

8 MARCH 2018

DIVERSITY CASE STUDY | CLLR SHAIDA AKBAR



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 Shaida Akbar. She is chairman of Wexham Court Parish Council. This case study will look at how she got involved with her parish

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

Why did I get involved?

I have lived in the parish of Wexham all my life and have always been passionate about serving my local community. I believe that strong ties in the community are important and that parish and town councils have a leading role to play in helping the community achieve this.

I first heard about becoming a parish councillor through my local Labour party. As soon as I heard about the opportunity I wanted to put myself forward.

I have always been an individual that wants to make a positive change in the community. Before my role as a parish councillor I got involved in a lot of initiatives which helped raise money for good causes. I have tried to instill this in the parish council since becoming a councillor. We recently partnered with Action Relief volunteers to hold a charity car wash which raised over £3,300.

Challenges

Being a parish councillor can be a big commitment and take away a lot of your personal time. At times it can be very challenging and you can often be put under a lot of pressure. I think you need to prepare yourself for that commitment if you are to be a successful councillor, but there are things your council can do to help ease the burden.

I am a mother of four and as many parents know, childcare can take up a lot of your time. Thankfully I am chairman of a parish council which is very flexible. We hold one meeting every month which is just enough to allow us to make the best use of councillors' time and get on with our priority of supporting the community. Being a flexible council makes the prospect of becoming a parish councillor more attractive to those who lead busy lives.

Achievements

When I was appointed chairman of the council I wanted to make sure the relationship between the council and the community was as strong as possible and make it one of our main priorities to really connect with our residents.

Part of this engagement work is to really raise the profile of the parish council with the community. The more visible you are the better. To do this I encourage all of our councillors to get out into the community as much as possible and they

do this by visiting our local old age homes, youth clubs, colleges, schools and community groups. This has really given councillors a perspective of what our residents want to see us deliver.

As part of our engagement programme, the parish council holds a number of events throughout the year that always have a focus on the community. We host a number of open day events that travel to different places in the community to ensure that residents from every background have a chance to tell the council exactly what they would like to see us do.

To engage even further with our community we also offer residents the chance to hire the parish halls for discounted prices.

Through our engagement programme the parish council has been really effective on the recruitment front. Upon our travels, we are always appealing for more people from the community to get involved and put themselves forward for election. We try and be as open and transparent as possible.

We want to make sure it is known that we are here to serve and represent them.

Final thoughts

Wexham is a culturally diverse area in Berkshire in terms of age, race and gender and that is definitely represented on the parish council. We have councillors from all sorts of different backgrounds and it shows how effective our engagement and recruitment techniques have been when reaching out to all members of our community.

I believe that in order for local councils to attract more diverse audiences, they have to go out and throw a lot of time at it. By engaging with all members of the community, only then will you truly understand their needs.

All councillors must work together on this for it to be successful. It is a two way partnership, where you listen to residents and learn from them to better fulfil their needs and ensure they become more active in your parish.