



STAND FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN.
BE A LIBERAL DEMOCRAT COUNTY COUNCILLOR.

www.beacouncillor.org.uk



Acknowledgements

This guide has been produced by the Local Government Association (LGA) Liberal Democrat Group in partnership with the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors as part of the LGA funded 'Be a Councillor' Campaign

In the course of writing this we have drawn on earlier work, and particularly on guidance produced the LGA. This Guide also incorporates elements of the Learning and Development Workbook for Potential Electoral Candidates produced by the LGA.

Cover images – top: **Councillor Isabel Brazil and Councillor Sebastian Field, Gloucester City Council, Councillor Jeremy Hilton, Gloucestershire County Council and Councillor Joanne Brown, Gloucester City Council**

Bottom: **Councillor Joe Harris, Gloucestershire County Council**

Could I be a Liberal Democrat county councillor?

YES!

Welcome to the 'Be a Councillor' guide for Liberal Democrat members and supporters.

Lib Dem councillors have long been an important democratic voice for the party. Our well-worn mottos of 'working hard all year round' and 'success you can see' really mean something to the communities we represent.

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

Inside the guide, you will hear from three Lib Dem councillors from different local councils. They have shared why they are Lib Dem 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 Lib Dems are working hard for local people, standing up for our communities and making sure everyone knows the difference the Lib Dems can make.

As Lib Dem councillors we are proud to serve our communities and set high standards for ourselves. We are part of shaping the future of our communities, villages, towns and cities. We also are hugely important in supporting and upholding the principles of liberal democracy in action. Local government is undergoing huge changes and challenges. It is more important than ever that Lib Dems are there to remind everyone that local government is there for local people. Representing local people and campaigning 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 help delivering leaflets or organising events. If so, you already have a great basis for taking up public office and becoming a Lib Dem councillor. But ultimately, if you really care about your area, and want work to make it the best place it can be, becoming a Lib Dem 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 Lib Dem local government family.

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 community 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.

Liberal Democrat 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.

A Liberal Democrat county councillor is a local community champion elected by residents to one of the electoral divisions in a county area to represent them on the council.

A county council provides a wide range of services, including:

- education
- social services
- libraries
- highways
- Trading Standards
- waste disposal.

All Liberal Democrat county councillors are accessible to resolve issues and problems brought to them by their constituents. There are also district, borough or city councils covering the same area but with different responsibilities, such as rubbish collection, recycling, council tax collection, and housing and planning applications.

If you would like to find out more about county councils visit the County Council Network:

www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk

Action point: Go online and explore your county council's website. Find out what services they provide and how many wards and councillors there are.

Janet Willis

County Councillor, Low Furness, Cumbria

Before standing for the county council I had never been involved in local politics and was a subpostmaster. My Post Office was earmarked for closure and I ran a huge campaign, supported by my community to try to keep it open. Tim Farron, our then local MP, helped with the campaign. We were only partially successful with the sub-post office becoming a part-time outreach service.

Tim thought I would make a good community leader and asked me to stand for the county council. I saw it as a way of repaying the community that given me so much support throughout the campaign.

I was elected in 2009 and represent a large rural community. Road safety is a major concern in the area and my biggest achievement, with Tim's help, was to secure funding for a roundabout at Greenood. This has made a huge difference to road safety and the lives of local residents and has spurred me on to tackle other accident blackspots.

I love my role. It is an honour to represent your local community and you can make a difference, whether it be something big like a roundabout or helping one individual with their big issue.



Runs a post office Lives in a very rural community Road safety campaigner

What is involved in being a councillor?

Being a Liberal Democrat 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 Lib Dem MPs, Assembly Member, MEPs, and town and parish councillors, Lib Dem councillors are also important in making sure there is a good reputation for the Lib Dems in the area.

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 Lib Dem 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.

Action point: 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.

Most Lib Dem Groups also agree to give part of their allowances to their local party to help get more Lib Dems elected.

Action Point: Find out more about the allowances scheme run by your local council, this can be found on their web site 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 Liberal Democrats and its councillors' association (ALDC) 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.

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.

Action Point: 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 can I find out more?

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

Lucy Nethsingha, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Cambridgeshire County Council

I have been a councillor for two councils; Gloucester City Council from 2004-2008 and Cambridgeshire County Council from 2009 to present. I first stood in Gloucester when my children were very young. I didn't win the first year I stood, but was elected the following year having spent a year delivering leaflets and getting to know the ward.

I really enjoyed being a district councillor as well as a stay-at-home mum. I loved making challenging decisions with grown-ups in the evenings after a day at home with the kids. I had my third child while a Gloucester City councillor and attended quite a few meetings with my younger daughter asleep in a basket behind my chair.

When my husband's job brought us to Cambridge I got in touch with the local Lib Dems and was delighted when they invited me to stand for the county council. I have found being a county councillor even more rewarding. As a primary school teacher I have found sitting on the Children and Young Peoples Committee, and chairing the Joint Commissioning Unit, which commissions many children's health services, especially absorbing.

I am a member of the Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Board, and was delighted to be able to commission work on the impact of active transport (walking and cycling) on health. (The benefits are huge!)



Lover of church music Cyclist Buyer of plants for retail therapy

How do I become a Liberal Democrat councillor?

Before you can be a councillor you must get elected. The Liberal Democrats aim to stand candidates in every ward, and are 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 Lib Dem name and logo associated with them does the party credit.

The form the approval process takes can be adapted to suit your local area, and so whether you are in control of the council or if you are struggling to get a full slate of candidates, there is a process that can work for you.

Most approval processes involve completing a simple application form and an interview. The questions for both of these need to be agreed by the approval panel, although templates and crib sheets are available.

If you're in a smaller local party or have a large number of wards where you will struggle to find candidates, you may decide not to include the interview part of the process, although getting potential candidates to complete a form is always useful as it gives you written 'evidence' in case there are problems at a later stage.

The interview should be professional but not be too formal. It shouldn't be a harsh grilling and all efforts should be made to put the potential candidate at ease. Before the panel meets it is a worthwhile exercise to discuss and write down the qualities that make a good a Lib Dem councillor. These are not always skills that you can learn or develop through training but their absence can later cause problems for the reputation of the party or group unity.

Councillors often have to make difficult choices in public about the services their councils are responsible for. This is a considerable responsibility. Top of most lists would come: Lib Dem values, team player, and loyalty to the group and the party.

Action point: Start making notes for your application form and identifying your strengths and weaknesses – for instance, if you don't know much about party policy do some research to find out.

Getting selected as a candidate

As a democratic party it is important that we have a fair, open and transparent process for choosing the people who stand for us in elections. The procedure is not designed to be complicated or onerous, but is intended to ensure we get the best candidates and that everyone who put themselves forward is given an equal opportunity of being selected.

Even if you are in an area where council candidates often get selected unopposed or where your existing councillors are hoping to re-stand, you still need a fair selection process to make sure that others have the opportunity of standing and to put you in good stead for when selections become more competitive.

There is a lot of freedom in how candidate selections can be organised, however, there are a few principles that are important:

- where there is an election for a candidate, this must be done through a secret ballot using the Single Transferable Vote system
- no one should be automatically re-selected, including sitting councillors

- in England, only those people who are members at the time where the position is advertised can vote in the selection
- all candidates must have been approved as a candidate within four years before they can put their name forward for selection.

The initial stage is for local parties to advertise the wards in which they are selecting candidates to all of the party membership within the council area.

Potential candidates will be asked to submit a simple application form or slip or send an expression of interest through an email to the Returning Officer.

As a campaigning party we should encourage potential candidates to speak to members if they want to be selected. All applicants should be given a list of the members eligible to vote, (which should be returned after the selection), with encouragement to get in touch with them. The Returning Officer may also wish to allow each candidate to produce their own canvass leaflet.

The Returning Officer should also write to all of the eligible voters explaining that a selection is underway, that they may be contacted by candidates and including a one-side of A4 artwork from each candidate.

They should also outline details of a hustings meeting when members can come along and listen to speeches from candidates and ask questions.

Most selections allow members to have a postal ballot if they cannot attend the hustings meeting, but usually these are only available on request to the Returning Officer. In most cases, the votes are counted at the end of the hustings meeting, but in some places they run a full postal ballot. This is for you to decide.

Action point: If you're not used to making speeches find someone who can help you to practice. Think, too, about the kind of questions you might be asked; what are the important issues in the area, and what kind of challenges is the council facing? You don't need to know all the answers, but you should be able to demonstrate that you understand the question, and that you have an opinion on key issues.

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 Lib Dem campaigning in your ward, and, in particular, to talk to voters and listen to their concerns.

This can be done on the doorstep and/or by phone, and there are 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 people such as your family and employers know this.

Action point: Find out about elections in your area and contact your local Lib Dem team. Ask about how elections are run locally and how you might get involved.

Councillor Joe Harris

Cirencester Park Division, Gloucestershire County Council,
St Michael's Ward, Cotswold District Council

Being a young councillor has been a big learning curve but ultimately a really rewarding experience.

Many people have asked me "do people take you seriously because of your age?" I've found that on the whole people take me more seriously because they appreciate having a different point of view and are quite curious about why someone my age would want to get involved in local government.



Councils face an uncertain time and a tough few years. Lib Dem councillors are pragmatists and problem solvers, whether you are running the council and delivering big schemes or in opposition and sorting issues that matter to your local community, there really is no better feeling than seeing the look on residents' faces when you deliver for them.

My advice to anyone who wants to be a councillor is don't be afraid to make mistakes, despite what some might think we're only human. Also, don't make promises you can't keep. Most residents understand that you can't change the world but are grateful for the things that you can do.

Get involved, get elected and help make where you live a better place to be.

One of the Lib Dems youngest councillors Local NHS campaigner

A county and district councillor

Costs, legal issues and probity

The main cost of getting elected is the cost of the campaign itself. 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.

Liberal Democrat Groups also have Standing Orders to ensure that group business is conducted fairly and professionally. Make sure you are given a copy of the Standing Orders during your approval and selection process. If you are elected they will be your Standing Orders too.

Action point: Check what the legal requirements for being a councillor are and that you meet them.

Being a Liberal Democrat 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.

Liberal Democrat campaigners believe that councillors and indeed the whole structure of local government should engage with people and work with them rather than simply take decisions on their behalf.

Lib Dem councillors are expected to keep their residents up-to-date with what they have been up to. With regular newsletters in many places called FOCUS, emails and Facebook postings.

They may also hold advice surgeries for constituents, attend regular Liberal Democrat Group meetings and play a full part in the life of the Party locally in their area. Lib Dem 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.

But 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.

Lib Dem 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 effect their own lives.

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

- serving the community
- representing the community
- representing the Lib Dems.

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 by asking them – whether on the door or on the telephone. Use time in queues, coffee shops, the launderette, on the bus, the hairdressers to listen to what people are talking about. Conversations are vital to getting more information, beyond voting intention and is vital to maximising your vote at election time.

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 Lib Dem 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 through a variety of mediums.

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 ensure you are listening 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.
- **Represent the Liberal Democrats.**

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 coming down the pipeline?

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. Good links with local vicars or religious leaders, the Police community support officer, the corner shopkeeper or the local branch of the Citizens Advice are great contacts.

Action point: 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.

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.

Sometimes issues are difficult.

If we run the council it may be that we are the 'baddies' that people want to campaign against. There are still ways you can stand up for your ward and you need to discuss how best to do this with your Lib Dem colleagues. Sometimes an issue divides a community and there is no 'winning answer' – you need to stick to your Lib Dem good senses – most people who disagree with you will appreciate you standing up for the area.

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.

Lib Dems have long been advocates 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 to 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 Lib Dems 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 have been up to 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. All ALDC members get access to the online CONNECT Casework module for free (£3 a month for others), an online casework management tool that will allow you to keep track of all the casework that you do in your ward.

Action point: Speak to current councillors about their casework, the issues and problems as well as how they handle an issue.

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 Liberal Democrats

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 or Tory councillors who went before us, then there was no point getting elected.

It's our real chance to put Lib Dem policies into practice. We can use scrutiny, questions, FOCUS and the media to hold the ruling group to account. We can use council motions, proposals, amendments and campaigns and lobbying to put our ideas across.

You are the face of the Lib Dems locally. Stand up for what we believe in, stand by your colleagues.

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 but these still need to be in line with the party.

Further information and support

Publications

Learning and Development Workbook for Potential Electoral Candidates, 2015, LGA

Councillors' Guide 2015/16, LGA, 2015

Councillor Briefing Pack: Sustainable Communities, LGA, 2015

Councillor Briefing Pack: Healthier Communities, LGA, 2015

Councillor Briefing Pack: Resilient Communities, LGA, 2015

Councillor Briefing Pack: Growth, LGA, 2015

Useful organisations and websites

Local Government Association Liberal Democrat Group

Local Government House, Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ

020 7664 3235

www.local.gov.uk/web/lga-libdem-group

Your council's website

Liberal Democrats

www.libdems.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

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC)

www.aldc.org

Sign up

Whether you are a councillor, candidate or campaigner, ALDC have all of the resources to help local campaign teams win.

We have nearly 1,000 EXCLUSIVE templates available for members to download for free and we add more every week.

You can join ALDC at half price if you choose to join us by direct debit – just £3.41 per month.

To find out more about becoming a Liberal Democrat Councillor please fill in the form below

Name
Address
Postcode
Email
Phone

- I am interested in standing for the Lib Dems at the next election
- I am interested in finding out more about ALDC

Send it back to:
ALDC
Liberal Democrat Campaigner and Councillors
23 New Mount Street
Manchester M4 4DE
or email contact@aldc.org



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