

8 MARCH 2018

DIVERSITY CASE STUDY | CLLR KELLIE HINTON



Background

The Diversity Commission was launched by NALC to support the growth of diversity in local councils. The Commission has begun work to look at ways for local councils to encourage every member of their community to get involved with what happens locally. As part of this work we are gaining evidence from diverse councillors to hear about their experiences of getting involved with their local council.

Our new series of Diversity Case Studies aim to give you an understanding of how to attract more diverse people to your local council.

This case study will focus on Cllr Kellie Hinton. She is mayor of Henley Town Council and was crowned as NALC's Star Councils Young Councillor of the Year in 2017. This case study will look at how she got involved with her town council, the

challenges she has faced and how she overcome them to achieve success with her town council. Read about her experience below.

Kellie's story

As a young mother of one, living on a low income in one of the wealthiest towns in the UK, one of the first questions people ask me when they meet me is, "How did you get involved in local politics?" I've become adept at answering this in a multitude of ways, normally involving words that wouldn't look out of place in a Miss Great Britain acceptance speech about world peace. Yes, it does feel like this is a calling and it is a natural fit for me in my life, but the truth is I didn't 'get' into local politics. If anything, I stumbled, tripped and fell into my local community. I was unruly, free and financially broke, living in the local YMCA. I was co-ordinating their garden renovation project and happened to meet the Mayor of Henley and I decided that unlike most people with authority and generally most people older me at that time, I liked this person, I believed in her. That was the planting of the seed. The watering of that plant came some time later, after I'd left the YMCA to have my daughter. I came across the now former mayor and she invited me to a meeting of the local independent party she was a member of. Honoured to be asked, I accepted. They nurtured me through my first election in 2011, aged 25.

Once I'd been elected, like any new councillor, I started to find my feet. I got involved in a community-led initiative for a new skate park (which I finally opened as mayor last summer) and I became the deputy for Henley in Bloom, part of the Britain in Bloom campaign. I did not know how interested and involved I would become in both of those projects at the start but here I am, having dedicated the last six years to them.

My council work has been focused primarily on recreation and amenities in the town and we have had a lot of success, even representing the UK in Entente Florale – the world's largest horticultural competition. I am particularly proud of and still work closely with our parks services team in my role this year as mayor.

There are people who specialise in finance or law and they have an obvious role within community groups or local councils. Then there are people like me, whose speciality is engaging with the community itself. We are not the obvious candidates. We are the new mums with time on their hands or students yearning for experience or the people written off because of their apparent lack of academic skills and not appreciated for their people skills. We may not be retired, have owned a business, we may not even own our own homes, but we are people who can change the face of local politics. I am not saying that councils should be

full of people just like me – that would be both unwise and boring. What we need are diverse councils. We need councillors who come from all walks of life, with different backgrounds. I hear people constantly saying in different local forums – how can we attract new people, younger people? The answer is look for them.

All too often we look for people based on their life experience, because that is what is needed at the time. But what about the people without the experience who are willing to learn and give their time? We should be looking for potential as much as we look for relevant skill-sets. To look for others to join us, we must first look at ourselves and we must also face change. Times change, technologies change and councils constantly change. We should modernise, move with the times and continue finding new ways to communicate with people. Keeping people informed is one of the easiest ways of getting them interested in what we do, which often leads to them getting involved. It just takes one open-minded person to plant the seed. We all know that the grass root level of politics – local councils – is the place where we can make real, visible change.

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