



**MAKE A DIFFERENCE. BE A COUNCILLOR.
A GUIDE FOR DISABLED PEOPLE.**

www.beacouncillor.org.uk



Cover images – top: Councillor Karen Bellamy, Labour, Waltham Forest
bottom: David Buxton, Liberal Democrat, Epsom & Ewell

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Make a difference. Be a councillor. A guide for disabled people.

Making a difference:

A guide to becoming a councillor for people with disabilities

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 vulnerable 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. There are about 20,000 local councillors in England and Wales, each representing their local community and all with their own reason for doing so.

The Government and the Local Government Association (LGA) believe that democratic institutions make the best decisions when they have a mix of people with different skills, backgrounds and experiences, from right across the country.

But at the moment there are many faces missing. For example, disabled people are currently under represented in public and political life; only about 10 per cent of local councillors have a declared disability or long term impairment, compared with about 14 per cent in 2010.

Starting on the route into elected office can be daunting, particularly if you feel you face particular barriers in taking part fully in your community. This booklet will help you decide whether to take the plunge and stand for election to your local council; it also outlines the additional support that is available through the 'Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Strategy'.

You could be the fresh new talent that your council is looking for. 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.

Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell

Chairman, Local Government Association

Helen Grant MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Justice, Women and Equalities

Councillor Tom Garrod, Conservative, Norfolk

I got involved with the local Conservative party as a teenager and started helping with election campaigns. They asked if I would stand for election. I lost the first time but a year later I was elected at the age of 19, Norfolk's youngest ever county councillor. I'm the deputy cabinet member for vulnerable children, which includes special educational needs, and it's refreshing for parents to have someone who understands the issues they face (I have cerebral palsy). One of the attractions about being a councillor for a disabled person is that to a good extent you can define what you want to do and when you want to do it. My advice to others would be to draw on your strengths as an individual and seek support when you need it. I enjoy seeing people's reaction when I tell them I'm 23, I've got a disability and I'm policy-making in the county council: that sends a really strong message.



What do councillors do?

Councillors are elected to the local 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 both commitment and hard work. Councillors have to balance the needs and interests of residents, the political party they represent (if any) and the council. These will all make legitimate demands on a councillor's time, on top of the demands and needs of their personal and professional lives. Before you consider becoming a councillor you may want to discuss it with your family and friends to make sure they understand what you are taking on. You will need their support as you'll have to spend some of your spare time on council business.

Councils carry out a wide range of duties, and manage large budgets. No one is expected to be an expert in everything, and councillor roles are flexible to suit all types of people and the skills, commitment and time they can offer. Many councillors chose to specialise in certain services areas, such as planning arts, or transport; and being disabled does not mean you would be expected to concentrate on disability related issues.

How councils work

This depends on the type of council. There are several types of local council in England, for example district, borough, county, metropolitan and unitary councils. Sometimes these are referred to as local authorities. You may also want to consider standing as a councillor for your town or parish council. These are smaller organisations that have some money to spend for the benefit of people in a small geographical area (for example a town or village).

All councils have things in common in the way they work and make decisions on behalf of their local communities. They are all led by democratically elected councillors who set the vision and direction of the council. Most are run on a system similar to that of central government, with an elected executive (or cabinet) to decide on policy and make decisions which other councillors then 'scrutinise' or examine in detail.

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. A large proportion of the work they do is determined by central government. Local councils vary widely in terms of their style, political leadership and approach to delivering these central government programmes, and it is here that your knowledge and commitment could make a real difference.

A council can be responsible for a range of services, such as:

- education and lifelong learning
- social services and health
- housing and regeneration
- waste collection and recycling
- roads and street lighting
- arts, sports and culture
- environment
- planning and regulation
- tackling disadvantage and building strong, stable communities
- taxing and spending
- transport.

These activities are mainly funded through payments from central government and the collection of Council Tax, although Council Tax makes up only about a quarter of a council's income.

Over recent years the role of councils has changed. They now have additional responsibilities such as improving the health and wellbeing of local people through joint working with health services. Another important responsibility is community safety and crime reduction, usually achieved through partnership working with the police and community groups. Councils now deliver much of what they do in partnership with other councils, organisations and agencies, so as a councillor you may have opportunities to sit on partnership boards or committees for health, education, community safety or regeneration.

What is expected of a councillor?

The councillor's role and responsibilities include:

- representing their ward
- decision-making
- developing and reviewing council policy
- scrutinising decisions taken by councillors on the executive or cabinet
- regulatory, quasi-judicial and statutory duties
- community leadership and engagement.

Most councillors hold regular drop-in surgeries each month, which provide a chance for residents to meet you and discuss their problems or concerns. On top of this you will be dealing with 'casework' – letters, emails and phone calls from people in your ward. When dealing with casework or council business you may need to meet with local residents or council staff.

Then there are council and scrutiny meetings. Councillors may also choose to sit on quasi-judicial committees, for example the planning committee, which takes non-political decisions on planning applications. The timing, number and length of these meetings varies from council to council. If you are a member of a political party you will also be expected to attend political group meetings, party training and other events.

Don't worry if you have access or communication issues – council staff will take this into account wherever possible. Meetings with local residents or staff can sometimes take place over the phone, the internet or in your own home. You will need to be able to visit the council offices regularly, though, for council meetings, training and other events.

Councillor David Chung, Labour, Merton

I was inspired to get involved in politics by observing people like the late Jack Ashley and seeing what he was able to achieve. I have a mobility impairment and am a wheelchair user, and I believe passionately that disabled people must be represented in politics. Yes, as a councillor you will have to allocate time to your duties, but it doesn't have to be all-consuming. With experience you develop a sense of where to put your energies. Yes, the job is challenging, but it's also very rewarding. One piece of advice I would give new councillors is to get a mentor to support you. I enjoy all aspects of being a councillor but I particularly enjoy working in my ward on community issues such as crime, fly-tipping, planning and community development. One of my biggest achievements was working with local people to get a new community facility. I am passionate about equalities issues and reducing inequalities.



David Buxton, Liberal Democrat, Epsom & Ewell

I was born profoundly deaf and had huge difficulty with communication until I learnt British Sign Language (BSL) in my teens. It gave me confidence in communicating with people. My own determination, attitude and ability helped me to break through barriers. I wanted people to look at my abilities, skills and experience, not my deafness and speech impairment. My family and friends were political but I didn't think it was possible for a young deaf person to take part in mainstream politics until I saw others doing so. With BSL interpreters, it didn't matter that I was deaf and unable to use speech – I could meet people, debate, share ideas, campaign and lobby. My advice would be to focus on your skills and experience, not your disability. I have lost elections over the years (I lost the last borough council election by just 25 votes) but I never give up.



Do I need any special skills or experience?

Groups made up of diverse individuals tend to make better informed decisions. It is important that councils have councillors who reflect and represent the communities they serve, but 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 skills and attributes will help you in the role:

Communication skills

These include listening and interpersonal skills, public speaking skills, the ability to consider alternative points of view and to negotiate, mediate and resolve conflict.

Problem solving and analytical skills

This includes being able to get to the bottom of an issue and think of different ways to resolve it, considering the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

Team working

Being able to work with others in meetings and on committees, and being able to complete any tasks that you agree to do on time.

Organisational skills

Being able to plan and manage your time, keep appointments and meet deadlines.

Ability to engage with your local community

This includes being available through the media, the internet, over the telephone and through meetings, public forums and debates.

You may have gained skills and knowledge through your professional, personal or community experience. This could include:

- knowledge of the needs of specific groups such as children and young people, older people or carers, plus your own experience of having a disability
- an understanding of financial management and reporting processes
- legal and regulatory systems or procedures
- housing, regeneration or environmental issues
- any other skills that relate to the work or facilities provided by the council.

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

Could I be a councillor?

If you care about the area that you live or work in and the issues facing local people, you could be a councillor. Perhaps you enjoy reading the local newspaper and often have a strong opinion on the issues you read about. You may enjoy talking to friends and colleagues about what's going on in the area. You may feel that certain sections of the community or people who live in a particular neighbourhood are getting a raw deal and need stronger representation. Research tells us that people are most concerned about issues such as crime, schools, transport and the environment. Your local council can make a difference on all these issues and many more, and so can you as a local councillor.

How much time would it take up?

How much time you spend on your duties as a councillor is largely up to you and will depend on the particular commitments you take on. 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. You will be expected to attend some council committee meetings, which are often held in the evening so that councillors can attend after work. As with most things in life, what you get back will depend on how much you put in. But remember, the amount of time you give to it is almost entirely up to you.

Why should I become a councillor?

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

- wanting to make a difference and be involved in shaping the future of the local community
- being concerned about your local area and wanting to ensure that the community gets the right services
- wanting to represent the views of local people and ensure that community interests are taken into account
- wanting to pursue your political beliefs
- wanting to ensure that disabled people are represented on the council
- wanting to contribute your business or professional skills
- concerns about one particular issue
- as an extension of what you are already doing through a political party, trade union, charity, voluntary group or school governing body – becoming a councillor can be the next step.

Who can be a councillor?

The easy answer is almost anyone, 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.

Councillor Marie Pye, Labour, Waltham Forest

When I was young it never occurred to me that I would be a councillor. Even when I became active in a political party I never thought about it. I was happy behind the scenes, and I couldn't imagine how a disabled person could do the role. There was a by-election in my area and the local councillors asked me to stand. Although I experienced barriers in the election process, like knocking on doors and attending meetings, I always found a way round it. People were enthusiastic and willing to help. I love being a councillor and making a difference to my local area. Residents often seem to see my disability as a 'plus' as I have clearly not always had it easy. The council does everything it can to meet my access requirements. Sometimes I do things differently to other councillors. I go to just as many meetings, but in accessible venues. Luckily, a really accessible pub has just opened near the town hall!



Councillor Rosemary Gilligan, Conservative, Hertsmere

Many changes happened in my village in the early 1980s. The main source of employment, a mental health hospital, closed, and 1,000 homes were built on its grounds. I felt strongly about it and my father said I should stand as a parish councillor. During that time I developed ME (myalgic encephalopathy) and faced a myriad of difficulties, but I didn't let this stop me. I went on to be elected to the borough council in 2002. My experiences have given me lots of patience. I now do things at a slower pace, so I'm good at standing back from a problem and seeing the solutions. I enjoy making a difference. I have been working to make the council more accessible, for example with more use of webcasting. I was honoured to be chosen as Mayor of the borough in 2009. I managed to open a bridleway as Mayor from the back of a horse, complete with civic chain.



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.

If you are in any doubt about whether you are eligible to stand as a councillor, you should contact the returning officer in the electoral services department at your local council for advice.

Independent or political?

Over 95 per cent of councillors are members of political parties, but you don't have to belong to a political party to stand for election as a councillor. You can either stand as an independent candidate or as a group or party political candidate. The political parties in your local area are already looking for people interested in representing them and will be pleased to hear from you. They will be able to support your election campaign and your work as a councillor.

Don't worry if you are not already a party member as they will be able to go through all the options with you. Some parties have special training and encouragement schemes for new candidates. Some areas have organised residents' associations or community groups that put candidates up for election.

Will I get paid for being a councillor?

Councillors do not receive a salary. However, they do get a 'member's allowance' in recognition of their time and expenses incurred while on council business. Each council sets its own rate for members' allowances, and you can find out more about them from your local council or on its website.

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 making the commitment to stand for election.

As a disabled candidate, will I get extra support?

The access to elected office for disabled people strategy provides support for disabled people who want to stand for election to public office. As part of the strategy, the Government has introduced the access to elected office for disabled people fund. The fund helps people who want to become MPs, councillors or other elected officials with any disability-related costs of being selected as a candidate or standing for election. For example, it may help if you have difficulty using public transport, if you need to pay for sign language interpreters, or are paying extra travel or accommodation costs for a carer. For more information visit:
www.access-to-elected-office-fund.org.uk

There is also an introductory training course, paid internships on the Speaker's Parliamentary Placements Scheme, and online guidance for political parties on the legal requirements to provide reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities.

The Equality Act also requires political parties not discriminate either directly or indirectly against disabled members or candidates.

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. Your local political party may also provide extra support for candidates/councillors with a disability.

What support is available to councillors?

Councils have staff available to provide support and assistance to all councillors, regardless of whether you belong to a political party or group. Exactly what facilities you get depends on the council. Many will provide a computer for your home and some may provide paid-for internet access and an additional telephone line and/or mobile phone. You will be using email and the internet, and many councillors now choose to keep in touch with local people through social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. You should expect full IT training tailored to suit your needs. Councils also provide induction and training for new councillors on many other aspects of the job.

Councils are required by the Equality Act to make "reasonable adjustments" to accommodate the needs of disabled councillors, who would otherwise be placed at a disadvantage compared to a 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.

Apart from being a legal duty, it does of course make good business sense to accommodate reasonable diverse needs of councillors so that they can play a full and effective part in the running of the council.

Many factors will be involved in deciding what adjustments to make and they will depend on individual circumstances. Different people will need different changes, even if they appear to have similar impairments.

Michael MacDonald, local election candidate, Trafford

During my 22-year career at Trafford Council I worked as the disability equality officer and later the equality diversity officer. I have been deaf from the age of one and my first language is British Sign Language (BSL). While working at the council, I liaised regularly with councillors. I saw that their role was a good opportunity to improve people's lives. I realised that having a councillor who is disabled would encourage other disabled people to engage more with local politics and help them to feel better represented. I stood for election in 2011. Although I enjoyed it, I experienced many barriers, particularly the costs of a BSL translator. I was so pleased to hear about the access to elected office fund. Knowing that next time I will have the support of a translator at no personal cost is such a relief. I now feel that I can continue my journey in local politics with focus, determination and confidence.



If you believe that the council you wish to be elected to would need to make adjustments to accommodate your needs, you should contact them at any early stage to discuss your requirements.

Under certain circumstances, disabled councillors might also be eligible for Access to Work, which provides grants for things like specialist equipment and travel (when public transport can't be used).

The timescale

Most councillors are elected for four-year terms, but councils run different electoral cycles. Some elect the whole council once every four years, while others elect a proportion of their members each year. To find out when local elections are due to place in your area, contact your local council or visit its website. The political parties like to have their candidates in place at least a year before an election. This is so that there is time for the candidate to get to know the important local issues, meet as many voters as possible, visit community groups and raise their profile before the election takes place.

Next steps

Once you decide you want to take it further and put yourself forward as a candidate, what's the next step? The answer depends on whether you want to represent a political party or group or would like to stand as an independent candidate. If you want to represent a political party then the next step would be to get involved with your party locally as soon as possible.

This will help you find out more about what the role entails, who you will be working with and what it takes to win elections.

Ultimately it's up to the political parties' local groups to decide whether to select you as a candidate, so you need to make contact with them and get involved with their work. Political parties will expect you to be, or become, a party member. Further sources of information and support are listed in the 'useful contacts' section of this booklet.

If you are thinking about standing as an independent candidate you can contact your council's electoral services department to see when elections are next taking place. The Local Government Association's independent group can also provide information. Contact details can be found at the end of this booklet.

Whether you have been selected by a party or are standing as an independent candidate, you must make sure that 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. All the necessary documents must be submitted 19 working days before the day of the election. For more information on this process visit www.beacouncillor.org.uk

Councillor Karen Bellamy, Labour, Waltham Forest

I was born with a disability which has left my joints very weak and prone to early arthritis and my skin very easily damaged (Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome), but I was always determined not to let this stop me. I have across countless people with outstanding skills that their communities could benefit from but who struggle to participate due to their disability. As a great believer in leading by example, I decided to stand for election in 2006. Being a councillor allows me to help people and make a difference. As a disabled person, I bring a totally different perspective. I find that local people recognise that I understand their concerns and the issues they care about. I have a junior cabinet post for child and family poverty, so I'm looking at ways to help those in poverty on a day-to-day basis. Disabled people have a unique insight into a lot of issues that people face, from housing to healthcare, fuel poverty and employment.



USEFUL CONTACTS

The following people will be able to advise you on getting in touch with your chosen local party or group.

If you would like to find out more about representing the Conservative Party, contact Rachel Oldham, deputy head of local government: www.conservatives.com/get_involved/become_a_councillor.aspx
telephone: 020 7984 8048
email: rachel.oldham@conservatives.com

Conservative Councillors Association:
www.conservativecouncillors.com

Conservative Disability Group:
www.conservativedisability.org

To find out more about representing the Labour Party contact Katherine Buckingham, local government compliance officer:
www.labourcouncillor.org.uk
telephone: 020 7783 1498
email: councillors@labour.org.uk

Labour Party Disabled Members Group:
www.labourbility.com
email: info@labourbility.com

To find out more about representing the Liberal Democrats, contact Anders Hanson, senior political officer at the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors:
www.bealibdemcouncillor.org.uk
telephone: 01422 843785
email: anders.hanson@aldc.org

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors:
www.aldc.org

The Liberal Democrat Disability Association:
www.disabilitylibdems.org.uk
email: info@disabilitylibdems.org.uk

If you are interested in standing as an independent councillor or representing the Green Party, UKIP or another established smaller party, contact the Local Government Association's group for independent councillors:
www.independent.lga.gov.uk
telephone: 020 7664 3224
email: independent.group@lga.gov.uk

To find out the name of your local council or councils, visit www.councillor.info and enter your postcode. The website www.writetothem.com also provides information on your local councils and councillors along with your MP and MEPs (Members of the European Parliament).

Every council in England has a comprehensive website which includes details about the services it runs, who the current councillors are and contact details for different departments. For information on when elections will take place, contact the electoral services department. For advice on becoming a councillor you can contact the democratic services department. Your local council can also tell you about any town or parish councils in your area.

Guidance for candidates and information on the electoral cycle is available on the Electoral Commission website:
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

The Local Government Association (LGA) represents councils in England and Wales. Information on its work can be found at:
www.local.gov.uk

The Department for Communities and Local Government website provides news and information on the local government sector:
www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment

The Access to Elected Office Fund strategy provides support for disabled people who want to stand for election to public office:
www.access-to-elected-office-fund.org.uk

For information on "reasonable adjustments" to accommodate the needs of disabled councillors visit: http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/EqualityAct/PSED/essential_guide_guidance.pdf

For more information on how the Equality Act applies to political parties visit:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people-strategy-compliance-with-the-equality-act-2010-guidance-for-political-parties--2>

For more information on Access to work visit:
<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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