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Cover images top: Councillor Awale Olad, Labour Camden, London,  
bottom: Councillor Emma Will, Conservative Kensington & Chelsea, London.

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# Making a difference: Your guide to becoming 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 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. This booklet should help you decide whether to take the plunge and stand for election to your local council.

There are roughly 20,000 local councillors in England, each representing their local community and all with their own reason for doing so. You may already have an idea of the type of people who stand as local councillors, but this image could be outdated. Councils are particularly keen to encourage people from under-represented groups to get involved, such as younger people, people from England's many ethnic communities and disabled people. Women are also under-represented on local councils.

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 a chance to make such a huge difference to quality of life for people in your local area.

## 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 other people's daily lives and 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.

## Councillor Jack Hopkins, Labour, Lambeth

I stood as a councillor for my neighbourhood because I felt that my friends and neighbours needed someone who was on their wavelength and would make the council work for them. I am also a bit nosy, and being a councillor gives you licence to meet all sorts of interesting people. The job is hard work but incredibly rewarding. I can't imagine getting the range of experience, knowledge and skills in any other role. I have had training in public speaking, community leadership, organisational transformation and safeguarding. The role is incredibly varied – whether it is digging community gardens, speaking on behalf of residents or closing down off-licences which sell alcohol to kids, it's as interesting as you want it to be.



Writing a novel  Arsenal fan  Learning magic  Local Councillor

### 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 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 which play a big part in the local economy and influence many aspects of the lives of the people who live or work there. A large proportion of the work councils 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 local knowledge and commitment could make a real difference.

Depending on the type of local authority it is, 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
- recycling
- roads and street lighting
- arts, sports and culture
- community safety and crime reduction
- 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 well-being 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 voluntary and community groups.

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.

### What is expected of a councillor?

The councillor's role and responsibilities include:

- representing the ward for which they are elected
- decision-making
- developing and reviewing council policy
- scrutinising decisions taken by the 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. Surgeries are a chance for residents to meet you and discuss their problems or concerns. You may also need to spend time visiting constituents in their homes. On top of this you will be dealing with letters, emails and

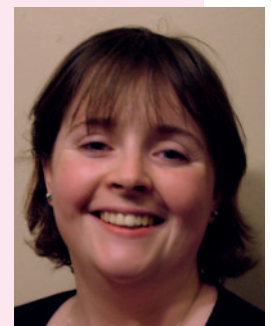
phone calls from constituents. When dealing with casework or council business you may need to meet with council staff. These meetings, and any visits to council offices, may need to take place during the working day.

Then there are council and scrutiny meetings. Scrutiny is the crucial process of looking at the work and decisions of the executive. As well as the close examination of councillors, it can also involve the community and interested parties. Handled well, scrutiny procedures can stimulate real local involvement in how the council manages and delivers its business.

Councillors may also sit on quasi-judicial committees, for example the planning committee, which takes non-political decisions on planning applications. The 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.

### Councillor Abi Brown, Conservative, Stoke-on-Trent

I was asked by someone in my political party to consider standing, but refused a number of times before agreeing. I didn't see anyone representing the views of families like mine and prioritising the things that matter to them. There were very few younger councillors, and none who were juggling a young family with self-employment. I also saw issues locally that weren't being tackled. Meeting residents is an important part of being a councillor, as is liaising regularly with partners such as the police and fire service. I also really enjoy the satisfaction of getting a job done, be it a new litter bin or resolving an anti-social behaviour problem. Knowing you've made a difference to someone's life is fantastic.



- Mum to two young children
- Small business owner
- Keen saxophonist
- Local Councillor

## Councillor Laura Robertson-Collins, Labour, Liverpool

I've been involved in Labour party politics since I was at school. Despite knowing a lot about the role before I became a councillor, the initial workload still came as a shock to me, but I absolutely love it. I represent the community that I have lived in for 25 years, since I came to Liverpool as a student. I work for the TUC and have three children. I enjoy being able to actually achieve change in my ward and have made great efforts to pull different agencies together to make change happen. This has often been really basic stuff such as cleaning up the streets made messy by large numbers of student houses, or increasing the amount of rubbish that is recycled in the ward, but it makes a big impact for those who live here.



Has a pet corn snake  Enjoys cycling and swimming  A fan of Watford Football Club  Local Councillor

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

Groups made up of diverse individuals tend to make better informed decisions. It is important that councils have councillors who not only 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, knowledge 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 to think of different ways to resolve it, including 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**  
You may have to make yourself available through meetings, the media, the internet, public forums, debates and on the telephone.

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

- knowledge of the needs of specific groups such as children and young people, older people or people with health problems
- 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.

## I don't have the time...

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 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.

## Councillor Michael Bukola, Liberal Democrat, Southwark

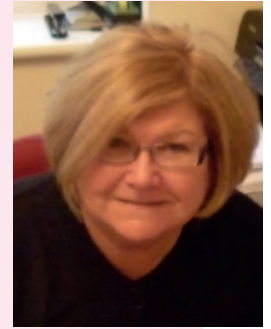
It's inspiring to be elected to the local council which has given so much support to me throughout my life and housed three generations of my family. As an elected councillor, I now have the opportunity to be at the forefront of how the council does its business, holding the serving administration to account and finding ways to bring prosperity to some of society's most vulnerable. I am particularly keen to improve the life chances for young people. I have a strong sense of shared experience with many of the young people in my community: a cultural awareness and an understanding of their background and heritage. This means that I speak from a particular vantage point and am able to convey messages between the community and the council.



Plays football and rugby  Freelance accountant  Regular churchgoer  Local Councillor

## Councillor Anne Gower, Conservative, Suffolk

I became a councillor after being involved in a local campaign about a mobile phone mast. The Conservative Association contacted me to ask if I would consider standing for election. I was unemployed and over 50 and feeling like no more challenges or opportunities were going to open up for me. I accepted the challenge of becoming a councillor with little understanding of what it entailed, and I love it. All my skill sets have come into play in one role. My career encompassed banking, publishing, sales and fundraising, and the fact that I had dealt with people from all walks of life has helped me with the challenges I face as a councillor. Within three years I was a cabinet member at the borough council and was also elected to the county council.



Left home at 16    Reads crime thrillers    Has two pet cats    Local Councillor

### 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.

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 be a member of 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're 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 places have organised residents' associations or community groups which 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 information about allowances from your local council or through 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.

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

If you fulfil the general criteria for being a councillor, you can stand for election. Until now, disabled candidates have not been entitled to extra funds or support from the council to help them canvass potential voters, although political parties sometimes provide extra support. However, in 2011 the Government ran a consultation on providing extra support to help people with disabilities to stand as MPs, councillors or other elected officials. As a result, it has announced its commitment to a number of steps, including funding for training and development and establishing an 'access to elected office' fund to support disability-related costs. The Home Office publication 'Access to elected office for disabled people: a response to the public consultation' outlines the proposals. At the time of publication of this booklet, this was work in progress (see the 'useful contacts' section for further information).

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. To read about the experiences of Marie Pye, a councillor in Waltham Forest who is disabled, visit [www.beacouncillor.org.uk/meetthem/mariepye.htm](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk/meetthem/mariepye.htm)

## What support is available to councillors?

Councils have staff available to provide support and assistance to councillors, regardless of whether you belong to a political party or group. Exactly what facilities you will 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 networking services such as Twitter and Facebook. You can 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.

### Councillor Monica Coleman, Liberal Democrat, Sutton

As someone who grew up in London of Irish parents, I always felt a little disengaged from my community. Most people were from non-English backgrounds and communities kept themselves to themselves. Later on I worked with some amazing councillors who went the extra mile to help, and because of that I made my mind up to stand for council. As a relatively young councillor from my background I thought I could bring a different perspective rather than the older, male, middle class perspective. I also have a 'day job' in another local authority so being organised is a must. I really enjoy helping people and changing the public's perception of what type of person a councillor is.



Teaches Irish dancing  Loves shopping for shoes  Has six Blue Peter badges  Local Councillor

## Councillor Jane Davey, Independent, Ashford

I decided to stand because I have encountered many councillors during the course of my working life in local government. A few have been inspirational figures, but some weren't all that good and I thought: 'If they can do it, so can I.' As an independent councillor, I get good support from my council. I don't have a party whip, which is a benefit. I am part of a group, Ashford Independents, and we come from all walks of life. I think that councils should be more representative of the populations they serve. We need more women, younger people and people from ethnic minorities to stand as councillors.



Likes bell ringing  Has a cat called Monty  Enjoys cooking, wine and real ale  Local Councillor

### 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 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 in the local media 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 as soon as possible 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 of 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.

Your next step as an independent candidate is to start building your profile so that local people know who you are, and working out your position on local 'hot' issues such as crime, traffic, the environment and schools. You will need to know what your local council is doing about these issues and how your own opinion differs from the political parties. Nearer election time, as you start going door to door persuading people to vote for you, you will be challenged on your opinions.

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 visit [www.beacouncillor.org.uk](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk)

## 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:

**Conservative:** [www.conservatives.com/get\\_involved/become\\_a\\_councillor.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/get_involved/become_a_councillor.aspx)

telephone: 020 7984 8048

email: [rachel.oldham@conservatives.com](mailto:rachel.oldham@conservatives.com)

### **Conservative Councillors Association:**

[www.conservativecouncillors.com](http://www.conservativecouncillors.com)

To find out more about representing the **Labour Party**, contact Katherine Buckingham, local government compliance officer:

**Labour:** [www.labourcouncillor.org.uk](http://www.labourcouncillor.org.uk)

telephone: 020 7783 1498

email: [councillors@labour.org.uk](mailto:councillors@labour.org.uk)

To find out more about representing the **Liberal Democrats**, contact Anders Hanson, senior political officer at the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors:

### **Liberal Democrat:**

[www.bealibdemcouncillor.org.uk](http://www.bealibdemcouncillor.org.uk)

telephone: 01422 843785

email: [anders.hanson@aldc.org](mailto:anders.hanson@aldc.org)

### **Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors:**

[www.aldc.org](http://www.aldc.org)

If you are interested in standing as a politically independent councillor or representing the Green Party or another established smaller party, contact the Local Government Association's group for independent councillors:

[www.independent.lga.gov.uk](http://www.independent.lga.gov.uk)

telephone: 020 7664 3224

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

If you have a disability and are considering standing as a candidate you may find the following contacts useful:

### **Conservative Disability Group**

[www.conservativedisability.org](http://www.conservativedisability.org)

email: via 'contact us' link at bottom of website home page

### **Labour Party Disabled Members Group**

[www.labourbility.com](http://www.labourbility.com)

email: [info@labourbility.com](mailto:info@labourbility.com)

### **The Liberal Democrat Disability Association**

[www.disabilitylibdems.org.uk](http://www.disabilitylibdems.org.uk)

email: [info@disabilitylibdems.org.uk](mailto:info@disabilitylibdems.org.uk)

See the Home Office report 'Access to elected office for disabled people: a response to the consultation' and up-to-date information on the Government's work on equality in public and political life at [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/public-political-equality](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/public-political-equality)

To find the name of your local council or councils, visit [www.councillor.info](http://www.councillor.info) and enter your postcode. The website [www.writetothem.com](http://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 including details about the services it runs, who the current councillors are and contact details for different council departments. For more 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 of 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](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

The Local Government Association represents councils in England and Wales and information on its work can be found at: [www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)

The Communities and Local Government website provides news and information on the local government sector: [www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment](http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment)



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