

# The Women's Local Government Society.

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## The Work awaiting Women on County Borough Councils.

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The need for women in local Government was never greater than at the present time, yet the number of County, Borough, and District Councils without any woman member still remains deplorably large. Extraordinarily interesting possibilities lie before the Councils, in the way of reconstruction, and the best results can only be attained where men and women work whole-heartedly side by side.

The woman candidate should have a high standard of qualifications, and it is desirable that she should possess some particular aptitude or some special knowledge. Many who have been engaged in social service find their experience of great value when they undertake municipal duties.

The woman who intends to fit herself for civic responsibilities, can do so by familiarising herself with the work of the Council, by reading the published proceedings in the local Press and any reports of Committees that may be available. She should also be present in the Public Gallery during Council meetings, in order to learn the procedure. Friendly conversations with Councillors is, in some respects, best of all. Further, by these means she will discover in what department of public service her aptitude and previous experience will render her most useful, although it may not be possible for her to obtain immediately on election a place upon the Committee of her choice.

It is too often assumed that the only questions in municipal work in which women members will be interested are those concerned with health, housing and education. Undoubtedly, women have felt that these subjects on which they possess special practical experience are those on which their advice and help are most urgently needed. It must, however, not be forgotten that to the Education, the Housing, and the Maternity and Child Welfare Committees, as to other statutory Committees, persons who are not Councillors can be co-opted, and that the benefit of women's experience can thus be secured. ("Statutory" Committees are those which have to be constituted in accordance with special provision in some statute.)

It will be useful to set out the duties which are imposed on all County Borough Councils. Different Councils arrange their work on slightly different methods, The duties are here classified under the headings of the Committees to which they are assigned by a typical Council.

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In the following paragraphs, statutory committees are *starred*.

**Public Health Committee.** This Committee deals with:—Nuisances (including smoke) and with offensive trades; with provision and inspection of drains, water-closets, cess-pools, and ash-pits; with the adulteration of food and drink and drugs; with the inspection of cowsheds, dairies etc.; with the prevention and notification of infectious diseases, and with the establishment of hospitals and sanatoria; with common lodging houses; with canal boats; with the Factories and Workshops and the Shops Act.

\***Maternity and Infant Welfare.** This Committee has duties under the Acts relating to mid-wives, notification of births, and maternity and child welfare, including baby hospitals and help for expectant and nursing mothers.

\***Asylums and Care of the Mentally defective.** This Committee reports to the Board of Control. It is charged with the erection of the asylums and with their supervision, so that Asylums Committees can do much for the lives of the inmates. The Mental Deficiency Act, 1913, imposed the care of all defectives over the age of 16, who required institutional care and control, and gave power for the establishment of colonies of various types for the mentally and morally defective.

**Public Works and Town Planning Committee.** This Committee has charge of the construction and maintenance of sewers and drains; of the making, cleansing and lighting of roads; of street alterations; of bridges over streets; of sky signs; of public lavatories; of public buildings and monuments.

\***Housing and Estates Committee.** This Committee prepares schemes, and has power to carry them out. It may close houses; repair houses; control tenement houses; build and own houses municipally; assist utility societies and others by loans; and so forth.

**Water Committee.** This Committee maintains the public service, and can institute proceedings under the Rivers Pollution Prevention Act.

**Baths Committee.** This Committee controls the public bathing establishments, including cottage baths and public wash-houses.

**Parks Committee.** This Committee has charge of the public parks and recreation grounds, in which it may provide music; of trees and shrubs in streets and open spaces; and of cemeteries. The Committee deals with the purchase of grounds, and with allotments.

**Markets and Fairs Committee.**

This Committee manages markets and fairs, and carries out the weights and measures, the diseases of animals, and the poultry Acts. It supervises slaughter-houses and the inspection and seizure of meat, etc.

**Salvage and Refuse Committee.**

This Committee is responsible for the collection and destruction of refuse, domestic and other.

**Gas Committee.**

This Committee is charged with public and domestic lighting, and with the provision of cooking and heating facilities by gas.

**Electric Supply Committee.**

This Committee is charged with public and domestic lighting by electricity, and with provision of power for factories, trams, etc.

**Tramways Committee.**

This Committee maintains the public services of trams and motor omnibuses.

\***Education Committee.**

This Committee deals with higher, elementary and technical education, and with art instruction; with continuation, industrial, nursery and special schools; with duties under the Employment of Children and Provision of Meals Acts; also with the establishment of school clinics and (at any rate, at present) with medical inspection of school children.

\***Public Libraries Committee.**

This Committee manages the libraries. These are for reference and for lending.

**Museum and Art Gallery Committee.**

This Committee has the supervision of local art treasures, and the expenditure of any funds that may be entrusted to the Corporation for the purchase of suitable objects of art for exhibition.

**Watch Committee.**

The Watch Committee is the Police Authority, and carries into effect the powers of the Council under the Prison Acts, and under the Inebriates Acts; it maintains the Fire Brigade; it licenses hackney carriages, omnibuses, etc., and also drivers and conductors; it grants licenses for the storage of petroleum, and for many other purposes; it puts in force the bye-laws for good rule and government; and it has numerous other duties of various kinds.

\***Distress Committee.**

This Statutory Committee under the Unemployed Workmen Act, 1905, deals, amongst other matters, with applications for emigration. It can expend a  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. rate.

**Finance Committee.**

This Committee makes orders in writing for all payments on behalf of the Council; negotiates all loans; invests sinking funds; presents accounts and estimates; manages and transacts preparation and collection of all rates, creation and issue of stock and adjustment of rating; and considers financial bearings of all proposals made by Committees.

In addition to the above, there may be mentioned the work of the \*Old Age Pensions Committee, the \*Food Control Committee, and the local \*War Pensions Committee, which, though not directly responsible to the Council, have their appointments approved by it.

It will thus be seen that there is no lack of variety in the work awaiting Women Councillors, and that there is opportunity for each to exercise her individual gifts to the utmost.

Apart from the subjects of health, housing and education, before mentioned, which will naturally take precedence, there is a crying need at the present time for the inclusion of women on Watch Committees, to secure the appointment of women police, and to deal with the many questions affecting women and girls in our streets and places of entertainment. Women Councillors are also badly wanted to deal with the care of the insane and mentally defective, with the provision of baths and wash-houses, of parks and open spaces, of music and other suitable recreation there, and of libraries and museums. Surely, also, they would be useful in preventing our streets and highways from being disfigured with architectural monstrosities, as well as in seeing that our courts and alleys are properly cleansed. The "City Beautiful" of the future should owe much to their taste.

Women are employed in nearly all municipal departments, although, except in the case of Health Officials, mainly in subordinate capacities. It is, therefore, a great advantage to have women on the Committees. An immense amount of work can be done by a Woman Councillor in visiting the various municipal institutions, hospitals, sanatoria, asylums, schools, baths, parks and libraries, making herself acquainted with the work of the staffs and employees, and taking a personal interest in the welfare of the individual workers. It is astonishing to find what a far-reaching result this sympathetic interest, if not shown in an inquisitive or interfering spirit, will have upon a department, and how the humanizing effect of the "personal touch" can permeate even official life.

It seems likely that in the near future Councils will have laid upon them some of the functions at present exercised by the Boards of Guardians. It will be more than ever essential that women of the right type should be forthcoming; young enough, too, to tackle the new problems with enthusiasm. They will find civic life intensely absorbing, they will discover that it will take just as much of their time—the whole of it, if they like—as they are willing to give. They will have to make many sacrifices of family life and social enjoyment, but in the pleasure and the interest of a public service of such supreme worth they will reap an exceeding rich reward.

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