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Tories to target grass roots to broaden membership

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Conservative party activists should set up local community groups as fronts to improve the party's image and attract a wider range of members, according to an internal review of how the Tories can revitalise their membership.

Groups set up to tackle practical activities such as litter-picking and renovating community facilities, and to campaign on local issues such as roads and schools, would bring floating voters into contact with prime minister David Cameron's brand of 'compassionate Conservatism' and win them over, people involved with the review believe.

The sweeping review was launched by Andrew Feldman, party chairman, after the general election last year to ask "all the big questions" about "how a [modern political movement](#) should work".

It will conclude that the Conservative party needs to re-establish itself in communities by winning over a new generation of members and activists, according to several people familiar with the review's progress.

It will also suggest linking local associations to a federal structure, a move likely to be unpopular among some of the party's longest-serving activists who are in many cases fiercely independent of its London headquarters.

The Tories have seen a steep membership decline from a high point in the 1950s when nearly 3m people belonged to the party.

Over the past decade, membership has almost halved from nearly 300,000 to about 150,000, though it ticked up again slightly in 2014 — the latest figures available. It is forecast to drop further in the coming years as a large proportion of its remaining members are elderly.

Mr Cameron wants to reverse that trend by entrenching his party decisively in the centre ground of British politics.

He became party leader a decade ago on a platform of [compassionate Conservatism](#) but this was superseded by the financial crisis, with the party putting greater emphasis on fiscal rigour.

The prime minister's 2015 election victory has given him an opportunity to return the Tories to his original vision. The first signs emerged in his [party conference speech](#) in the autumn and an official New Year message reinforced the shift in approach.

Measures such as same-sex marriage and continued spending on overseas aid are seen by the new generation of Conservative activists as vital in demonstrating that the party is no longer dominated by elderly, socially conservative members.

The Conservatives sought to target younger voters during last year's election by mobilising grass roots campaigners through the [RoadTrip](#) group and substantially outspending their Labour rivals on new media marketing, such as [Facebook advertisements](#).

The Scottish Tories have also had a makeover, [ditching half their previous election candidates](#) in a bid to help them overtake Labour as Scotland's second-largest party in Holyrood.

273,000

Members of the Conservative party in 2002

The review's board consists of Lord Feldman, Robert Halfon, deputy party chairman, and a handful of MPs and local and regional party chairs. The first fruits of its labours were announced at the party's conference in October: a £250,000 fund to help people on lower incomes run for parliament. The subsidies will help make the party more meritocratic, Lord Feldman hopes.

Over the past decade the Conservatives have increasingly used national co-ordination to redirect local associations' campaigning from safe seats into marginal constituencies. A federal structure

would formalise these arrangements and make them permanent, rather than only during election time, a person familiar with the party board's thinking said.

The federal proposal would need to be approved by local constituency associations and will not be imposed against their will.

The idea seeks to build on the party's city seats initiative, which has seen candidates and Conservative associations in urban areas that are not traditionally Tory working closely together to build the party's vote.

149,800

Members of the Conservative party in 2015

The review is also looking at whether to create a central membership base at Conservative headquarters. Some local associations' recordkeeping is thought to be patchy and this hampers organisational efforts, some senior Tories believe.

Other measures under consideration include a membership package akin to that of a members' club or health club.

This could include free or discounted access to events, reading material and promotional merchandise, and the opportunity to shape party policy, a person familiar with the review's deliberations said.

In addition to the party review, a new Compassionate Conservative Caucus will focus on social justice. Figures associated with this idea include Welsh secretary Stephen Crabb and Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson.