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Conservative chairman proposes headhunters and ‘gold’ membership

Lord Feldman is forging ahead with his bid to reshape the face of the party despite current furore



by: **Kate Allen**, Political Correspondent

The Conservative party is to use headhunters to scour the country in an effort to find a new and more diverse generation of election candidates.

The Tories plan to search local business groups, women’s networks and community organisations for people who could represent the party in parliament, on local councils, and in other positions such as school governors.

These proposals are to be presented to the party’s board on Monday as part of a 10-month-long review of the Conservatives’ structure and operations carried out by Lord Feldman, the party chairman.

Although the party at Westminster is currently bogged down in an [epic bout of infighting](#), Lord Feldman — one of the prime minister's closest political friends — is forging ahead with his bid to reshape the face of the party.

His aim to entrench the Tories decisively in the centre ground of British politics seeks to reverse a long-running decline in its levels of public support.

From a high point in the 1950s when nearly 3m people belonged to the Conservative party, the Tories have suffered a steep decline in membership. Over the past decade their numbers have almost halved, from nearly 300,000 to about 150,000.

The review aims to answer “the big questions” about “how a modern political movement should work”, Lord Feldman said when launching it last year.

A programme will be set up by Conservative Campaign Headquarters to run workshops and training sessions to train aspiring politicians in the skills they will need to participate in public life.

The party also plans to create new elite forms of membership, which will give its most committed activists and supporters greater access to ministers and policymaking. “Gold” membership will buy VIP treatment at the Tories' annual conference.

One of the main issues Lord Feldman's review has identified is diversity. Although there are more female Conservative MPs than ever before — with one in five of the party at Westminster being women — only a third of the party's candidates in last year's general election were female. Just 13 per cent were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

The new outreach programme will see senior politicians, including cabinet ministers and the prime minister, visiting trainee candidates as part of their countrywide campaign tours.

In a bid to attract more people to the party from low-income backgrounds, the Tories will also set up a bursary scheme to support low-earning candidates in target seats. The bursaries will be available in 2018, after the Boundary Commission has finished its work of redrawing constituency areas.

They are intended to help candidates spend longer on local campaigning, giving them more time and resources to build up support in seats the Tories hope to win.

Lord Feldman is also aiming for a significant centralisation of party operations as part of the review, with a new membership system being administered by CCHQ rather than local associations, as has been the case until now. A new four-strong team will be hired to manage this centralisation and launch a major marketing campaign to attract new members.

The Conservatives' quasi-autonomous grass roots associations will be allowed to choose to group together into multi-constituency associations, to boost their organisational firepower. The existing network of associations is financially inefficient, the review found: the Conservatives generate **£20m a year from grass roots membership** but spend only a quarter of that on campaigning.

The Tories also plan to set up **local community organisations** to improve the party's image and attract a wider range of members. Groups set up to tackle practical activities such as litter-collecting and renovating community facilities, and to campaign on local issues such as roads and schools, will bring floating voters into contact with Mr Cameron's brand of "compassionate Conservatism" and win them over, people involved with the review believe.