Government Equalities Office

Political Life: Disabled People's Stories (Plain Text Version)

Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Strategy

Every effort has been made to make this document accessible. However, if you have any issues this document is also available in a range of alternative formats:

 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-life-disabled-peoples-stories>

 For more information on the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Strategy visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/creating-a-fairer-and-more-equal-society/supporting-pages/making-it-easier-for-disabled-people-to-stand-for-election>

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Ministerial Introduction

In 2012 the UK delivered the largest and most successful Paralympics ever, including more athletes from more competing nations, record ticket sales, a hugely successful Paralympics GB Team and the most extensive media coverage of any previous Paralympics.

During the Games Ellie Simmonds, David Weir and Jonnie Peacock become national heroes. Disability was consistently, openly and widely talked about like never before. According to a poll by Scope, 72% of disabled people think that the Paralympics have had a positive impact on attitudes. 20% say it’s changed the way people talk to them and 20% say it’s made people more aware of their needs.

Disabled role models, whether they are from the world of sports, politics or another sector, can inspire positive change, When British politician Jack Ashley died, the following tribute appeared on a memorial website:

‘He inspired me from a very young age. That Deafness didn’t have to exclude you. You could rise above the crowd if you believed in yourself. My careers advisor told me I should aim to be a shelf stacker.

Instead I ran away to London – worked in cinemas, rising to manager…..I set up a laser company and fired lasers off Oxford Street and Canary Wharf….I founded a charity, taught computer graphics. And I haven’t stopped yet!

RIP Jack Ashley – you inspired me’.

I believe that we should never under-estimate the influence of role models and that a strong democracy is an inclusive one. However, at the moment there are many faces missing - disabled people are currently under-represented in public life.

By promoting the experiences of disabled people in public life we create a more open environment in which disabled people feel more confident to apply for political positions and change perceptions about the capabilities of disabled people.

That’s why the Government has published this collection of stories of disabled people in political life, as part of its Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Strategy. These stories alongside a package of other Government measures, including internships, training, and a £2.6 million fund, are helping tackle the particular obstacles faced by disabled people who want to become MPs, councillors or other elected officials.

These policies are just the start of what we are doing to make Parliament and councils more representative of the people they serve. After reading these stories, who knows, perhaps you could be one of those whose contribution we are currently missing in our council chambers or even in Parliament itself.

Helen Grant MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism and Equalities

Getting the Experience

David Nicholson, former Parliamentary intern

What does the Parliamentary Placements Scheme involve?

The Speaker’s Parliamentary Placements Scheme is part of the UK Government’s Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Strategy, which was set up with cross-Party support to provide support to disabled people who want to become MPs, councillors or other elected officials. The Parliamentary Placements Scheme aims to give paid interns an insight into how Parliament works.

I started my placement in October 2012 and finished in July 2013, so I got to experience a full Parliamentary cycle. I spent four days a week working with an individual MP and one day working for the House of Commons.

What experience have you gained?

I’ve met a lot of people and my contacts list has really grown. Day to day, I took phone calls on behalf of my MP’s office, put meetings in the diary, deal with emails, created briefs for my MP and attended meetings. I even got to experience running the MP’s office myself for a week when one colleague had left and we were waiting for another to start. I also got to see all the main political events, such as Prime Minister’s Question Time and big debates where I had the opportunity to learn and take on new ideas.

It’s been a very positive experience and I’ve gained a lot of confidence. I’ve also learnt that to work in politics takes courage, a strong fighting spirit, and a will to never give up to overcome the barriers and demonstrate that you’re not going to run away from unpredictable moments and challenges. It’s important to keep positive when things aren’t going well or when you’re under pressure.

Some people expect there to be people who have negative attitudes towards their involvement in politics because of their disability, but my experience is that people’s attitudes are very positive towards disabled people being involved in politics.

What made you want to take part in the scheme?

I always wanted to get involved in politics and have a love for Westminster politics. I saw it as an opportunity to prove that people with my condition – autism – can be successful, can make good employees, and be passionate about issues. It’s given me the chance to learn how Parliament works and to develop not just personally but politically: in Parliament you bump into people from all the parties and are exposed to new, challenging political ideas.

What was your previous experience before getting involved in the intern scheme?

When I was at high school I was diagnosed with autism and I was keen to help others who were facing challenges, no matter what they were – disability, educational reform, social mobility, or the issues surrounding Scottish independence. While I was at school I undertook campaign work around the subject of autism, travelling to Sweden to learn about how their educational system serves children with autism and giving a presentation about this to the Scottish Government ASD Reference Group.

I felt that by joining a political party I could make a real difference and I joined my party when I was 16 or 17, in 2006.

When I went to university I became heavily involved in student politics. I spoke at the Scottish Parliament when the Scottish Autism Bill Campaign was launched, and so I’ve been quite involved in the disability and equality field.

What disability-related barriers do you face in political life, and how have you overcome them?

Debates can get very heated and people with autism can get put off by ‘schoolboy politics’. You have to make sure that when you’re involved in political debate, you don’t take it personally when another person disagrees with the point you’re making. It took me a long time to learn how to do this.

With autism, sometimes I have trouble communicating as well as socialising. When it comes to elections, this happens most during the campaigning activities – for example, knocking on doors and not knowing what reaction you’re going to get and how to deal with it. This can affect your confidence. Luckily, I have always had people who support and encourage me, for example having someone by my side when I’m campaigning so they can step in if I become anxious. Having the support of people who understand and are happy to help has helped me overcome this challenge and build my confidence.

What are your plans for the future?

Ideally I would like to be involved in Parliament and stay in London. I’m being open-minded, and would also consider a job in the public or private sector. I hope to stand for Parliament in 2020.

What advice would you give to other disabled people who want to play a role in politics?

Disabled people are still very under-represented in politics so it’s encouraging to see that more disabled people are getting engaged in politics and are speaking out and being heard.

If you then want to get some hands on experience try taking part in peaceful protests, join disability groups, get involved in campaigns and political parties. Party involvement is good because if you want to create change it gives you a fantastic opportunity to do this in a wide range of issues that you’re interested in. If you decide to stand for elected office, apply for the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund, which is excellent and really benefits people with physical and complex disabilities.

Vincent Torr, current Parliamentary intern

Vincent Torr is taking part in a placement with David Hanson MP, as part of the Speakers Parliament Placement Scheme.

Fascinated by politics

I first became interested in politics aged 10, when I watched Tony Blair and John Major during PMQs. It really opened my eyes and made me realise that Parliament was where all the big decisions were being made. I’m equally in awe at the enormous pressure MPs face and how every word they utter is scrutinised and dissected.

I’ve always been interested in the issues that affect everyday people, from welfare reform, equal rights and how Parliament debates these issues. Sometimes it can take a long time to change things for the better. But I’ve always felt that it may take a billion grains of sand to make a brick, and a million bricks to build a community, but without someone adding that first grain, you’re never going to build a community.

Speakers Parliamentary Placement Scheme

I was volunteering in my local MP’s office when I heard about the Speakers Parliament Placement Scheme. I never thought in a million years I would get through. I think the scheme is a great idea as it allows people to connect with parliament in a way they never would have before.

Biggest challenge

Having club feet, chronic fatigue two hearing aids means dealing with the issues that my body tries to throw at me is my biggest challenge. For instance, something like going up and down the stairs can be a struggle sometimes. So it’s great that my fellow interns can help me when I need it. I sometimes feel it demeans your status in the eyes of others when you struggle with something like that. I’ve learnt to challenge my own perception on this, it’s a battle I have with myself, my body and the world.

Also, when your body decides it’s going to play “shoot the pain” it can be quite difficult to focus on anything. It can be quite difficult to concentrate when you’ve got thundering pain going through body; it’s like trying to meditate in the middle of a nightclub, with a massive speaker just behind you. I also hope to deal with my deafness too. One missed word in a debate, and suddenly you’ve said something that makes you look like you’ve missed the point.

At the moment it’s like learning to walk in the Olympic Stadium and you’re only used to crawling, but you’re fully aware that you’re in Usain Bolt’s lane and he’s running right towards you.

There are also people’s perceptions. Not everyone is willing to make allowances either. Even those that are willing aren’t always able to do so. It’s a constant battle between willing to help but can’t, and those who can help but aren’t willing.

Hopes for the internship

I’m still a bit of shocked that I’m here. I’ve shook hands and spoke with John Bercow, Hazel Blears and Michael Gove recently and it felt really surreal because I’m used to seeing these people on television, not in my workplace. I was equally struck by their commitment to equality and to helping those who want to succeed.

While I’m here, I really hope I can raise awareness of the issues that disabled people face. The scheme has really taught me that people with my condition can work well in parliament with the right support.

It is great that the Government Equalities Office funds three places on the scheme for three disabled people to experience the cut and thrust of parliament. The MPs and the people I’ve met so far have been fantastic role models, and it’s important for disabled people like myself to have role models they can look up to.

Geraint Rennie

Geraint Rennie is taking part in a placement with David Hanson MP, as part of the Speakers Parliament Placement Scheme.

My Interest in Politics

My interest in politics stems from a young age, and in fact my earliest memory was during the election in 1992. Although, the result was a real disappointment to my community – it was my first taste into how politics can affect people’s lives.

My second reason for wanting to get into politics is that I’ve always been interested in the causes of poverty, both domestically and globally. Living in poverty not only affect’s peoples’ physical and mental health, but also their education, wellbeing, self-worth, and prospects in life. This all can contribute to preventing people from achieving their full potential.

In my spare time, I used to volunteer for my local Oxfam shop in Aberystwyth and raise money for charities trying to help tackle poverty in less developed countries. It is something I am very passionate about.

I studied International Politics and after graduating I worked as a customer team member for The Co-operative. You could say, it wasn’t something that I found fulfilling, I was still itching to work in politics. So when I heard there was a placement opportunity to work alongside actual MPs - I had to go for it. It was my chance to achieve my dream.

I have been on the placement for just over a month now but I’m hopeful it will lead to a job within parliament or even working for an MP. Maybe one day, I may even get to be an MP.

My Biggest Challenge

Sometimes I find it difficult communicating with people. When I was at school I had a speech problem and was badly bullied. This affected my confidence and my ability to talk to people, however David and his assistants are very understanding.

Sometimes I have self-confidence issues in my abilities and standard of work, especially in terms of getting a job at the end of my placement. However I am working to build my confidence and the feedback I’ve been getting on my work so far has been really helpful.

I’m really enjoying my placement at the moment and learning so much. I just hope my self-confidence will not hold me back.

Standing for Elected Office

Michael Andrew MacDonald

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

During my 22 year career at Trafford Council I worked as the Disability Equality Officer and later the Equality Diversity Officer. I have been deaf from the age of one, and my first language is British Sign Language. I have a strong interest in disability because of my personal experience and as a result I have pursued a career which enables me to make a difference for disabled people. My passion for disability and equality issues also led me into roles such as the Chair for the Trafford Council’s Disabled Workers Group, and to sit on the board of a local school for special educational needs children.

Whilst working at Trafford Council, I liaised regularly with the area’s local councillors. I saw that their role was a good opportunity to help people in their everyday lives, as well as to get across the importance of disability and equality issues to the wider population. I also believed that having a local councillor, who was disabled, would encourage other disabled people to engage more with local politics, and would help them to feel more confident that their views and opinions are being represented in policies and decisions affecting their local area.

What made you decide to stand for elected office and what barriers did you face?

I recognised that with my enthusiasm for helping people and my professional background that I would have a lot to offer in the role of local councillor. However I was concerned about the challenges and barriers I might face. I eventually stood for a local election in 2011 and although I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity, as I expected, I experienced many barriers, particularly the costs of communication. I require the support of a British Sign Language (BSL) translator as I am unable to use speech to communicate. Without a BSL translator it is difficult for me to have discussions which enable me to understand the views and concerns of local people, to canvass the local area and debate important issues.

Candidates, whether or not they have a disability, often have to make several attempts to be selected and elected. Are you planning to stand again?

I wanted to stand for election again and I was so pleased to hear that the Access to Elected Office Fund had been launched. From my own experience of standing for election, I knew that the support provided by the Fund was much needed for disabled candidates. The personal cost of standing for election for me was very high, as I needed to pay for BSL translators. Knowing that I now have access to this support at no personal cost to me is such a relief. Knowing that I can get the support I need, when I need it, is has filled me with confidence and rebuilt my enthusiasm.

Kirsten Hearn

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

Experience of injustice came early to me. As a partially sighted child I was bullied and taunted because I was different. I was enraged that it was me they objected to for all I’d done was be disabled. As I journeyed through the women’s, disability and lesbian and gay liberation movements, my rage at sexism, ableism and homophobia fuelled my activism. In my work as an artist, writer and local government officer, I sought to change the world through exposing the outrageous hatred of the different.

I wrote, I ranted, I organised and I sat down. I sat down for peace, against apartheid and for disabled people’s right to ride. But I wanted mainstream politics to take up these issues so I decided to get involved in formal party politics.

My first bid was for a seat on the Greater London Authority. Proud to be selected for the London Labour List, I was unfortunately far too far down it to stand a chance of being elected. Still, I loved the fight, campaigning outside tube stations and on the street with Ken Livingstone, and we narrowed the gap hugely by the day of the vote.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges?

As a blind person, there are many barriers put up to stop me participating in society. This is reflected in how political parties organise and how would-be politicians campaign.

Canvassing on the doorsteps and streets is expected of candidates, but this is not easy to do if you are disabled. In order to run a good campaign, I must keep abreast of local issues and research policy areas so I can say what I will do when I am elected. This is hard when information is very inaccessible. If I am to have an equal chance of getting nominations and participating as a candidate in elections, this is the kind of support I need.

I couldn’t do any of the campaigning without a support worker and as the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund had not opened, I had to foot the bill myself.

How has the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund helped you in the election process?

I was amazed when I discovered that the Access to Elected Office Fund not only existed but would support would-be politicians to get nominated as well as when they had been selected as the candidate. Suddenly, a huge pile of barriers fell away.

My next bid for office was to seek the Labour nomination for the Hornsey and Wood Green Parliamentary seat. Well blow me down if I didn’t get into the last three! This time, with the support of the Access to Elected Office Fund, I was able to pay for support workers to assist me on door to door canvassing.

I believe that it was the fact that I had support workers that helped me raise my profile and get to the shortlist. I didn’t win the nomination, but thanks to the Access to Elected Office Fund, I was able to really enjoy the fight.

What are your future plans for your political career?

I’m now on the shortlist for a Councillor nomination in Haringey. If I get it, there will be months of hard work to bring the ward back to Labour. I have asked the Access to Elected Office Fund to support me to campaign and research the issues. With their support, I will stand a greater chance of getting the nomination.

If I get the nomination, I will then need the Fund to help me pay for support to be out on the streets and the doorsteps canvassing local people. Support workers can help me produce campaign material, and undertake research about community concerns so I can fully understand what local people want of their councillors. I can’t do this without sighted help.

How can candidate offices across local authorities and political parties use the Access to Elected Office fund to attract more disabled candidates and diversify the often ‘closed’ world of local and national politics?

I well remember David Blunket’s fight to get adequate support when he was elected as an MP. He had to argue for additional staff and reasonable adjustments so that he could get the huge piles of ink print information MPs are deluged with, made accessible. David has kicked open the door for blind politicians but there continue to be barriers put in the way of our participation. Government Internet Security policies as applied by different departments put more barriers in the way of anyone using adaptive technology to access information. No one has thought of the impact of such policies on disabled politicians.

Voters need to be confident that we can do the job. When they see a disabled candidate campaigning well and being supported to do so, this gives confidence that we might be worth voting for. This is why the Access To elected Office Fund is so important

Adrian Berrill-Cox

Adrian has Muscular Atrophy and uses an electric wheelchair. He has a carer but help in campaigning comes from friends and party activists. Adrian was the Conservative Party candidate for Islington North, is standing as a Council candidate in Kensington & Chelsea next May and has been seeking selection for a Parliamentary seat in the next General Election.

In Adrian’s view, the key to seeking election is communication with those selecting candidates and the electorate. While physical disability clearly gets in the way and makes some means of doing so impractical there’s always a way; there’s no reason why a disabled candidate can’t find effective ways of talking to people and getting a message across and seeking election is a very interesting and rewarding experience.

Greg Judge

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

For me it started at University - my department was under threat of budget cuts and I took it upon myself to launch a campaign against University management to try and stop the injustice. I found that I was quite good at campaigning, co-ordinating people and getting messages across to large audiences who could do something about it. My own life taught me that it isn't always easy to succeed in your ambitions but pure determination and family support are key to trying and hopefully reaching your goals. Not everyone has that kind of confidence or support network and I wanted to be someone who fights and champions issues for those whose nets have broken time and again.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

The barriers I have faced have been physical, like access to buildings, street campaigning and events. I learned that to help overcome access barriers to buildings, I always get as much information as possible about the venue before attending so I know what situation to expect.

Being short naturally and in a low height wheelchair, networking has been a significant issue – it can be difficult to move around the room and get people’s attention.

I'm looking at using an electric chair that has a seat raising function to give me a better chance of locating people and joining in better with group conversations.

Street campaigning has been one of my biggest barriers. It can be difficult to get to doors by myself, so I overcome this by finding someone who is willing to help me.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

If you enter politics through an interest in disability policy, it is important also to emphasise your interest in a wide range of other issues, so that people do not see you only as the 'disabled candidate. Be completely determined, focused and aware of the task ahead of you..... ignore those who doubt you, focus on your strengths and build support around you, as that will be crucial for when the pressure increases.

If you are attending or planning an event whether it’s in Westminster, the Council House, party conference or other such event – they all require proper research. This can be for disabled parking, accessible toilets, door widths, lift types etc.....I always get as much information as possible prior to attending as you cannot guarantee what situation you’ll encounter upon arrival. Plan ahead, whether it is access, accommodation, travel or activities – get every ounce of information there is, check on StreetView, door by door and know exactly what the barriers are and how to get round them.

Working in Political Life

Councillor David Beaman

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I have always had an interest in politics at both a national and local level but didn’t become actively involved until 2007, aged 53, when I joined the Liberal Democrats. I first stood as a candidate for Upwey and Broadway in the May election (Weymouth & Portland Borough Council). My decision to stand was related to my support for construction of a Weymouth Relief Road, which at the time was facing opposition from groups outside the local area. After my first taste, I became keen to stand as a candidate again in future elections.

I left the Liberal Democrats in 2009 and was a member of the Conservative Party for a short period before becoming independent. I believe that decisions should be made in the best interests of the local community, rather than be dictated by party politics. I first stood as an independent candidate for the Portland Tophill East (Weymouth & Portland Borough Council) in May 2010. I later stood in the 2011 local elections as an independent candidate for the Upper Hale ward (Waverley Borough Council and Farnham Town Council), where I was successfully elected to Farnham Town Council.

With the assistance of the Access to Elected Office Fund I was an independent candidate in the May 2013 elections for Wrecclesham and Rowledge ward, Waverley Borough Council and Farnham South, Surrey County Council.

What is the reality for disabled people working as politicians?

Being diagnosed with Parkinson’s I have difficulty walking for any length of time and I am generally vulnerable to falling. This makes door-to-door campaigning and delivering leaflets to establish a real presence very difficult. I need significant local help for this and it is better if I am always accompanied while I am out campaigning.

As an Independent, I have the added problem of having no party machine or financial resources to help me. The provision of a financial grant from the Access to Elected Office Fund to cover the cost of a carer to accompany me whilst campaigning has, therefore, been of great help. It has allowed me to undertake more door-to-door campaigning than I otherwise would have been able to achieve, and closer to the levels any other candidate would be undertaking. Provision of the grant has enabled my partner to accompany me when canvassing.

How can candidate offices use the Access to Elected Office fund to attract more disabled candidates and diversify local and national politics?

Every opportunity needs to be taken to spread the word to make people aware of the availability of the fund. Apart from “word of mouth”, which tends to be the most effective means of communication, presentations to disabled and political party groups at both national and local levels, as well as presence at political conferences and events might be helpful.

What are your future plans for your political career?

I am currently considering standing for the next round of local elections in May 2015 to defend my position as Independent Member for Upper Hale. I will not, however, make a final decision until nearer the time as it may well be influenced by the fact that they are likely to be held on the same day as a General Election, making it harder, I believe, for an independent candidate to be elected. In the interim period, I will also consider standing as an independent candidate in any by-election that might arise in Waverley Borough Council or Surrey County Council.

How can candidate offices use the Access to Elected Office fund to attract more disabled candidates and diversify local and national politics?

Every opportunity needs to be taken to spread the word to make people aware of the availability of the fund. Apart from “word of mouth”, which tends to be the most effective means of communication, presentations to disabled and political party groups at both national and local levels, as well as presence at political conferences and events might be helpful.

What advice would you give to other disabled people who want to play a role in politics?

Be persistent and never give up. In my situation, my Parkinson’s, which is under control with medication, does not make me immediately recognisable as disabled, so I do not necessarily face the same problems as other people who have a disability. Indeed, people do not always appreciate or understand the mobility difficulties that I face.

All the resources being made available through the Access to Elected Office Strategy are obviously helpful, although this needs to be accompanied by the development of more training schemes. Apart from allowing information to be more widely disseminated, such training sessions would also provide the opportunity for people with disabilities to network to share and learn from the experiences of others. Consideration should also be given to short and longer-term placements with Leaders of local authorities in addition to Parliamentary placements.

Councillor Alison Hansford

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I was married at the age of 20 and moved to the North East, which was a totally new area and way of life for me. It was amazing how people didn't realise, but politics was a huge part of their conversation and daily life, with such extreme views within the same working class community.

At times life has been a struggle and I went through the experience of losing my own home to living on a notorious estate in a significantly deprived area where drug dealing was the norm. It was accepted that people sold on their spare keys when they moved out for the new tenant to be burgled when they moved in. This happened to my family and it initially made me really angry, but then I asked the question of how can this cycle stop? I spoke to the doctors and persuaded them to hold a rehab programme whilst I started up a neighbourhood group.

I have two children, who are now 18 and 19 years old, both of whom have been diagnosed with Foetal Anticonvulsant Syndrome. As a part of having to fight both the education and health sectors on their behalves, I came to be more aware of how politics affects everyone's life and subsequently became more involved. Before this time my only awareness was MPs at Westminster.

I then moved with my family back home to Lancashire and joined the Parish Council. I was asked to represent parents on Chorley Council’s equality and diversity forum, which led to me becoming a school governor. People kept asking me why don't you stand for election but I didn't think this was possible, not only due to my own disability but because I haven't been to university. Today I'm a locally elected Borough Councillor.

What is the reality for disabled people working as politicians?

Public transport is not always accessible to me and is one of my main obstacles because of the lack of service in the area I live. Not being able to drive due to my epilepsy means that I'm reliant on family to take me to meetings. My epilepsy affects my memory, which means keeping track of commitments and what has been said at meetings very difficult.

I have experienced a lack of understanding from others within all sectors. There are also things such as inaccessible buildings and the need to be accompanied as often as possible whilst my seizures are uncontrolled. It can sometimes be difficult to grasp an understanding of what government decisions mean in practise and I would like more training in this. However, the courses tend to be in Southern England, so with my disabilities I am unable to access them without substantial additional cost.

When people speak about my disability I used to just say I'm ok, but now I'm honest and say having spina bifida can be a nightmare. I have learnt to be more open about how thing affect me, such as chairs being too uncomfortable to sit on, not going to meetings too early due to my epilepsy, continuing to speak even if my speech is slurred or not trying to hide my partial seizures.

How has the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund helped you in the election process?

Finance is a big reason why I had to consider carefully whether to stand for election again. For each journey I make I have additional transport costs with my husband taking me, going home then coming back four or more hours later. I need support from someone for ward walks, attending parish council, visiting schools, community groups and meeting residents. I deliver a newsletter four times a year to every house in each village in my ward. I have to pay someone to do this as there is no way I could do this myself and without there would be no communication with residents.

The Access to Elected Office Fund is a lifeline to me as it will enable me to fund a support worker to accompany and support me when I go out canvassing in my ward and meeting residents and community groups. It will also enable me to have a handheld portable device that will assist hugely with my memory loss, enabling me to take notes of what residents want, and issues identified. Without the fund I wouldn't be a candidate in the true sense, just a name on a piece of paper. I wouldn't be able to get out and show people even though I have a disability it isn't there to stop me or you. I have decided to stand for 2014 election but only due to the support offered by the Access to Elected Office Fund.

How can candidate offices use the Access to Elected Office fund to attract more disabled candidates and diversify the often ‘closed’ world of local and national politics?

Political parties could do more to promote the fund and demonstrate that there is support there for disabled candidates. Many people think that don't have the skills to be a politician but life experience is all you need. Colleges would be a good place to start as young people are starting to mature and, even though they may be unable to vote until 18, they can stand for election in their 17th year. For this to work, you need to be seen as a person with a disability not a disabled person. Maybe the council could place a leaflet in every voting register as this goes to every household.

What advice would you give to other disabled people who want to play a role in politics?

I would say that you need to consider what sort of time you can give to the role as it is time consuming and hard work. Make sure you have the support you need at home and speak to the council to see if they are able to assist you if you are elected in your new role and can make any adaptations needed.

I would contact my own local councillor and ask if I could shadow them on a couple of occasions to get a feel of what the role is like. You can also attend local council meetings as they're open to members of the public with agendas available beforehand on the council’s website.

Councillor David Chung

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I was inspired to get involved in politics by observing people like Jack Ashley and seeing how he operated as a politician and what he was able to achieve. Disabled people must be represented in the political system, and if you want to make a change that matters to you.

What advice would you give to other disabled people who want to play a role in politics?

It is important to represent yourself. Yes, as a councillor you will have to allocate time to do your duties but it does not have to be all consuming of your time and with experience you develop a sense of where to put your energies. Yes, the job of councillor is challenging yet at the same time it is rewarding. From assisting a resident with a problem to implementing something within the local community which makes a difference to people’s lives. Don’t allow uncertainty to get the better of you, sign up and you’ll see you will make it work. One piece of advice, get a mentor to support you.

What skills do you need to be successful in politics?

I have come to understand the role through eleven years of experience. Communication skills are paramount in being a local councillor, in one-to-one situations dealing with case work, in group situations like Residents’ Association meetings, and in more formal situations when at the Council. Strategic planning is necessary to know what to say and how to do work towards achieving planned objectives. Working with groups and individuals to get them to participate and make contributions toward achieving objectives is the key to effectiveness.

What do you enjoy about working in political life?

I enjoy all aspects of being a councillor, but I particularly enjoy working in my ward of Longthornton on community issues such as local crime, fly-tipping, planning and development. One of my biggest achievements was working with members of the community to get a community centre. I am a firm believer that within every local community there should be a community centre. It keeps the community alive because people meet and talk to each other members of the community meet to engage in community activities and in so doing talk to each other and are kept informed of what’s going on around them.

I believe that local projects should involve the democratic participation of members of the community. The local community will be enhanced and local people in the community will feel they have contributed. I am passionate about equalities issues: societies work better when there is equality.

Councillor Marie Pye

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I was always interested in politics from a young age, as I was part of a political family (political with a small p). We would frequently talk about politics around the dinner table. I was more interested in how politics affected everyday people’s lives, rather than what was happening at Westminster.

I became involved in local political activities as a teenager, but it never occurred to me to stand as a candidate. I just couldn't imagine how a disabled person could do this kind of role. All of the Councillors I knew spend their time knocking on residents doors, going to meetings in old inaccessible buildings and drinking in old inaccessible pubs! It was only when there was a by-election in my area that the local Councillors asked me to stand because I was somebody really active in the local community. I was given the distinct impression that we were unlikely to win so with some trepidation I agreed.

The campaign was really hard for me, because of being a disabled person I couldn't do all the door knocking that a non-disabled candidate may have done. I couldn't deliver hundreds of leaflets, I couldn't attend meetings in venues riddled with stairs. However, I did have contacts in loads of local groups and a whole army of people (not necessarily all members of my political party) who could help out. I could hand out leaflets outside the local station and at the school gate-and people knew who I was. I could organise my own meetings in disability friendly venues that were better for everybody.

My party encouraged me stand as I was really active in the local community and I was delighted to win by a very respectable margin.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

There are lots of different types of barriers and challenges within the political process. The biggest barriers are actually inside your own head as it never occurs to you that you can be a successful candidate and win an election. Although I experienced barriers in the process, like knocking on doors and attending meetings, I always managed to find ways round it. I was amazed at people’s enthusiasm and willingness to help.

What is it like working in political life?

I absolutely love being a local Councillor. Why? Because of the difference I can make to my local area. From small things like getting a bin next to the station through to a massive traffic calming scheme that has really reduced the number of accidents in our area. Officers in my local authority have been fantastic in making sure that everything is done to meet my access requirements-even a sofa in the Council chamber. Sometimes I do things differently to other Councillors, not so much door knocking but more surgeries, visiting local groups and attending community events. Probably just as many meetings, but in accessible venues. We still haven't found a good accessible pub but I live in hope.

Who or what was most helpful to you in overcoming these challenges?

Once I had decided to stand as a candidate, I realised that there were lots of disabled people in my party and made connections through MPs’ offices. I also received a lot of support from local activists in my party who offered me practical solutions and always made me feel at ease. For example, they were more than happy to help with my leafleting campaigns, so that I could concentrate on staying in one busy location and speak to different members of the public. I also found local residents and offices in the local Council very supportive.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

Do it! Don’t hesitate to consider yourself as a candidate. Never assume that your impairment will be an issue, and never worry that your contribution will not be valued.

How can we get more disabled people into political life?

We need to encourage more disabled people to become Councillors and we need to understand that sometimes as disabled people we cannot do exactly the same activities as some nondisabled colleagues, but we can do other things of equal value. The infrastructure and the adjustments need to be there but most of all we need political parties and Councillor colleagues to understand the benefits of having some people around who sometimes do things differently.

Former Councillor Richard Boyd OBE

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I have had over thirty years of political experience. I became a district councillor in 1975, and stayed in that post for 19 years, overlapping with 20 years as a County Councillor and four year period as Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on the County Council. I also spent three years as a parish councillor, was Chairman of the Essex Police Authority from 1994-1997, was Deputy Lieutenant for Essex in 1998, and was made an Alderman in 2006. I ran Disability Essex for more than a decade. In 2011 I was awarded an OBE.

I have had tinnitus since serving as radio operator in the merchant navy, and chronic heart disease following two heart attacks in the late 80s.

My first taste of politics came with delivering leaflets for the Liberal Party in the 1970s, which led to me standing for election as a local Councillor.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

One barrier I faced as a Councillor was tiredness caused by County Council meetings finishing very late at night, which I tackled by ensuring I had sufficient sleep and a proper diet. My wife was very supportive.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

My top tip for disabled people thinking of standing in elections is to be positive and not be put off by the barriers you will face: see these challenges as one of the many one has to face in life.

Would the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund be something you would consider using? How might it help you in the election process?

I am now semi-retired after 30 years as an elected member of local authorities and have passed my half century as a member of the Liberal Party, so I do not feel I need to use the Fund myself. However, I hope the Fund will encourage others who are at the start of their career in politics or who want to be re-elected.

Councillor Karen Bellamy

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I was born with a disability that has left my joints very weak and prone to early arthritis and my skin very easily damaged, but I have always been determined not to let this stop me. I came across countless disabled people who have outstanding skills and experiences to contribute to their local communities, but struggled to participate due to their disability. As a great believer in leading by example, I decided to stand for election in 2006.

What do you enjoy about being a councillor?

I enjoy making a difference. My personal experiences have driven my passion for championing the rights of disadvantaged people. My working life has mainly involved building communities, setting up community projects and working as a mental health advocate in the community.

Disabled people have a unique insight into a lot of issues that people face, ranging from housing issues to health care, fuel poverty and employment to name a few. I also feel that people with disabilities are particularly empathic to the problems that people face daily.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

Door-knocking is an issue, so we have a roving surgery where we put flyers out the week before to say we will be in a particular road so if folk need to see us in their road, they can.

Who or what was most helpful to you in overcoming these challenges?

My own self-determination and my supportive partner have been the most important things in helping me get through. Also, being able to drive has helped because I can’t walk very well so it would be very hard to operate without my car. I will not say it’s easy, but most things in life that are worthwhile are not easy for anyone.

I have spoken to the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, about getting a law passed to make it a legal requirement for reasonable adjustments to be made to help a disabled candidate with their campaigning, without it having to come out of electoral funds. I am also working hard to try to stop proposed cuts being made that directly affect disabled people, such as the removal of mobility allowance for disabled people in care homes, which I believe effectively makes them prisoners in their own homes.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

Do it! We can’t say we are not represented if we don’t get involved. Being a councillor allows you to genuinely help people and make a difference.

Former Councillor David Buxton

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

My family and friends were involved in politics and they loved to debate issues that inspired me to think about their views and ideas. At first, as a young Deaf person, I didn't think it was possible to take part in mainstream politics, until I saw Christine Reeves speaking in BSL at the Liberal/SDP conference and I heard about Richard Williams becoming a parish councillor in Wales. It made me realise I wanted to be more involved in politics. One day I was introduced to Simon Hughes who invited me to a meeting at the House of Commons. From that meeting, I was encouraged to start my own political involvement.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

I was born profoundly Deaf and brought up in a strict oralist deaf boarding school. I had huge difficulty managing my own communication skills with family members and strangers until I learnt BSL at college in my late teens. I found my confidence in communicating with people using BSL interpreters and that helped me accept who I am. My own determination, attitude and ability certainly enabled me to build more opportunities by breaking through barriers, proving I can do as well as anyone else. I wanted people to look at my abilities, skills, experience and qualifications, not my deafness and speech impairment.

Who or what was most helpful to you in overcoming these challenges?

With BSL interpreters, it didn't matter that I was Deaf and unable to use speech - I was able to meet people, I could debate, share ideas, campaign and lobby. People like Christine Reeves and Richard Williams inspired me, and then when I met Simon Hughes he challenged me to start doing something - join a political party, get involved locally. I was lucky to have a few hearing friends from my local church who were able to "interpret" for me when I met local people at Simon Hughes' surgeries and local ward meetings. They gave free service and support.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

Focus on your own political, campaigning, lobbying and debating skills, ability and experience, not your disability. Recognise your own potential as this will get you support from voters, supporters, friends and strangers - have a real interest in the local community issues, local people’s concerns and so on. It's not about being a career politician; it is about being a real community campaigner and representing local people.

Don't be afraid of what people see or think of you - try and rise above your disability, keep your chin up and do what you can during the election. Be inspired by what people like the late Lord Ashley of Stoke, Anne Begg and David Blunkett did. I have lost many times over the years, but I don't give up! At the end of the day people will recognise what you have tried to achieve and admire you for the successes you have achieved.

Councillor Rosemary Gilligan

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

A lot of changes were happening in my village in the early 1980s. At the time, the main source of work and jobs for local people came from Shenley Mental Health Hospital, which also served as the heart of our community. The closure of the hospital had a radical effect on the area, as did the development of over a further one thousand households being built on its grounds.

I felt strongly about the impact of these changes, and my father suggested that in order for me to really help I should stand as a parish councillor. During that time I had a double knee operation and developed M.E., and as a result faced a myriad of difficulties, but I didn’t want to let this stop me. I went on to be elected as a borough councillor for Shenley in 2002.

What do you enjoy about being a councillor?

I enjoy feeling I am making a difference, and believe I have achieved a lot as a local councillor. One thing I have worked on is to make the council accessible to all. For example, in our borough we have three major settlements, which are not connected well by public transport so it can be difficult for residents to come and listen to meetings. We are solving that problem by webcasting, so you can see what we are doing from the comfort of your home. I also think it’s important to train local councillors to be at ease with residents, and to be more available.

My Ward is rural and we are lucky to have a village environment, where people will stop me in the street when they see me and tell me their problems. In more urban areas, having talked to other councillors from big city councils, it’s not so easy for people to access you as they don’t know how to get in touch easily.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

I am very dyslexic, and this seems to be getting worse as I get older so it is becoming more of a challenge. It can take me all day to answer emails and nothing else. It took me a long time to accept that I did need to ask for a bit of help. At first, I tried to hide it and would say ‘Yes, OK’ to writing something and then struggle for hours. Now I am much better at telling people that I prefer to talk than to write. I make light of it, but make clear that I know my limitations.

However, my disabilities and life experiences have given me advantages, too. A positive thing you can bring if you have a disability is that you will have learned to get round things in different ways. Because you’re thinking like that, you’re more open to think in the same way about other problems and can bring these problem-solving techniques to your role as a councillor.

Who or what was most helpful to you in overcoming these challenges?

When I did a university course a few years ago, the county council supported me and gave me Dragon Dictate, which was a real help. With M.E. I’m now getting much better at pacing myself and not trying to do everything when I’m having a good day, as I have learned this will tire me out. I try to organise life so that I’ve got a fairly quiet day before and after a busy day.

Support from my friends has been very important. They all live in the area I’m trying to do something useful for, and they will sometimes come and bring dinner when I am too tired to cook.

It can also be the very small things that make a difference – for example, I have a thing that helps me get in and out of bed more easily and although it is small it makes a really big difference. Now I don’t know how I managed without it!

What tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

Whether you’ve got a disability or not, be clear about why you want to be a councillor. It’s not always fun, and you have to accept there will be times when you get very frustrated, but equally there are times when you do feel you have made a difference and have improved your community. Do your research and make sure you think it’s something you really want to do.

If support would help you to overcome barriers, think about applying to the Fund. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. The worst that can happen is that you will be told ‘no’.

Don’t get disheartened if you don’t get elected the first time. The more you do it, the better you get at it. I would say to anybody, give it a go. It’s definitely worth doing. In my lifetime the view towards disability and the access towards things has improved dramatically and over the years I’ve met some amazing people, with disabilities that are very difficult to live with, who have done some amazing things.

What I’m doing with my life now is not something I thought I’d be able to do. I really thought I would never do anything other than the life I had planned for myself before I developed M.E. and arthritis, but people encouraged me and I did. It’s because of my health issues that I’m doing what I’m doing. The last thing I had thought about was getting involved in politics; I hate public speaking with a vengeance, but I do it because I feel I need to, and it is so worthwhile. When I have a bad day wishing life had gone a different way, I remember that now I have a completely different life that I enjoy just as much. I’m now a Magistrate as well and I love it – it’s very important to me.

I believe very strongly that I’m elected to speak for the community. I may have my own opinions about things but sometimes I have to say the will of the group of people that I’m representing is more important. You’re not there to speak for yourself; you’re there to speak for everybody.

Would the Access to Elected Office Fund be something you would consider using? How might it help you in the election process?

I am moving to a new area soon, where I plan to stand for election. When political parties select their candidates, they expect candidates to be able to go and canvass door to door, which is something that I am not able to do without support. However, because I’ll be new to the area I won’t have the support from friends and neighbours that I have gradually built up where I live now. I would use the Fund to help me with extra costs I would face in canvassing. This would make a big difference to me because it would allow me to meet my party’s internal rules and expectations during the selection process, which will increase my chance of being selected.

Councillor Tom Garrod

When did you become involved in politics?

I got involved with the local Conservative party as a teenager and started helping with election campaigns. They asked if I would stand for election. I lost the first time but a year later I was elected at the age of 19, Norfolk’s youngest ever county councillor.

What is it like being a councillor?

I’m the deputy cabinet member for vulnerable children, which includes special educational needs, and it’s refreshing for parents to have someone who understands the issues they face (I have cerebral palsy). One of the attractions about being a councillor for a disabled person is that to a good extent you can define what you want to do and when you want to do it.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

My advice to others would be to draw on your strengths as an individual and seek support when you need it. I enjoy seeing people’s reaction when I tell them I’m 23, I’ve got a disability and I’m policy-making in the county council: that sends a really strong message.

Baroness Campbell

Independent crossbench peer, Jane Campbell, successfully challenged parliament on whether her personal assistant (PA) could speak on her behalf, since she is unable to make long speeches.

Lady Campbell has a severe form of spinal muscular atrophy, a condition that means she uses a wheel chair and is reliant on a ventilator to breathe for much of the day. When she speaks, she says she literally runs of out puff after a few minutes and needs to take a moment to recover with a few deep breaths.

The decision by the Lords procedure committee overturns a standing order dating back to 1707, which states that “no person shall be on the floor of the House” except peers, Clerks and doorkeepers. She can now be accompanied by a PA, and that her assistant will be able to finish her speeches if needed.

How easy was it to change Parliamentary procedure?

It is not easy to overturn these ancient standing orders. It is a part of the ritual and tradition of the House of Lords. I take my hat off to this committee and my fellow peers. On the first request, there was much resistance but the House of Lords are renowned for listening to the argument and reflecting.

It was up to me to make a good case which included both justifications for the change; as well, I needed to demonstrate that this would not affect the quality of engagement that the House of Lords is internationally reputed for. This took a good deal of and careful consideration on both sides.

What did the change mean for you?

It is what I have always fought for, having complete control of your life, over the way you speak, the way you conduct yourself. If I have my PA by my side I do feel I can conquer the world, and it shows how important personal assistance is for people who cannot for whatever reason manage on their own It will also mean I am more comfortable and effective in the chamber. For example, when someone speaks I can get a PA to scribble it down for me; all Peers need this when listening to complex arguments, especially if responding.

The change sends out a message to other disabled people that even in really difficult times, changes like this can happen. It shows that there are people in this country that want us, need us and are ready to stand by that. I now feel a rounded Parliamentarian.

What do you think about that Hansard, the official record of parliamentary proceedings, would not mention if a speech was completed by your PA?

I agree. My assistant is solely my voice. This is what personal assistance is all about. It is about facilitating the person to be who they are.

Baroness Brinton

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

A real desire to help people, as well as to promote the philosophy and policies of my party. I was attracted to the casework and championing side of being a councillor and portfolio holder, and then an MP, as much as following my particular interests in education.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

The first thing to say is that my disability developed after I was selected to fight a top target seat for my party. I hid my disability as much as possible, because I felt it would be used against me by difficult opponents in a hotly contested seat. This meant that I did too much.

If I was doing it again, I would find someone to be my disability mentor, and help me respond to the specific challenges I face.

Who or what was most helpful to you in overcoming these challenges?

My campaign manager was there for me 100%. This included advice and support, but more importantly, re-scheduling what I was doing when my mobility was limited.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

Find an adviser who really understands both your disability and the electoral process. You are likely to have to overcome subtle as well as obvious challenges: identify them up front, and tackle them! My campaign manager was there for me 100%. This including advice and support, but more importantly, rescheduling what I was doing when my mobility was limited.

David Blunkett MP

What do you think about diversity in political life?

We should all be judged by what we do and how effective we are irrespective of any disability. Blind or partially sighted people do not belong to a separate group; for good or ill, we are all individuals in our own right.

How do you respond to questions about your disability?

I find that when I meet people for the first time, after greeting my guide dog, they tentatively raise the question of my blindness. I do not mind this. It is perfectly natural that people should wish to ask questions.

How important are mentors?

On standing for Sheffield City Council, Winifred Golding, who had served on the council for many years, became my mentor and provided invaluable help and support.

How do you navigate around Parliament?

With my election as an MP, Teddy, my guide dog, became the first dog allowed on the floor of the Commons’ chamber proper. Having learned by trial and error to find our way through the vast maze of corridors and staircases, we had soon mastered our regular routes sufficiently.

How do you handle meetings?

After years of experience derived from handling negotiations and participating in meetings without visual signals to guide me, I have learned to listen particularly carefully, not only to the spoken word but other signs…..an intake of breath…length of a pause.

What advice would you give to other disabled people wishing to enter political life?

Have the confidence to be yourself. Under strong television studio lights my eyes have a tendency to flicker; it is a reflect action, which cannot be remedied. Every now and then someone suggest that I wear dark glasses. This may be the image some people have of blind people but it is certainly not one I am prepared to accept. Take me as I am or leave me has always been my attitude to life and remains so today.

Any anecdotes you’d like to share?

I well remember once when Robin Day’s introduction at the start of the television programme Question Time was drowned out by the sound of Teddy the guide dog noisily lapping water from a bowl and the audience’s laughter.

Dame Anne Begg MP

What inspired you to get involved in politics?

I grew up with an interest in current affairs and my involvement in politics and the Labour Party grew after the 1983 elections. I realised that I did not just want to stand on the side-lines and complain, but that I wanted to actively support my party. Initially, I became involved in the political administration side of things, like running elections and becoming the secretary of the branch.

As a disabled person did you experience particular barriers or challenges and if so, how did you overcome them?

The biggest barrier for me was having faith in my ability to become an MP. If I had been left to my own devices, I would not have considered standing for an election. I was invited to stand for the 1997 elections for a constituency that was 40 miles away, partly because of the all-women shortlist that had been introduced but also because I had built up a good reputation and national profile due to my activities within the teaching profession. Despite this, I still needed encouragement from colleagues before considering running for an MP.

Who or what was most helpful to you in overcoming these challenges?

I received a lot of encouragement and support from my own political party. The all-women shortlist was very important as it meant that they actively looked for talented women who were making a difference in their communities. I realised once I had been elected that people’s perceptions were based on my knowledge, expertise and past experiences. People were not concerned that I was in a wheelchair as they knew that this did not affect my performance or abilities.

What top tips would you give to other disabled people thinking of standing in elections?

Just go for it! Be active in your local community or political party. Do not doubt your abilities and worry about people’s perceptions. If you can show that you have the right qualities to be a good MP, people will support and encourage you.

The environment, especially in the Chamber of the House, is a challenging one, but that’s not stopped people, with a range of impairments, from being very successful in Parliament.