



STAND FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN
BE A GREEN PARTY COUNCILLOR

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Cover images – top: **Councillors Andy Hodgson, Max McLoughlin and Shahin Ashraf MBE with Co Leader of the Green Party Sian Berry and residents in Solihull**

Bottom: **Vix Lowthion with residents on the Isle of Wight**

Could I be a Green Party councillor?

YES!

Welcome to the ‘Be a Councillor’ guide for Green Party members and supporters.

Green Party councillors are bridge builders and consensus builders for whom ‘actions speak louder than words’. Even one lone Green voice can change the debate, challenge the status quo and ensure local people concerned about climate change and social justice have an effective voice.

This guide contains information about how councils work, the role of a councillor and most importantly, what being a Green Party councillor looks like.

Inside the guide, you will hear from several Green Party councillors from different local councils. They have shared why they are Green Party councillors and why it is important to them to represent their communities.

The guide is a great starting point if you have ever looked at other councillors and thought “I could do this”. There is also information about where to go to find out more.

In local government the Green Party is working hard for local people, providing leadership that is making our communities more sustainable, inclusive and making sure everyone knows the difference local action and participative democracy can make.

Green Party councillors come from every walk of life but share a common set of values: a reminder that local government is there for all local people. Representing local people and working with them is what we do best.

You may already be a campaigner, community activist, involved in your local church or mosque, or a local school governor. You might be in full-time or part-time work, retired or self-employed across profession, job or vocation. Ultimately, if you really care about your area, and want to work to make it the best place it can be, becoming a Green Party councillor could be for you.

We hope you find this guide useful, and if you decide to stand for election, we look forward to welcoming you into the Green Party local government family.

Foreword

The most powerful voice you can have at the table, in the room or within the town hall is a Green voice. It is the one that really matters – and it's the one that can change everything.

Unlike the other parties, we don't have a huge natural 'base vote' on which we can build. We have to earn every vote. So when a Green councillor is elected, it is because of our work, and the things we have done both for and with the local community.

Up and down the country local communities are seeing what a difference a Green makes. And they are electing more and more. Whether it's because we are ensuring financial support is maintained for our most vulnerable residents, improving local recycling rates, fighting homelessness and fuel poverty by building and insulating more social housing or fighting with residents to stop local green spaces being lost to development. Greens are standing proud of what they are achieving.

We need more people to step up and come forward to be Green councillors. To be leaders in their communities. To be advocates for change. It might seem daunting, but it needn't be.

The best councillors are those who simply bring their everyday experience to the job and who work with their local parties to be the change we want to see. It's hugely rewarding to be able to put into practice the things you believe in. To champion the concerns of local people. To make a real and tangible difference.

If you haven't thought about it before, then there's no better time. We face a climate emergency and, now more than ever, we need Greens at every level to offer solutions, ideas and ways to a secure future. If not us, who? If not now, when?

Councillor Jonathan Bartley

Councillor Sian Berry AM

Green Party of England
and Wales Co-Leaders

Elise Benjamin

Chair of the Association
of Green Councillors

What is a councillor, and what do they do?

Councillors are elected by communities to represent them and to run their local authority. Councillors represent wards or divisions which vary greatly in size across the country.

Councillors are expected to be active in the life of their local communities and act as the voice of their constituents, raising any concerns with the local council on a range of matters related to the work of the council. From waste collection to street lights, housing to social services, councillors talk to people about everything and anything.

Green Party councillors represent the party and its policies, and are an important part of their local party, feeding back to members about what is happening at the council.

Councillors may also work with politicians at a regional, national and European level on issues of local importance which have national implications.

Councillors are elected for a four-year term unless they are elected at a by-election, in which case they must stand again at the next normal election for the seat. They are often referred to as 'members' of the council.

The council is controlled by either the political party which has a majority of councillors or, if no one party has a majority, there may be a coalition of parties or a minority administration.

Your role as councillor will vary depending on whether you are the first pioneer Green Party councillor in your community or part of a growing or established group, but, generally speaking, will include some or all of the following broad responsibilities:

- dealing with individual pieces of casework for local residents and helping them resolve issues
- leading on local campaigns on behalf of the local communities
- serving on council committees which look at decisions being made or have specific legal or 'regulatory' duties
- acting as community leaders and helping local people get involved in the decisions made by the council.

Be prepared Top Tip: Go online and explore your council's website. Find out what services they provide and how many wards and councillors there are.

Council structures

In Britain there are two distinct types of local government structure – when deciding whether (and where) to become a councillor it is important to bear in mind the differences between them. In Scotland, Wales and often the more urban parts of England, there is a unitary structure of local government (ie each area has one council responsible for providing all the services).

For many parts of England there is a two-tier structure of principal authorities, with each area being covered by a district and a county council. Outside London there are also parish and town councils.

Unitary authorities

These are responsible for all powers delegated to local government (see table overleaf). There are 55 unitary authorities in England. In Wales all 22 local authorities are unitary as are the 32 local authorities in Scotland.

London boroughs

London boroughs have very similar responsibilities to unitary councils but have some of their powers transferred to the Greater London Authority (GLA), with whom they work in close cooperation. The GLA also has responsibility for the police and fire service. There are 32 London boroughs and a City of London Corporation.

Metropolitan districts

The 36 metropolitan districts have the same responsibilities as unitary councils but comprise the areas covered by the six former metropolitan counties (Greater Manchester, Tyne and Wear, Merseyside, the West Midlands, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire).

District (or borough) councils

Districts have various responsibilities such as: refuse collection, housing, licensing, planning, leisure facilities, environmental health, car parking, markets and protecting the environment. There are around 200 district councils.

County councils

County council responsibilities include: education, social services, libraries, roads, street lighting, the fire service, planning and consumer protection. There are 27 county councils. It is possible to serve as both a county and a district councillor, known as a dual councillor or dual-hatter.

Parish and town councils

There are around 10,000 community (found in Wales), parish and town councils in England and Wales which are made up of nearly 100,000 councillors. Parish councils can exist where there are anything from 100 residents to over 50,000.

Principal authority responsibilities

	Metropolitan or London authorities			Shire or unitary authorities		
	Joint authorities	Met councils	London	District	Unitary	County
Education		X	X		X	X
Housing		X	X	X	X	
Planning applications		X	X	X	X	
Strategic planning		X	X		X	X
Transport planning		X			X	X
Passenger transport	X				X	X
Highways		X	X		X	X
Fire	X				X	X
Social services		X	X		X	X
Libraries		X	X		X	X
Leisure and recreation		X	X	X	X	
Waste collection		X	X	X	X	
Waste disposal	X				X	X
Environmental health		X	X	X	X	
Revenue collection		X	X	X	X	
Public health		X	X		X	X

What is involved in being a councillor?

Being a Green Party councillor is a rewarding experience and many councillors will tell you that they have obtained new skills and experiences whilst working with their communities.

Together with our Green Party MP, Assembly Members, MEPs, and town and parish councillors, Green Party councillors on principal authorities are also hugely important catalysts to championing 'Policies for a Sustainable Society' in their local areas.

Here are some things to think about before deciding to stand for election.

What's the time commitment?

Think about how you would balance the responsibilities of being a councillor alongside family, friends and employment.

Talk to the people around you before you stand: their support will be really important. If you have Green Party councillors or former councillors in your area, have a chat with them about what is involved

If you also work, talk to your employer. You are entitled to time off for being a councillor and many employers see the benefit of an employee gaining such great experience outside the workplace.

If you have caring responsibilities, think about how to manage those.

Many people looking after children or dependent adults make excellent local councillors as they have direct personal knowledge of the services that affect people just like them.

Be prepared Top Tip: Make a list of all the things you currently do and think about how you could manage your activities and commitments. Talk to people with experience of being a councillor and who have similar time commitments to you.

Can I afford to do it?

Most councillors receive an 'allowance' for their duties which is taxable. Being a councillor is a job and the allowance is to ensure that if elected you are not left out of pocket. If you are on benefits these allowances can affect your entitlement, so get advice before agreeing to stand.

There is also a childcare and dependents carers' allowance for attendance at meetings payable on production of receipts, up to an agreed maximum cost per hour.

The council also provides a special responsibility allowance to those who undertake additional duties such as the leader of the council, portfolio holders, scrutiny chairs and opposition leaders.

Many Green Party councillors also agree to give part of their allowances to their local and regional party to help get more Green Party councillors elected.

Be prepared Top Tip: Find out more about the allowances scheme run by your local council – this can be found on their website – and think about your own financial situation.

What training do I need?

You don't have to be highly educated or have a profession. Skills gained through work, education, bringing up a family, caring for a sick or disabled relative, volunteering or being active in faith or community groups are really valuable.

In addition, the Green Party regionally, nationally and through the Association of Green Councillors (AGC) offers training for people thinking of standing for election, as well as for candidates, and all councils provide training for both new and experienced councillors. We also take advantage of the wide range of opportunities available through the Local Government Association (LGA).

Although you don't need any particular training to stand for election, think about what skills and attributes you do have and how they might help.

For instance, councillors are expected to be available to enable constituents to come to them with problems. This means that councillors need to have good listening skills, the ability to represent someone, to keep confidences, and to resolve conflict.

Be prepared Top Tip: Attend your regional, national and AGC conferences for training and development opportunities.

How can I find out more?

There is more information below in the section called 'Once you're elected', as well as online on the AGC website. The LGA has also produced a workbook to help you to go through some of the things you need to consider.

Be prepared Top Tip: Make a list of the skills and experience you think you have. Ask friends and relatives what they think. Be honest, but don't underplay yourself – most people have a much wider range of skills than they think. Consider how these skills would make you a great councillor.

How do I become a Green Party councillor?

Before you can be a councillor you must get elected. The Green Party aims to stand candidates in every ward, and is always looking for good, new people to get involved. There is a procedure to go through, but it is not complicated and there are lots of points at which you are offered help and support.

Getting approved as a candidate

There are two main reasons to have a candidate approval system. The first is to ensure that potential candidates know what is expected of them, but it is also to ensure that anyone who has the Green Party name and logo associated with them does the party credit.

You will receive advice and support for the process from your local and regional party.

Be prepared Top Tip: Meet with your local party, existing councillors and active candidates to learn more about how and why they became candidates.

Getting elected as a councillor

Unless you are a candidate in a by-election, the election will most likely happen on the first Thursday in May.

Between your selection and election day you will be expected to help lead Green Party campaigning in your ward and, in particular, to talk to voters and listen to their concerns.

This will principally be done on the doorstep. There are also various kinds of events you can hold as well as leaflets and letters you can distribute.

You will have an agent (and/or campaign manager) and that person will be responsible for organising the detail of the campaign. As polling day approaches things will get busier and more will be expected of you, so remember to be proactive in making sure that you still have time for family and work.

If you are elected you will be expected to start immediately, so make sure in advance that your family and employers know this.

Be prepared Top Tip: Find out about elections in your area and contact your local Green Party team. Ask about how elections are run locally and how you might get involved.

Costs, legal issues and probity

The main cost of getting elected is the cost of the campaign itself and includes items such as leaflets, canvass cards and posters. Local parties should have a fundraising plan to cover the cost of the campaign.

Candidates do not receive expenses or payments, but once elected councillors normally do receive allowances.

There are some legal constraints on who can and can't be a local councillor, for example you have to live or work in the council area where you want to stand. There are other reasons such as bankruptcy which prevent an individual from standing and most local authorities publish the reasons why a person couldn't stand in the election section on their websites.

Elected representatives at every level are required to complete a Register of Interests which declares your financial and property interests and membership of any organisation that may influence you – such as a political party. The main thing to remember is, if in doubt, declare it and take advice from the chief legal officer if you are elected.

Every council also has a 'Members' Code of Conduct' which sets out rules for how its councillors are expected to conduct themselves in office such as the need to declare any pecuniary interests at a meeting before items are discussed. Following election, all newly-elected councillors sign a written undertaking to abide by the code of conduct. Council officers provide advice on all of these matters to councillors.

Green Party groups also have Standing Orders to ensure that group business is conducted fairly and professionally.

Be prepared Top Tip: Check what the legal requirements for being a councillor are and that you meet them.

Being a Green Party councillor

If you are elected you will take up office immediately and, although it may seem a little intimidating at first, there will be training and support to help you settle in. The council will run an induction for new councillors and, in terms of the work in the ward, you will find that much of it will follow on from the work you were doing before the election as a local campaigner.

Green Party campaigners believe that councillors, and indeed the whole structure of local government, should engage with people and work with them rather than simply make decisions on their behalf.

Green Party councillors are expected to keep their residents up-to-date with what they have been up to with regular newsletters, emails and social media posts.

They may also hold advice surgeries for constituents, attend regular Green Party group meetings and play a full part in the life of the party locally in their area. Green Party campaigners and councillors will often be the people leading the charge on issues of great importance to a local community.

A significant part of all these responsibilities is the work that councillors do at a neighbourhood level, representing the people of their electoral ward or area.

There is good evidence that councillors who develop and nurture a good reputation in their ward earn the respect of the electorate, who in turn, repay them at the ballot box. In itself, this is a compelling reason for taking the role of the ward councillor seriously.

The need to be effective as a ward councillor is about much more than this. Representing people in your area, understanding the issues and concerns they face and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action and make a difference is the most important task that any councillor undertakes. Significantly, it is also often the role that local people value most.

Green Party campaigners and councillors can act as the leaders and organisers for real change. As a result we may win council seats but the real victories will be in the community groups built and the control taken by people over the decisions which affect their own lives.

There are a number of key roles that councillors are involved in:

- serving the community
- representing the community
- representing the Green Party.

Serving the community

Providing public services is the main function of the council. Local councils provide around 800 different services, from highways and adult social services to education and refuse collection. Councillors have a key role as:

- policy-makers
- decision takers
- 'scrutineers' of the effectiveness of the council in delivering services.

You need to be the voice of your community at the town hall, representing its wishes and a link between your community and the council.

The surest way of finding out what really matters to local residents is to ask them – whether on the door or as you meet people going about their daily affairs. Use time in queues, coffee shops, the launderette, on the bus, at the hairdressers to listen to what people are talking about. Conversations are vital to getting more information and strengthening your links in and to the community you represent.

Representing the community

Councillors represent all of the people within your communities (including those who did not vote for them).

The task of representing a group of several thousand local people can be complex. The way that councillors carry out their ward duties can vary enormously, but as a Green Party councillor it is expected you will be very involved in every aspect of your community – from attending functions to supporting local events and regularly being in contact with residents in a variety of ways.

You should:

- **understand the ward** – the key issues facing local people, by talking directly with voters
- **represent local voices** – by being a channel of communication between your local community and the council and ensuring you are listening to and representing the views of those you represent
- **manage casework** – listen to and respond to requests from individuals and groups in the community, resolving problems.

Understanding the ward

If you are a new councillor, it is essential that you get to know the area you represent. You need to know and understand your ward. What are the issues that concern people most? What issues are emerging?

A great place to start is with local community groups and ‘community players’. You don’t need to attend every meeting of every community group, but you do need to know they are happening and have good links with the key people. Local vicars or religious leaders, the police community support officer, the corner shopkeeper or the local branch of the Citizens Advice are great contacts.

Issues will come up in your ward that require campaigning. A good local campaign is a brilliant way to cement the relationship between you and local people. You don’t have to run the campaign, we’re much more interested in ‘empowering’ other people to campaign themselves, but you will need to be involved, and perhaps help get things going.

Be prepared Top Tip: Look at the internet and search for groups using key local area names. You’ll probably discover a multitude of groups you were unaware of – and were unaware of you. Set yourself a challenge to meet up with one contact and group every month.

Representing local voices

The task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals can be tricky.

While representing individual voters, councillors often try to keep in touch with as wide a range of people in the ward as possible. This will involve going to meetings and events, meeting people on a one-to-one basis, and listening to different views about what is needed or what should be happening. Your role as a representative includes lobbying to get a fair share of investment and service improvements in your area; dealing with casework and getting things ‘sorted’; and championing your area at the council.

Many authorities have an area or neighbourhood board structure bringing together councillors from a local area. The Green Party has long been an advocate of more local decision making and it is important we make the local structures work.

Because councillors are often one of the main link points between local people and the council, you will also need to be able to provide information as clearly as possible to help them understand local government services and processes. This becomes easier once you are a councillor and understand them better yourself.

The biggest challenge for ward members is often in getting the council or an outside body to take local views into account when making decisions.

There are various ways of doing this, but the first requirement is to understand what those views are yourself.

We as the Green Party pride ourselves on asking voters what they think is important in their area, getting their feedback on local issues, reporting back to them what we are doing and sharing information.

People are much more inclined to listen and pay attention if they feel that the person speaking to them knows what they are talking about, is committed to getting the best outcome, and has credibility as an elected representative.

Managing casework

Some councillors find casework the best part of their role – the opportunity to sort out problems for people who find the council ‘an impossible nightmare’.

Customer service studies always show that it is the speed and style of the initial response that is remembered by the resident. Respond quickly to all enquiries – email makes this very easy nowadays.

You need to set up a system for managing your casework that works for you. A book, a system using your email, a spreadsheet – whatever works for you. Bits of paper and your memory will not work.

However, make sure you do not raise false expectations about what you can achieve. Help individuals achieve things themselves. Remember we are here to empower not act as an alternative social worker or benefits advisor.

It is a good idea to build up a network of good contacts to help you solve casework. Good relations with a small number of officers will work wonders – always say thank you to officers when something is done.

Representing the Green Party

You are also importantly a representative of the party. We want our local community and our local council to be a more liberal and democratic place. If we are not any different from the Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat councillors who went before us, then there was no point getting elected.

It’s our real chance to put Green Party policies into practice. We can use scrutiny, questions, newsletters and the media to hold the ruling group to account and, in some areas, we are part of the ruling group and can use this leadership role to implement change. We can use council motions, proposals, amendments, and campaigns and lobbying to put our ideas across.

For the best solutions for local residents you will also have to work with others, identifying a common agenda to address the needs of the community whilst continuing to be in line with the party.

Be prepared Top Tip: Speak to current councillors about their casework, the issues and problems as well as how they handle an issue.

Parish councils

How to become a parish councillor
Despite the name, parish councils have nothing to do with the church. Parish and town councils represent the first tier of local government and there are approximately 70,000 parish/town councillors in England. It is the most local level of government – local people elected by local residents to tackle purely local issues.

While they may be responsible for smaller areas and fewer people than principal councils, they are recognised as the grassroots layer of democracy and are the most ‘local’ level of local government.

Many parishes are ‘unwarded’ (not divided into wards), so councillors represent the whole parish. Where parishes are warded, these wards do not necessarily have the same boundaries as the district wards.

Some parish councils are allowed to use the description of ‘town council’. Councillors will then be known as town councillors rather than parish councillors and the council will have a town mayor rather than a parish chairman. The legal status of town and parish councils is the same. Parish and town councils exist in most parts of the country, although not in London.

They have small budgets and limited powers, but provide an important link between individual communities and the principal councils in that area.

Eligibility

Eligibility is identical as for principal councils as detailed earlier except that instead of the criteria that you must appear ‘either on the electoral register for the council area in which you are seeking election; or have lived or worked in that council area for at least the last twelve months’, you must appear ‘on the electoral register for the area in which you are seeking election; or be living within three miles of it, or working, owning/leasing land or property in that parish for at least the last twelve months’.

Your role as a parish councillor

Parish council elections are held every four years, usually on the first Thursday in May. If you would like to stand for election, you will need to obtain a nomination paper from the parish council clerk and arrange for someone (who is an elector for the locality) to propose and another to second your nomination.

Parish councillors may be elected if there is a ‘casual vacancy’, due for example, to a councillor’s resignation. This vacancy may be filled by a by-election or by ‘co-option’ (where a parish council finds someone who might be suitable and then votes to select them, without a by-election).

Co-option usually occurs if there are not enough candidates to fill the vacant council seats. If you are interested in being co-opted, make yourself known to the parish council clerk. Contact details should be on the parish council website.

Being a parish councillor means you:

- represent the ward and your electorate’s views at grassroots level
- ensure that council business is planned, run, improved and monitored correctly
- work in areas of community leadership
- represent the Green Party.

The time commitment

There are regular meetings, usually in the evening and at least once a month, and you will be expected to work in and for your local community. It is worth checking this with your local council to ensure you will be able to attend these meetings. The parish council has a number of committees which you can join.

The financial cost

Some parish or town councils pay allowances to their councillors. Others do not have allowances but reimburse councillors for expenses if they attend meetings outside the parish, with the approval of the council.

As well as their basic responsibilities to represent the whole electorate within the parish, deliver services to meet local needs and strive to improve quality of life; parish councils can also be responsible for providing a range of community services such as: street lighting, allotments, local transport and traffic services, and tourist information centres.

They can make a particularly important contribution to tourism, planning, legal proceedings, licensing, community halls, representation, transport, management of town and village centres and providing community centres. Parish councils have few restrictions on the use of their powers but expenditure does have to be covered by the parish. As parish councils do not face ‘capping’ or receive any government grants they have more flexibility than principal councils on their spending.

The parish also has a reasonable amount of power. A prime example of this is in planning applications.

The planning authority is the district or borough council, but it often gives details of planning applications within the parish to the parish council and will consider the councillors' comments when coming to a decision. Also, the county council is often the highway authority, but it usually consults the parish when considering any road scheme, for example, the placing of double yellow lines, or implementation of a cycle path.

Being a parish councillor brings no special privileges other than the satisfaction of working for the parish in which you live. Becoming a local councillor is life and career enhancing – it shows you can make decisions, work in a team, are community minded and proactive.

Useful organisations and websites

Local Government Association (LGA)

Independent Group

Local Government House, Smith Square,
London SW1P 3HZ

Tel: 020 7664 3235

www.local.gov.uk/lga-independent

Your council's website

The Green Party

www.greenparty.org.uk

Association of Green Party Councillors

(AGC)

www.agc.greenparty.org.uk

Local Government Association (LGA)

An invaluable source of help and advice
for all those in local government.

www.local.gov.uk

The Electoral Commission

Independent elections watchdog and regulator of party and election finance

www.electoralcommission.org.uk



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