always think about who politics is their only aim but I think ten years ago, for me the picture was very, very different and actually, I've spoken at huge numbers of events like this and I thought I was

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the only councillor in London who had got involved in politics because of a zebra crossing and I now actually discover there's more than one of us out there [laughter]. When I was 13, a friend of mine was hit by a car, crossing between the two sides of my school side, we had the sports side on one side of the road and the main building on the other. So it was the campaign for the zebra crossing between the two parts of my school that got me into politics. I didn't wake up one morning and think 'I know, what I really want to do is to be a local councillor' but during that zebra crossing campaign, what I became aware of was the huge difference that having a good councillor or a bad councillor could make. For me, and I have to say at the time and in the area of London I was in, it were mainly bad councillors. I felt I could do that job better because I actually cared about the community I was in and that included the community at the school and I personally felt, as a 13 year old, that far too much politics was focussed at a much older generation and really didn't factor in some of the concerns I had.

So that's how I first got involved in politics, I discovered that my councillors weren't that good but the people that wanted to get rid of my councillors and become the councillor at the next election were really supportive. So that's really, in some ways, how I picked my party, it's a bit of an accident. So I got involved with the Liberal Democrats, which I'm now a councillor for, when I was 17 and really for me, it was just about changing my community. I had no ambitions nationally in politics, I had certainly no intention to have a career in politics but what I did want to do was ensure that my school got what it deserved and at the local elections when I was 17, my school got a new council, different councillors, a zebra crossing and a new science building to replace the one that had had to be closed because of health and safety issues. That's for me when I actually said yes, being a councillor can absolutely change the local area and I want to do that and I want to be part of

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that. So I got involved in politics much more heavily, as my biography says, I've been involved in all sorts of parts of the party but I've always come back to the local. I stood for council for the first time when I was 21, just failed to get elected, I stood again when I was 25 and I got elected but all the way along the path for me, it was actually other people's encouragement that encouraged me to do it. I think I'm a very different person standing here today than I was when I was 13 and first starting to get involved in politics and every step of the way, someone has had to say to me 'actually yes, you can do it, go for it'.

So what I really hope events like today's event will be is us saying to you 'yes you can do it, go for it' because I needed someone to say that to me. I'd say the absolute core skill of being a councillor is being good at working with people and if you love working with people and you love getting out there in your community and if you love the place you live, you have everything you need to be a councillor already. We can fill in the technical details for you tonight but if that's your commitment, that's what being a councillor is all about. As many people have said, it is the most fulfilling role you could ever do and for me, I live in the heart of the ward I represent in Islington and seeing the changes day to day that being a councillor and also being a cabinet member at the council can bring about for the people that I work with; not just people I work with, these people are my neighbours, that is the best feeling you can have in the world. So really do consider it and do know in your heart when you leave here this evening, you can all be fantastic councillors.

How do you find out what issues are important to residents and how do you go about resolving them?

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BM: Essentially, one of the first things that you've got to do and I think, everybody's probably mentioned it already, is as a councillor, you represent those people so there are things that you can do. The council will run a resident's survey, for instance, every year which will be right across the whole borough, we'll find out what the top priorities are so you can have a look at that. The second thing you can do is before you even become a councillor, one of the things that you would do is campaign on the streets; knock on the doors as Anjana said and when you knock on the doors, one of the things that people confront you with is the issues that are important to them. So if you find, for instance, you're walking down a street and the tenth door you've knocked on, you find the tenth person telling you that parking is a serious issue in that street. It's not rocket science but the real question is how would you then gather that momentum, how we will feel about a specific issue, very concerned about that issue, very passionate about it and turn that into a solution and that's about working with your fellow councillors through petitions, through lobbying whoever's in charge of that pot of money, that particular portfolio in trying to deliver what you need for those local residents. Sometimes there's conflicting interests because what local residents want in one street might conflict with what is needed in the next street or the next town so you've got to balance all that out and of course, you might win over the local residents very easily, for instance on this parking issue that I've raised but you might not win over the councillors in the neighbouring town because they may be very put off by what you want to implement; let's say a CPZ, a controlled parking zone. In other issues, you might have something where two or three people come to you and say look, you know, we really need something in this local area but actually, those two or three people might be the vocal minority and you've got to work that out by speaking to the actual quieter majority by knocking on those doors, finding out how people

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really feel about it because almost everything the council actually implements, contrary to popular belief, it has to be implemented with the support of a majority on a consultation document. So if you want to put speed humps down the road, you might have had 50 people come to you and say they want them but you can't implement them until A, you've found the money but B, more importantly, residents down that street have actually supported you in official consultation to implement those speed bumps, for instance, down that road.

RP: Certainly, I think it's a real mix; some parts of my community come to me really regularly with the issues that are worrying them. Generally, they are better educated members of the community, they've got access to the internet and email, they're formed into very organised Resident's Associations and then I've got parts of my community who would never come to me if I didn't go out and do that door knocking and do that introduction. So I think there is something there in actually not just guessing what the community think or in just listening to the vocal minority, but actually getting yourself out and in there and talking to people because different groups of people will interact with their councillors in different ways. So I think you need to use a real range of methods when you're communicating with people to ensure that there's something that works for everyone. We do run things like online petitions which works really well with the student population in my ward but we'll also knock door to door with petitions, the students are never in but they can sign up online but then the people on some of the estates I represent would much prefer to see me face to face and talk about the issue before signing the petition. So I think it does take a real mix but the other thing I just wanted to add is your political party will help you. It can feel like all of what we just said you're doing on your own and you're really not. What you'll do as a councillor is, if you're lucky, head up a little team of activists in your ward for

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your party and they'll be your real support network. So I've got a team of six or seven people who regularly deliver leaflets for me so when I've got a campaign running, I don't have to deliver all 7,000 letterboxes in my ward; they help me with that delivery. When I do the door knocking, it feels so much nicer to go out with your ward colleague or a couple of other people. So your party or the Resident's Association will provide that support network for you, you won't be completely left on your own doing that campaigning. You're really the champion getting your activist volunteers to come out with you, picking the nights, doing that liaison with the council or the Transport for London but you're only fronting a campaign; to get the campaign to be really successful, you need to be pulling other people in.

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Does a councillor put the needs of their local resident first or those of the council?

AP: All I would say that is I don't think there is any criteria like that, that it has to be the council needs that you have to meet or the community needs that you need to meet. We've all said that you must want to do it for the community and you must want to serve the people of the community that you live in and I think that is the most important criteria that there would be. Everything else falls in its own place once you've decided that, like I said, we all became involved in politics because of our different reason and I don't know, you might have your own reason to become involved in politics but I don't think there is anything which sets down that you have to have, you know, like it has to match something that the council wants or the community wants; I don't think that is one of the criteria. Purely, you love people and you want to serve people and that is the most important thing.

How much time do you spend on being a councillor?

RP: As you go through different stages of your career as a councillor, the time commitment is very different and the other caveat I'll put on it before saying how many hours I do is that you can really share the jobs so at different times during your life, there will be more or less difficult things happening in your own personal life. So the great thing in London is you're elected as part of a team of three councillors; every ward's got three councillors so actually, you can share things across.

I'd say as a back bench councillor doing your surgeries, attending local community meetings, the formal council

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meetings, catching up with casework and phoning officers to chase up things, you're probably looking at about ten hours a week and then it can increase as you go up the political chain. I'm paid to be full time in my job, Islington's cabinet members, there are eight of us, are paid to be full time and I usually estimate on putting in about 70 hours a week.

BM: Another thing about the average time, as Ruth said, essentially for a back bench councillor it's supposed to be about ten hours and it can go up to, like she said, about 70 hours. Now what London Council has done very well on, and actually fights on all councils behalf, is it sets out an average time of how much each councillor should be spending, depending on what role they do and on councillor's allowances, which is a question I'm sure is on the back of some of people's minds, although it hasn't come out, is or should be essentially linked in with how many hours you're supposed to be doing. For most jobs, some council leaders even, it is a voluntary job; it's supposed to be a part time job, it's not supposed to take over your whole life, you should be able to work your life around your role as councillor.

CB: I do work full time as an accountant, I do have a young family; a ten year old and a seven year old and I'm also, as I said, leader of the opposition and so forth. I'll probably spend about 30 hours a week doing what I do on top of that. I'll tell you what's very important for those it applies to, is to have a supportive family. If you're thinking about going into it and you're married and have children, girlfriend, whatever; get their support because it really does change a dynamic of your life and with a supportive family, really anything's possible, as I've found out, because I certainly couldn't do what I do without the support of my family and I'm ever so grateful for that. But moving further on about commitment, it is also about delegation as well, being able to delegate things to other ward councillors, not everything, but also members in

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your group; there's certain things you can delegate to and just keeping organised for all those things. I must say, if it wasn't for emails, I think life would be an awful lot more difficult and I'm not sure I'd be able to do it to be quite honest if it wasn't for emails and the internet because it does make it a heck of a lot easier.

AP: If you're in a position and if you're a back bencher then you're not spending a lot of time. I would say maybe you're spending less than ten hours but if you are in power, in control of the council and if you're a back bencher then you'll definitely be spending at least ten hours per week and if you're a portfolio holder then you will be spending, I would say, at least 30 / 40 hours. When you are involved in a party, I would say mainstream party, it's not just the council work that you do, you also have to do a lot of campaigning to continue with making sure that you get elected and for that, you have to work at the weekends and in the evenings sometimes as well. So that all adds up because it is your time that you have to give and that is why, like Ruth is saying 70 hours, I'm sure it does come to that many hours and not only that, you don't just have your council duties only to do. How can you find out about the problems that are happening in the society out there and the community out there? You are invited to a lot functions that you go and attend and most of the functions are at the weekend and in the evening sometimes. You have to attend them as well because only if you attend those functions that you're going to find out what is the problem in the community. I spend most of my life, at the weekend, at the functions and I agree with Clarence that you have to have your family's support to do this job. Without that, you cannot do this job because today, I'll give you a typical example; I look after my mother as well at home, she is not well at all, she can't move at all today. All of a sudden, something happened to her yesterday now I had to ask my son to look after her today, if he wasn't going to do that then I'd have to council this

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today and say sorry I can't come. But because he was okay with it, he said 'alright mum, it's okay, I know you have to go, I'll look after mother' so you really have to have support from your family otherwise you can't do it.

Is your address made public and does that put you at risk?

BM: When I first got elected in 2005, not very long into it, I actually got a phone call from a, who I didn't realise at the time, was quite a psychotic gentleman going on about something I couldn't quite understand. When I told him to, you know, just to clarify himself, he didn't take too kindly to that and then started being very abusive to me on the phone and then threatened to kill me basically. Of course, your address is given, obviously when you go to vote, you'll see every candidate's name and address on that but that is simply printed on the election day itself. Now when it comes to actually your publication of your address after that time when you're elected as a councillor, you can ask the council to hide that so they can say that you just live within Earls Court, you don't have to say which street or which number you live at but clearly at election time, people do have that opportunity to see where you live. The other thing is when I did know that this person was threatening to kill me, I didn't know whether he was being serious or he was just let loose one day. Essentially, I contacted the local group officers who supported us and most of us have and most of you as councillors will get a group of council officers to support you in your role. They contacted the head of the legal department who contacted the police and actually, the police offered me quite a range of things to try and help me if I considered my life to be in danger and I felt quite reassured by that. But be reassured that as a councillor, the support is there if you need it, god forbid should you feel that would actually happen to you.

What is it like being an independent councillor?

CB: How effective are independents? Independents can be very, very effective, particularly when there's a group of independents, as I can speak from my own experience. We have 12 independents in our group in Havering and we

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are the largest independent group in London. I think across the country, one in ten councillors is actually independent. I think a lot of people view independents with a bit of a quizzical look saying what do they do? A lot of them are stuck on one issue, single issues and I think it's important to become a bit more organised, a bit more focussed on other things. You may be able to stop a bypass being built but can you sort out budgets, can you do this, can you do that; broadening your appeal to the people out there, to the community. The more organised you are, the more high profile you are, the more effective you will be so it was really one of those things; the more you put in, the more effective you will be.