

How to... Contact Your Local Councillors

What do councillors do?

The duty of your local councillor is to represent the needs of your ward to your local council and other organisations. Councillors can help if you are not happy with the outcome of an issue you have reported to the council or another public or voluntary agency. They have a duty to all their constituents, including those who did not vote for them.

Councillors are monitored to ensure they follow a code of conduct. They rely on public support for their positions, so they have a strong reason to take your concerns seriously and act on them. Your local councillors have regular opportunities to influence the decisions that affect the whole of your area and its future at council assembly meetings. You can contribute to this decision-making process by asking your councillors to represent your views on issues during these meetings.

A council leader and an executive, made up of a small group of councillors, make most of the day-to-day decisions or delegate them to council staff (or cabinet).

Contacting your MP

Sometimes the topic or issue you are concerned about may be one of national concern, e.g. immigration and it may, therefore, be appropriate to contact your Member of Parliament (MP).

Your MP is your elected representative in the UK parliament. MPs can scrutinise legislation, vote on it, and can question the government's actions. Contacting your MP can influence what questions they ask to the government and is an effective way to challenge a situation. Your MP will read and take notice of your letter because they represent you and want to know what you think. See overleaf for useful tips and a letter format to write to your councillors or MP. Find out who your MP is by going to www.theyworkforyou.com, and discover more online at www.parliament.uk.

This guide will help you find out more about the role of councillors, and how to take part in the decision-making process by asking your councillors to represent your views.



Council Officers

Officers are paid employees of the council and have a wide range of responsibilities in running council services and putting policies into practice. They are often the best people to contact first if there is a problem. Bigger decisions, such as those covering policy and budget, are made at council assembly meetings which are attended by the full council, i.e. all councillors.

Your rights

With some conditions and exceptions, citizens have the right to:

- Vote at local elections
- Contact their local councillor
- Attend meetings of their local council and its committees and raise questions
- Find out what major decisions are to be discussed and when
- See reports, accounts and records of decisions
- Complain to the council, the Ombudsman or the Standards Board if they think the council or a councillor has not followed procedures properly.

Before you contact your councillor

1. Have you dealt with your issue or concern as far as you possibly can? Have you contacted the relevant department or organisation yourself? Only contact your councillor when you feel you can get no further on your own.
2. Contact your council to find out who your councillors are for the area of ward that the problem arises in
3. Try to find out more about your councillor and whether they have previously dealt with your issue. Check the minutes of your local council meetings.

Contacting your councillor

You can find your ward councillor's contact details on your council website or through your council's helpdesk. They will generally provide an email address, phone number, postal address and details of any advice clinics they hold.

Mrs S Smith
X The Close
EX4 111
1 July 2006

Councillor Jones
XX Main Street
EX1 111

Dear Councillor,

Litter Dropping in EX4

I am writing to you because I am concerned about the increased amount of litter dropped by people in my local area. I am aware of what the council is doing about the problem as I often see street cleaners out and about, and have heard of the campaigns to keep the streets litter free and fines for those who drop litter. However, littering by irresponsible people still seems to be a problem.

I feel strongly about this issue for a number of reasons. Firstly, litter is bad for the environment and it stands little chance of being recycled if it doesn't go in a litter bin. Secondly, rubbish lying around seems to encourage people to drop more litter and it makes my local area much less pleasant to live in.

I would like to thank you for raising this issue in the paper and would like to ask you to encourage the council to do even more to deter people from dropping litter.

Please raise this issue at the next council assembly and ask for further action to be taken.

Yours sincerely
S. Smith

Writing a letter or email to your councillor

The letter above can be used as a template. Use a formal structure for your letter. Typed letters are much easier for your councillor to read. You can access free internet and word processing at your local library. Make sure your letter or e-mail is courteous and polite so that it will be taken seriously. Before you write in depth, write a heading with the subject of your letter. Then, over the following paragraphs:

1. Get to the point straight away
2. Show that you have researched your issue and recognise the work and achievements of the council at the same time as pointing out your concern
3. Tell your councillor why the issue is important to you
4. If you can, show your councillor that you are aware of and appreciate their work
5. Make it clear to your councillor what you are asking them to do