Introduction from Chief Executive, Charlie Parker

Thank you for your interest in becoming a councillor in Oldham.

The council is on a journey of rapid improvement and transition as we implement our co-operative agenda. We have recently been recognised as the most improved council in the country but, nonetheless, the challenges ahead for local government remain significant – in particular to further reduce our budget whilst continuing to drive regeneration and working with local people to deliver quality services. To achieve this ambitious agenda we need to deliver strong civic leadership by attracting high calibre councillors who will help us meet these challenges and make Oldham a better place.

Councillors are at the heart of providing strong civic leadership and, as local representatives, have a crucial role to play in Oldham’s regeneration as a confident, ambitious, productive and co-operative borough. The role of a councillor is an interesting one and with our ambition for a co-operative future in place, combined with an increasing focus on being closer to communities, this is a good time to get involved.

In recognition of the importance of the councillor role we have invested significantly in providing a stronger level of support for all members. We now have case workers in each district to support councillors, and we have developed a Local Leaders programme to help equip you with the skills, knowledge and experience to achieve real, lasting change for local people. Additionally, we are devolving an increasing range of services, decision making and budgets to a neighbourhood level, giving councillors greater influence in their local area.

I hope this booklet will be of use in helping you to make the decision about whether to stand for election and what it would mean if you do. Please also take the time to read the summary of our 2011 Councillor Survey – an online survey of all Oldham councillors. I hope it will give you an insight into the range of work undertaken by councillors and the experiences of those already in the role.

Thanks for taking the time to enquire about becoming a councillor and sharing our passion for where you live.

Charlie Parker
Chief Executive, Oldham Council
About the council

We are working towards becoming a co-operative borough, where the council works alongside residents and local businesses to improve the area, meaning that everybody does their bit and everybody benefits.

Oldham Council spends over £225 million per year to provide more than 700 services.
It serves around 210,000 residents, and employs around 3,000 people.

Here are just some of the services that the council provides:

- Emptying bins and recycling
- Keeping Oldham’s streets clean
- Highways maintenance
- Providing libraries and art galleries
- Leisure facilities such as swimming pools, sports centres and parks
- Caring for children, the elderly and other vulnerable people
- Children’s services, children’s centres and before and after school clubs
- Traffic management and road safety
- Making sure that consumers are protected against dangerous goods
- Registering births, deaths and marriages
- Planning and building control
- Community centres and youth centres
- Helping to regenerate the borough

* FTE (Full Time Equivalent figure as of December 2011)
Becoming a councillor

This booklet provides information on what councillors do, who can become a councillor, and what is expected of them in that role. It also provides answers to some frequently asked questions people have about becoming a councillor.

The role of a councillor

As a councillor you are the democratically elected, and democratically accountable, representative for your ward. As a councillor you represent the council to the community and the community to the council. As such you have a number of roles: decision maker, ward representative, community leader, and ambassador. Councillors who are members of Cabinet or who sit on formal committees of the council or external bodies have additional responsibilities.

Representing your ward

The primary role of all councillors is to represent their ward and the people who live in it. You can do this by:

- Meeting and consulting with individuals and groups within your ward, listening to the needs of local people and taking their views into account when considering policy proposals and in decision making
- Advising constituents on the best way to raise questions, requests for service and engage with the council
- Personally raising questions, requests, complaints and compliments on behalf of individuals and groups with the council and the council's partner organisations (e.g. NHS Oldham, both Oldham Colleges, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, Greater Manchester Police and The Unity Partnership)
- Attending, and when appropriate chairing, public meetings concerning matters affecting your ward
- Explaining council policy to the community and making sure the policy has been carried out fairly
- Speaking to the media on matters affecting your ward, with advice from the council's corporate communications team
- Being seen and recognised in your ward

Policy and decision maker

All councillors participate in the formulation of policy and the decision making process. This requires preparation, including reading all papers, reports etc. prior to meetings and attending meetings with council officers to receive briefings, resolve queries, raise questions etc. Councillors can influence local policy through participating as a member of:

- Full Council – a regular meeting of all 60 councillors
- Committees – making decisions and scrutinising the work of the council. For example, Planning, Licensing, Overview and Scrutiny Committees
- Appointment panels, disciplinary and grievance appeals
- Partnership boards, e.g. District Partnerships and PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meetings

Community leader

Oldham Council works in partnership with many local bodies and councillors serve on these local forums on behalf of the council. Councillors exercise community leadership by:

- Representing the council and acting as an advocate for Oldham on external bodies at sub-regional, regional and national level and reporting back to the council
- Sitting on the management boards of voluntary organisations and school governing bodies
- Using their influence as elected representatives to develop links between groups and communities in the ward and local area, forging local partnerships to ensure resources are used to meet the needs of the area
- Campaigning on local issues and championing the causes which further the interests, quality of life and development of the community
- Encouraging community participation and citizen involvement in decision making

Ambassador

All councillors should be excellent ambassadors for the council through what they say and what they do.

Councillors act as ambassadors by:

- Always acting in accordance with the Members’ Code of Conduct
- Actively promoting Oldham and the work of the council in improving life for its citizens
- At all times having regard to the equality and community cohesion implications of what they say and do
- Developing a working knowledge of the organisation and functions of the council and keeping abreast of issues affecting Oldham, including attending briefings and participating in learning and development provided by the council

Corporate parent

All councillors have a number of roles and responsibilities to looked after children within the borough. The official term used to identify your role is “corporate parent”. Corporate parenting is the responsibility of all councillors across the council and is an agenda that you must engage in.

Members’ Code of Conduct

Oldham Council has adopted a Members’ Code of Conduct that sets out rules for how its councillors should behave. Councillors also need to declare any personal and/or prejudicial interests at any decision-making meetings before items are discussed.

Following election, all newly elected councillors will be required to sign a written undertaking to abide by the Members’ Code of Conduct, and they will also be asked to complete a register of interests form.

Advice on these matters can be discussed with the council’s Constitutional Services. You can contact them via email constitutional.services@oldham.gov.uk or telephone 0161 770 3862.
Support available to councillors
This section highlights the support you would receive as an elected member in Oldham.

Officer Support
Staff working for the council, also referred to as officers, provide a range of support and assistance to councillors. Much of this support is available locally in each district, through the district co-ordinators and district case workers who support councillors in their roles as local leaders.

ICT
Each councillor is offered a laptop computer and fax/printer for use at home with email and internet access, and in some cases a mobile Blackberry device.

Councillors have dedicated ICT support, and the council will assist with setting this up and ensuring that everything works correctly. Training is also offered to ensure you are comfortable with the equipment provided.

Development
After the election, successful candidates will be required to attend an induction programme; this will be your opportunity to meet key officers.

To continue to support you in your role, you will be invited to participate in training and development programmes, including the Local Leaders’ programme, which is a comprehensive programme of development for all councillors.

Training and development will continue following your induction programme to broaden your knowledge of the role and the work of the council.

Mentor
You will be allocated a mentor within your political group. A mentor is there to show you the ropes. Issues covered could be anything from when and how to ask a question in a meeting to how to pursue a query on behalf of a constituent.

Frequently asked questions
Could I be a councillor?
If you care about the area that you live or work in and the issues facing local people, you could be a councillor. Perhaps you enjoy reading the local newspaper and often have a strong opinion on the issues you read about. You may enjoy talking to friends and colleagues about what’s going on in the area. You may feel that certain sections of the community or people who live in a particular neighbourhood are getting a raw deal and need stronger representation. Research tells us that people are most concerned about issues such as crime, schools, transport and the environment. Your local council can make a difference on all these issues and many more, and so can you as a local councillor.

Why should I become a councillor?
There are many reasons why people decide to become a local councillor. They include:

• wanting to make a difference and be involved in shaping the future of the local community
• being concerned about your local area and wanting to ensure that the community gets the right services
• wanting to represent the views of local people and ensure that community interests are taken into account
• wanting to pursue your political beliefs
• wanting to contribute your business or professional skills
• as an extension of what you are already doing through a political party, trade union, charity, voluntary group or school governing body – becoming a councillor can be the next step

Who can be a councillor?
The easy answer is almost anyone, as long as you are:

• British or a citizen of the Commonwealth or European Union
• at least 18 years old
• registered to vote in the Borough of Oldham or have lived, worked or owned property there for at least 12 months before an election

You can’t be a councillor if you:

• work for a council in a politically restricted post
• are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order
• have been sentenced to prison for three months or more (including suspended sentences) during the five years before election day
• have been convicted of a corrupt or illegal practice by an election court

If you are in any doubt about whether you are eligible to stand as a councillor, you should contact the council’s electoral services either by email election@oldham.gov.uk or by telephone, 0161 770 4718.
Do I need any special skills or experience to be a councillor?

It is important that we have councillors who not only reflect and represent the communities they serve, but also have a broad range of skills and life experience. You don’t have to be highly educated or have a profession. Skills gained through raising a family, caring for a sick or disabled relative, volunteering or being active in faith or community groups can be just as valuable.

Don’t worry if you don’t yet feel that you have the skills or confidence to be a councillor. The council provides support, information and training for new councillors.

While you don’t need any special qualifications to be a councillor, having or being able to develop the following skills, knowledge and attributes will help you in the role:

**Communication skills**

These include listening and interpersonal skills, public speaking skills, the ability to consider alternative points of view and to negotiate, mediate and resolve conflict.

**Problem solving and analytical skills**

This includes being able to get to the bottom of an issue and to think of different ways to resolve it, including considering the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

**Team working**

Being able to work with others in meetings and on committees and being able to complete any tasks that you agree to do on time.

**Organisational skills**

Being able to plan and manage your time, keep appointments and meet deadlines.

**Ability to engage with your local community**

You may have to make yourself available through meetings, the media, the internet, public forums, debates and on the telephone.

You may have gained skills and knowledge through your professional, personal or community experience.

These could include:

- knowledge of the needs of specific groups such as children and young people, older people, or people with health problems
- an understanding of financial management and reporting processes
- an understanding of legal and regulatory systems or procedures
- knowledge of housing, regeneration or environmental issues
- any other skills that relate to the work or facilities provided by the council

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I don't have the time...

How much time you spend on your duties as a councillor is largely up to you and will depend on the particular commitments you take on.

Most committees meet six times per year, but some, such as Planning and Licensing, meet more often and so the workload of their councillors is greater. Councillors need to spend time reading agendas and reports, and becoming familiar with the issues that you deal with so you can make informed decisions. If you are elected chairman or vice-chairman of a committee you will also be required to attend agenda briefings with officers.

It may be that you are nominated as the council’s representative on an outside body. If this is the case you will also receive paperwork and have to attend meetings of that body and report on any items of note.

Councillors (if they are a member of a political group) also need to attend political group meetings.

It is important that councillors keep in touch with residents and are aware of local concerns and issues. This means being visible in the ward, knowing the matters that people are concerned about, being available to see people and taking telephone calls, emails and letters from them.

**Independent or political?**

Over 95% of councillors are members of political parties, but you don’t have to be a member of a political party to stand for election as a councillor. You can either stand as an independent candidate or as a party political candidate. You can get further information about becoming a member of a political party in Oldham from the local political party.

Don’t worry if you’re not already a party member as they will be able to go through all the options with you.

**Will I get paid for being a councillor?**

All councillors at Oldham Council are in receipt of a basic members’ allowance. The basic allowance recognises the commitment to carry out the duties of a ward councillor plus recognition of the costs incurred from travel/mileage within the borough.

In addition, those councillors who undertake formal positions in the council, such as chairs of committees or members of Cabinet, are paid an additional allowance. This recognises the additional and often significant time commitment for these duties as well as the additional responsibility of these positions.

You can find out more information about allowances on the council website here: http://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/200145/performance_and_spending/485/council_spending_records/3

**Can I be a councillor and have a job?**

Yes. By law if you are working your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to perform your duties as a councillor. The amount of time given will depend on your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer’s business. You should discuss this with your employer before making the commitment to stand for election.
I have a disability, can I be a councillor?

If you fulfil the general criteria for being a councillor you can stand for election. Until now disabled candidates have not been entitled to extra funds or support from the council to help them canvass potential voters, although political parties sometimes provide extra support.

However, in 2011 the Government ran a consultation on providing extra support to help people with disabilities to stand as MPs, councillors or other elected officials. As a result it has announced its commitment to a number of steps, including funding for training and development and establishing an ‘access to elected office’ fund to support disability-related costs. The Home Office publication ‘Access to elected office for disabled people: a response to the public consultation’ outlines the proposals. At the time of publication of this booklet, this was work in progress (see the ‘Further Information’ section).

Once you become a councillor, the council will work with you to overcome any barriers you may encounter as a result of your disability, and will make sure you can participate fully in your role.

If you would like to discuss any issues relating to the above, please contact the Members’ Services Manager, Sarah Whittle either by email sarah.whittle@oldham.gov.uk or by telephone, 0161 770 5688.

For more information, see the Home Office report ‘Access to elected office for disabled people: a response to the consultation’ and up-to-date information on the Government’s work on equality in public and political life at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/public-political-equality

Next steps

I would like to put myself forward as a candidate, what do I do next?

The answer depends on whether you want to represent a political party or would like to stand as an independent candidate.

If you want to represent a political party then the next step would be to get involved with your party locally as soon as possible. This will help you find out more about what the role entails, who you will be working with and what it takes to win elections. Ultimately it’s up to the political parties’ local groups to decide whether to select you as a candidate, so you need to make contact with them as soon as possible and get involved with their work. Political parties will expect you to be, or become, a party member.

As an independent candidate you should start building your profile so that local people know who you are, and working out your position on topical local issues such as crime, traffic, the environment and schools. You will need to know what the council is doing about these issues and how your own opinion differs from the political parties. Nearer election time, as you start going door to door persuading people to vote for you, you will be challenged on your opinions.

If you are thinking of standing as an independent candidate you can contact the council’s Elections Office either by email election@oldham.gov.uk or by telephone, 0161 770 4718 to see when elections are next taking place and what you need to do.

Whether you have been selected by a party or are standing as an independent candidate, you must make sure that you are officially nominated as the election date draws nearer. This means getting 10 people to sign your nomination papers (signatories must be registered electors in the ward where you wish to stand). These papers are available from the council’s Elections Office. You must also give your consent in writing to your nomination.

Nomination papers for the 2012 local elections should be submitted between the 27th March and noon on 4th April

What happens when I am elected?

If you win your election and become an elected member, the Borough Solicitor will send successful candidates a letter welcoming you as a newly elected member.

All councillors are invited to an induction session, giving newly elected members the opportunity to find out more about the council, and includes;

• Being ‘sworn in’ and welcomed by the Chief Executive of Oldham Council – this means making a declaration of acceptance of office and agreeing to fulfil your duties;
• Getting official photographs taken;
• Completing the Criminal Records Bureau form;
• Meeting key council officers.

The council’s Annual Meeting and Mayor making ceremony usually take place at the end of May after the election.

Please note: your constituents may start to contact you as soon as you are elected.

Further Information

• The council’s Constitutional Services can be contacted via email constitutional.services@oldham.gov.uk or telephone 0161 770 3862.
• For further information on elections in Oldham, please visit http://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/200038/elections or contact the elections service either by email election@oldham.gov.uk or by telephone, 0161 770 4718
• Guidance for candidates and information on the electoral cycle is available on the Electoral Commission website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk
• The Local Government Association represents councils in England and Wales and information on its work can be found at: www.local.gov.uk
• For more information and advice from the Local Government Association on becoming a councillor, visit www.beacouncillor.org.uk
• The Communities and Local Government website provides news and information on the local government sector: www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment
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