



STAND FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

BE A COUNCILLOR

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# Stand for what you believe in

## Be a councillor

What matters to you in your local area? Is it the state of the local park, the need for more activities for young people, improving services for older people, making the roads safer or ensuring that local businesses can thrive? Whatever needs changing in your neighbourhood, you could be just the person to change it by becoming a local councillor.

Perhaps you are already involved in your community and local affairs and want to take the next step. Or you may be looking for a worthwhile and rewarding way to help your local community.

There are more than 20,000 local councillors in England and Wales, each representing their local community and all with their own reason for doing so. In order to be truly democratic, councils need to be representative of their community. To make the best decisions, they need to draw on a wide range of skills, experience and knowledge of what the local community wants and needs. Councils need people from all parts of the community who can bring their own perspective on what is needed locally.

Are you ready to help change the face of local government?

No other role gives you the chance to make such a huge difference to the quality of life for people in your local area.

# Be independent

Did You Know... Independent Councillors, and those from smaller political parties such as the Green Party, UKIP and Plaid Cymru in Wales, play a key role in local government.

There are things that all prospective candidates should know before they embark on an election campaign. This guide will look at some of these issues and help you decide whether to take the plunge and stand for election to your local council.

Tip: the legal requirements and process for becoming a councillor can be found on the Electoral Commission's website: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent)

## Councillor Gillian Ford Residents' Association, London Borough of Havering

Having childhood holidays in my parents' friend's retirement home, I grew up helping out where I could. Aged sixteen, I was invited on to a social committee, representing young people to raise funds and activities for the community. Next came voluntary work in the local school and a position on the school governing body. Being asked to go on the Residents' Association Committee followed with the request for me to stand as a councillor. This was the obvious next step in influencing, supporting and improving the lives of others. I have found my councillor role incredibly rewarding and a humbling experience.

Volunteer  Artist  Dementia friend champion  Local councillor

# How do councils work?

**Tip: Have a look at your council's constitution, which is the rule book of the council. This provides the framework within which the council conducts its business and makes decisions.**

This depends on the type of council. There are several types of local council, for example parish (or community councils in Wales), town, district, borough, county, metropolitan and unitary authorities. Sometimes these are referred to as local authorities. Each area is divided into wards or divisions, and one or more councillors represent each ward.

All councils are led by democratically elected councillors who, working together, set the council's vision, direction and budget. Most councils are run on a system similar to that of central government, with a small elected executive (or cabinet) to decide on policy and make decisions which other councillors then 'scrutinise' or examine in detail. All councillors can research the issues that are affecting their residents and make recommendations. Some councils work with a 'committee system', where decisions are made across a range of committees.

All councils (with the exception of town or parish councils) are large organisations that play a big part in the local economy and influence many aspects of the lives of the people who live and work there. Central government still has some influence over councils through controlling some of their funding and through legislation, however, this is lessening as more powers are devolved locally. Councils vary widely in terms of their style, political leadership and approach to delivering programmes, and it is here that your community links and local knowledge will make a real difference.

Depending on the type of local authority it is, a council can be responsible for a range of services, including:

- planning and licensing
- education and lifelong learning
- health and wellbeing
- children's and adult social care
- housing and regeneration
- community safety and cohesion
- waste collection and recycling
- roads and street lighting
- arts, sports and culture
- transport.

Councils now deliver much of what they do in partnership with other councils, services and agencies, so as a councillor you may have opportunities to sit on partnership boards or committees for health, education, community safety or regeneration.

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## Councillor Bob Dutton

### Independent, Wrexham County Borough Council

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Having served in local government at its senior officer level I had no intention of moving into the world of councillors but I was attracted by being able to do what is best for the individual and communities. I was elected and led our Independent members, eventually collaborating with other groups to take control of the council. It is a fascinating world for the newcomer, opening areas of new interest and training and working with colleagues in all sorts of organisations, finding out how important their local councillor is to everyone. Councils influence decisions made on many services for the person in the street. In Wales if you don't speak Welsh you may find it helpful and enjoyable to learn it as increasingly business may be conducted in both languages as a way of protecting the heritage of the oldest tongue in Europe.

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- Chartered civil engineer  Economic development adviser
  - Former council chief executive  Local councillor

## Councillor Martin Fodor

### Green Party, Bristol City Council

I worked in local government for many years, dealing with policies around environment, sustainability, economy and community – both locally and nationally. I've always been active in my area but was never really involved in party politics. Then more and more friends suggested I should get involved with the Green Party and I helped in our first mayoral campaign in the city. As a 'paper' candidate I was runner up in my ward so everyone asked if I'd stand and get elected. I was already known for getting quite a few things done in the area, working with local traders, community groups and others. After a lot of canvassing I won the seat. Being on the politicians' side of the room was not too much of a shock for me, though it can be.

I find asking questions in scrutiny meetings and quizzing the Mayor at question time can be revealing and influential. There are several jobs to take on as a councillor: dealing with ward case work, to help people who can't get action out of the system; being part of a party group which is known for being well prepared and active in issues across the council; explaining how the council works, so people understand what can be changed locally; helping my local party build its influence and reputation for elections; and pursuing personal projects and interests with persistence to make a difference to the development of our city.

- Enjoys local art and music
- Created a home energy saving course
- Runs home energy efficiency workshops
- Local councillor

# What do councillors do?

Councillors are elected to a council to represent their local community, so they must either live or work in the area. Becoming a councillor is both a rewarding and privileged form of public service. You will be in a position to make a difference to the quality of people's daily lives and to their prospects.

Being an effective councillor requires commitment and hard work. Councillors must listen to the views of residents, other councillors and experts and work to bring them together to a common aim.

Residents, outside bodies and community groups, the party or group you belong to (if applicable) and the council, will all make legitimate demands on a councillor's time, on top of the demands and needs of their personal and professional lives. If you are considering becoming a councillor it's worth discussing the idea with your family and friends. You will need their support as you will have to spend time attending to council business, and depending on your ambitions this can amount to a substantial amount of time (more on that later).

One council estimates the time commitment as ranging from five to 20 hours a week. Your role within the council will determine how much time you spend on council duties. Joining a planning committee, for example, will increase your workload. As with most things in life, what you get back will depend on what you put in.



# Who can be a councillor?

The easy answer is almost anyone can be a councillor, as long as you are:

- British or a citizen of the Commonwealth or European Union
- at least 18 years old
- registered to vote in the area or have lived, worked or owned property there for at least 12 months before an election.

You can't be a councillor if you:

- work for the council you want to be a councillor for, or for another local authority in a politically restricted post
- are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order
- have been sentenced to prison for three months or more (including suspended sentences) during the five years before election day
- have been convicted of a corrupt or illegal practice by an election court
- have not paid your council tax.

**Tip: If you are in any doubt about your eligibility to stand, contact the returning officer in the electoral services department at your local council for advice.**

There are many reasons why people decide to become a local councillor. They include:

- wanting to be involved in shaping the future of the local community
- wanting to ensure that the community gets the right services
- wanting to represent the views of local people
- wanting to contribute particular skills
- concerns about one particular issue.

# What's expected of a councillor?

**Tip: Look at your council's handbook and code of conduct for members. It is intended to assist councillors in their work at the council.**

The councillor's role and responsibilities include:

- community leadership, engagement and support
- making decisions
- developing and reviewing council policy
- scrutiny and holding the executive/cabinet to account
- regulatory, quasi-judicial and statutory duties.

Being available for community members to contact is an important part of a councillor's job. Many councillors enjoy attending local events and meetings. Some produce newsletters or use social media or blogs. Some hold regular drop-in surgeries, which provide a chance for residents to discuss their problems or concerns. Much of a councillor's work can be done by telephone, letters or email, though sometimes it is better to arrange meetings with residents or council staff to resolve issues. Sometimes all a resident needs is to be directed to the right information and/ or contacts to enable them to deal with an issue themselves.

All councillors are expected to attend full council meetings, and most attend scrutiny meetings (the process of examining the work and decisions of the executive). Councillors may also choose to sit on quasi-judicial committees, for example planning and licensing committees which take non-political decisions on applications. The timing, number and length of these meetings varies from council to council. Depending on the arrangements within your council, you will have opportunities to join relevant political or Independent Group meetings as well as training events.

# Do I need any special skills or experience to be a councillor?

It's important that councils have councillors who reflect and represent the communities they serve, and also have a broad range of skills and life experience. You don't have to be highly educated or have a profession. Skills gained through raising a family, caring for a sick or disabled relative, volunteering or being active in faith or community groups can be just as valuable.

While you don't need any special qualifications to be a councillor, having or being able to develop the following attributes will help you in the role:

- communication skills
- problem solving and analytical skills
- team working
- organisational skills
- the ability to engage with your local community.

Don't worry if you don't yet feel that you have all the skills to be a councillor. All councils provide support, information and training for new councillors.

## Councillor Liz Hazell

UK Independence Party, Walsall Council

When you hear a politician – do you think that you could do a better job? Do you look around your area and think, I want to improve this? Are you interested in the people and places around you? Do you care? Do you prefer to do something rather than moan about it? Do you believe in democracy, right and wrong? Are you willing to stand up and speak out?

Then your council needs you.

- Worked in manufacturing  Past photographer for AutoTrader
- Retrained as an electrician  Local councillor

# Will I get paid for being a councillor?

**Tip: Find out more about the allowances scheme run by your local council on their website.**

Councillors don't receive a salary, but they do get a 'member's allowance' (which is taxable) in recognition of their time and expenses incurred while on council business. Each council sets its own rate for these allowances. 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. Councils also provide a special responsibility allowance to those who undertake additional duties such as the leader of the council, portfolio holders, scrutiny chairs and opposition leaders.

## **Councillor Randy Conteh** Independent, Stoke on Trent City Council

I have been a councillor for 10 years and although it's hard work I genuinely enjoy it. My role includes addressing residents' concerns, responding to local petitions or organising consultation events, combined with fun days. My achievements include improving the facilities for younger people in two local parks – eight years of hard graft from consultation to completion. Being a councillor within an independent group means that we are not subject to any party whip – we are allowed to vote as individuals, and I always vote with my conscience. If you tell the truth, speak from the heart and talk sense, then people will listen.

- Supports Stoke City Football Club  Active in community groups
- Organises charity events  Local councillor

# Can I be a councillor and have a job?

Yes. By law if you are working your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to perform your duties as a councillor. The amount of time given will depend on your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer's business. You should discuss this with your employer before deciding to stand for election.

## Councillor Lyn Ackerman

Plaid Cymru, Newbridge Borough Council and Caerphilly County Borough Council

I wanted to become a councillor to improve my community. I had done a few trips into England due to sporting interests and they always seemed to have much nicer facilities than us. It made me question what was happening to our council's budget and where and how it got spent.

I had been involved in politics quite young due to my father's interest and it was a natural progression to follow him in that regard. You soon realise that women are under-represented in councils, but the population figures show we are more in number. It gave me the drive to make sure that women's voices got heard.

- Volunteers for people with learning disabilities
- Plays darts
- Former rugby player and referee
- Local councillor

# I have a disability, can I be a councillor?

The Public Sector Equality Duty, places a specific duty on public bodies, including Local Authorities, to consider all individuals when carrying out their day-to-day work, from shaping policy, to delivery of services and in relation to their own employees.

Councils are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate the needs of disabled councillors, who would otherwise be placed at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled councillors. It is an 'anticipatory duty' meaning that councils must think in advance about the needs of disabled people and make reasonable adjustments.

Once you become a councillor, your council will work with you to overcome any barriers you come across as a result of your disability and will make sure you can be fully involved. Being a councillor is not a full-time job and may not affect any benefits you receive, but individual cases will vary so do check this with your benefits office.

Government Guidance to the Equality Act 2010  
[www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance)

The Government Equalities Office  
[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office)

The Equality and Human Rights Commission  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com/en](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en)

# What support is available to elected councillors?

Councils have staff, known as officers, available to provide support and assistance. Exactly what facilities you get will depend on the council. Many will provide a computer for your home and some may pay for internet access and an additional telephone line and/or mobile phone. Councils also provide induction and training for new councillors.

Once elected, independent councillors can find it useful to formally link up with other Independent members of the council. Joining an Independent Group will help you to gain the maximum number of seats on council committees and increase your influence.

If you stood for a smaller political party, representatives from that party will give you guidance on group working locally.

# Next steps

If you are interested in being a councillor here's some next steps to consider:

## 1. Put yourself forward as a candidate

If you choose to put yourself forward as a candidate and want to stand as a representative of a group, association or political party, you will need to make contact with their local office. You will be able to find their contact details online, via the council's electoral services department or via the LGA's Independent Group Office.

Your council's electoral services department can tell you when elections are next taking place. They can also point you towards useful sources of information in the council and the steps you need to take to be formally nominated.

Once you've decided to put yourself forward as a candidate you need to be prepared to put in the hours, both during the campaign and after.

## 2. Start building your profile so that voters know who you are

Now that you've decided to stand you will need to work out your position on local 'hot' issues such as crime, traffic, the environment and schools.

You will need to know what the council is doing about these issues and how your opinion differs from other candidates. Nearer election time, as you start going door to door persuading people to vote for you, you will be challenged on your opinions.

You may also want to begin building a network of supporters who will help with your election campaign.

Once you have identified the key issues and determined your key messages, get leafleting and door knocking early and often.



### 3. Ensure you are officially nominated as the election date draws nearer

This means getting 10 people to sign your nomination papers (signatories must be registered electors in the ward where you wish to stand). These papers are available from your local council's democratic services department.

You must also give your consent in writing to your nomination.

The council will also confirm dates for nomination papers and elections, as occasionally the pattern might change. However usually all the necessary documents should be submitted 19 working days before the day of the election.

For more information, visit [www.beacouncillor.org.uk](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk) or the Electoral Commission website: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

#### The timescale

Most councillors are elected for four-year terms, but councils run different electoral cycles. To find out when local elections are due to take place in your area, contact your local council or visit its website.

Ideally, you will need to begin campaigning at least a year before an election so that you can get to grips with the important local issues, meet as many voters as possible and raise your profile before the election takes place.

# Further information


If you want to be an Independent Councillor or represent an established party, outside of Labour the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats you can receive support from the LGA Independent Group office. They cannot provide direct help with election campaigning but can offer general advice and assistance. Once elected, you can access their regular regional meetings, information and development seminars, bulletins, training and peer support.

LGA Independent Group Office

Telephone: 020 7664 3224

Email: [independent.group@lga.local.gov.uk](mailto:independent.group@lga.local.gov.uk)

Website: [www.lgaindependent.local.gov.uk](http://www.lgaindependent.local.gov.uk)

 @LGA\_Independent





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