

# CALLING ALL COUNCILLORS

*A Four Year Term Of Duty, Who's In?*

Word Limit: 1,100 words

Word Count: 1,130

Author: Adam Harper

Hannah Gissane of Lake Macquarie in New South Wales is not what you would call your typical councillor. Apart from being a female working in local government, making her a minority straight away, she is also only 19 years old.

You see Hannah is one of a new breed of politically savvy and ambitious youngsters cropping up in New South Wales councils; young, passionate and views local government as a career enabler rather than a career ender. And she's not alone.

Away from the coast in the rural town of Gunnedah, it's a similar story. Already with one term in local government under his belt, Adam Marshall was voted Mayor in September of 2008 at the ripe old age of 24.

"Age doesn't matter; it's about your level of commitment. Regardless of whether you are young or old, you have to earn your stripes in any new venture and if you are committed, open minded and enthusiastic; that's what defines a good councillor, not the date on your birth certificate," said Adam.

This renewed enthusiasm for local government comes despite the troubles councils are facing. This means despite cost shifting, rate pegging, even with the global financial meltdown stripping budgets. And New South Wales is not exactly known for offering high remuneration to its local government members, so perhaps its commitment to community that is keeping people in New South Wales keen to serve.

Enthusiasm is only half of the equation Adam explains, "the remaining task is actually getting elected. There's an old belief that says if you want to get into rural council, you have to be a farmer, retired or a bored housewife."

He's none of these, just passionate.

On the other side of the planet, in the United Kingdom, it's this passion councils are struggling to find, having extreme difficulties recruiting people between the ages of 25 and 50. Often, local representatives are seen as inefficient and one of the three R's; rich, retired or redundant. In Australia, we've thrown out our own set of the three R's relating to local council responsibilities; rates, roads and rubbish. Councils now have a much broader remit and representing your community carries a lot more prestige. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why there is healthy competition from skilled individuals for the honour of representing a region at local government level for a four year term.

So what else attracts them to the role? According to 26 year old Katheryn Smith from Gloucester Council it can be a number of reasons. Some people want to contribute to community; others use it as a political stepping stone into state and federal politics. No matter what the reason, once you get there, your work has only just begun.

Kathryn said, "There certainly is an element of the 'old boys' in council where new councillors are not given equal respect and we have to fight harder to have our opinions even heard. But it's not impossible, in my first few months I was responsible for seeing Gloucester's first public baby change table built. For a young mother, that's a big and gratifying reward to see such a quick result. I'd really like to see more first time contenders stepping up to keep the mix of youth and experience."

Newcastle City Council has experienced just this. It is made up of 13 councillors, 10 of those were brand new to local government when elected in September last year. In fact, there were 64 people nominated.

So there's plenty of fresh blood showing interest, but in this rivalry to get in, who is actually making the cut? Only two of the 13 Newcastle councillors are female. Local government is still very much a male dominated field, especially in senior management positions. Women in senior management roles only make up 20 percent of the local government workforce in Australia. Only five percent of chief executives or general managers are women. In the 2008 elections, 1,474 men were elected to local government in New South Wales, compared with 391 women. So it seems local government is still perceived as a man's domain, but should it be?

"Women are great communicators and that is a required attribute when representing a community. However, one of the biggest barriers facing women in council is the 'boy's club' mentality. In particular, young women in their first term are often sidelined, bullied and overlooked by the seasoned male councillors. That discourage what little incentive there is for new women wanting to join local government. Having said that, I am thrilled to see a new wave of young women standing for local elections, perhaps times are changing," said Karen McKeown, President of the New South Wales arm of the Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA).

The male skew is an issue ALGWA has been fighting against for more than half a century, campaigning to increase the number of women participating in local government. When ALGWA first started in 1951, only 54 women in Australia had been elected. In the 1995 elections, 406 were elected in New South Wales alone, yet there were still 12 councils with no women at all.

"Today, women make up 52 percent of the population in this country, but only 27 percent of elected decision makers are female. This imbalance is not conducive to happy council and shire regions," said Karen.

New South Wales does lead by example on the issue of gender equal opportunity in local government. Councils here employ more women per capita than their fellow states, and also employed Australia's first female Lord Mayor with Alderman Lilian M Fowler elected to Newtown Council in 1974.

Karen serves on Penrith City Council where six out of the 15 are female, it's a better than average mix. In Mosman, four out of nine councillors are female, almost half. Is the picture the same when you compare metro to rural? In Bourke, there are eight male and only two female councillors, Armidale has one female on a council of 10, and Griffith has three women out of the 12 councillors. So it would seem the issue is worse in rural and regional areas.

Local Government Association President, Cr Genia McCaffery, agrees. "It's not just the gender balance that is more difficult in rural areas. Attracting people to council full stop is tougher in the country. There could be too great a distance to make regular meeting commitments and often women don't have the

time owing to family commitments. And without the proper financial incentive, it's hard to attract skilled people in these areas. Interestingly, however, I noticed at our last elections there were a lot of young people standing. It's hard to explain why, but i'm really pleased to see such enthusiasm and can only hope it continues."