

How to... Become a Councillor

Make a difference in your community as a local councillor!



The role of local councillors

Local councils drive local change, provide and co-ordinate services and support communities that make up its population. To do this they work with the health service, the police, voluntary organisations, faith groups, sports clubs and businesses.

Councillors make all this happen. By standing as a candidate in a local election you are offering your service to the community as their representative.

Anyone can stand for council!

From resident to councillor

The councillors representing each ward are likely to come from a range of political backgrounds. Many people assume that the only route to become a councillor is to become a member of a political party and be nominated by your local group to stand for election. However, you can stand for election as an independent candidate. You could even form your own party, although you need to make sure you register it with the Electoral Commission.

Local Councillor elections run every four years. In some areas they are not all elected at the same time, so elections may take place more often. Local elections are run according to a complex timetable. Contact your local authorities electoral services office to obtain a copy of the nomination papers, which come with guidelines on how to stand for election and a copy of the timetable.

How your council works

Cities, urban and rural areas are split into a number of political areas called wards. The residents of each ward elect a number of councillors to represent them for four years (the councillors and the wards are listed on your councils' website).

There is also an executive who makes most of the day-to-day decisions. The executive works with the council leader and other councillors, who each have responsibility for a particular area of the councils work e.g. housing or education.

Overall policy and key decisions are made at council assembly meetings which are attended by the full council.

To stand for election you must:

You are disqualified from standing if:

- You are employed by the council where election is sought
- You have been declared bankrupt, or have served a prison sentence of over three months within the last five years

- Be over 18 years old
- Live or work within the council area
- Be registered to vote within you council area
- Complete the nomination papers
- Be nominated by ten registered voters in the ward you wish to stand
- Be a UK or Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of a member state of the European Union

The councillors role

People come from a wide range of backgrounds and bring a variety of skills and experiences to the role. However, there are a number of basic rules all councillors need to follow including:

- Attending council assembly and committee meetings
- Complying with the code of conduct
- Represent constituents by bringing their views into decision-making processes
- Encouraging community participation and citizen involvement in decision-making
- Registering any conflict of interests
- Balancing the different interests in a ward to represent it as a whole
- Influencing long term planning for the community
- Making decisions that effect the local community

Councillors act as community leaders by representing their community to the council and the council to the community. They plan their time so that they are available to all their constituents and can actively participate on any panel, committee, forum, community council or assembly to which they are appointed. Councillors hold *surgeries* where local people can discuss their concerns.

Member development and training opportunities are offered to help build skills.



What does it take?

- Passion, commitment and time
- An interest in local government and representation
- A willingness to work in a team and learn new skills
- A commitment to working in the best interests of the community
- An ability to engage with all sections of your local community

The Challenges

- Being able to balance the needs of different sections of the community with limited money
- Accepting decisions that may not be popular with everyone
- Represent the best interests of your community against political and business pressure

Ask yourself, what do you stand for? What are your personal values? What can you bring to help the local community?

“Councillors represent residents whose voices are not normally heard. What I enjoy most is knowing I have made a difference.”
Councillor Columba Blango

Becoming a candidate

The first step to becoming a councillor, before completing a nomination paper, is to gain the support of at least ten people who will sign your nomination. If you are a member of a political party, then you will need to go through their specific selection process. Independent candidates fund their own campaign.

After the nomination is submitted it is time to plan an election campaign!

Considerations

Being a local councillor demands commitment and dedication, therefore it is worth finding out what kind of time commitment is expected before making a final decision to stand.

- Look at the meetings schedule of your local council, in particular at the times
- Attend some of the meetings to see how business is conducted
- If possible talk to a serving member to discuss the amount of paperwork you are expected to read in advance
- Try to find out about any partnership meetings you will be expected to attend on behalf of your constituents
- Once elected you will be contacted by your constituents with requests for help, this means that you are likely to receive a lot of phone calls, letters and emails

Assess whether it is realistic for you to fit these demands into your current life commitments.

Remember local councils are simply made up of local people who manage to juggle their role with their work and family commitments. If you feel passionate about your locality, then becoming a local councillor is an effective way to make an active contribution.

"I became a councillor because I always wanted to know what's going on and why. I like to change things for the better for local people, listen to others and to take action."
Councillor Dora Dixon-Fyle

Further information

Contact your local authority for information on registering as a candidate in your area.

www.dopolitics.org.uk

www.direct.gov.uk

The Electoral Commission

Telephone: 020 7271 0500

E-mail: info@electoralcommission.org.uk



Support in the role

Councillors are not expected to know everything the council does and are fully supported in their role. The key thing is to be genuinely interested in the people and issues in the community you serve.

- Council staff are there to provide you with information and advice
- You will be offered a wide range of training and development
- There are opportunities for coaching and mentoring
- You will receive a basic annual allowance
- You will be provided with computer equipment, e-mail and internet access

"I became a councillor because I wanted to shape the future of the area I live in and make it better for everyone. I also wanted to increase the representation of young ethnic minority women in local politics."