

Stand for what you believe in
Be a councillor



INSPIRING TALENTED PEOPLE TO BECOME COUNCILLORS: A GUIDE FOR MPS

www.local.gov.uk/be-a-councillor



“Within three years I was a cabinet member at the borough council and was also elected to the county council.”

Councillor Anne Gower, Conservative, Suffolk

“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.”

Councillor Michael Bukola, Liberal Democrat, Southwark

Cover images – top: Councillor Monica Coleman, Lib Dem – Sutton, South London, bottom: Councillor Arif Hussain, Conservative – Wycombe, Herts.

To find out how you can get involved in the ‘Be a councillor’ campaign please visit: www.local.gov.uk/be-a-councillor

There is also a national website for the public, full of case studies and helpful information about how to become a councillor: www.beacouncillor.org.uk

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Inspiring talented people to become councillors: A guide for MPs

Councillors are the lifeblood of local politics. The decisions they make affect the quality of life and well-being of our citizens in countless ways, from education to housing and regeneration, community safety, environment, roads, sport and culture, and helping local businesses to thrive. Councillors work hard to make a real difference in their local area.

Increasing the pool of talent from which councillors are elected is a key challenge for local government in the 21st century. Only by ensuring that the brightest stars are encouraged to stand for election can we make sure people get the absolute best from their council. No councillor can remain in post forever, and when they choose to stand down we need bright new talent ready to make a difference.

How can MPs help?

We are asking Members of Parliament to help ‘talent spot’ the very best people, encouraging and inspiring them to stand for election to district, metropolitan, borough and county councils. By finding and nurturing bright new talent we can refresh local politics, ensuring that councils truly represent the electorate and effectively address the issues that really matter.

As an MP, you have an important role to play in helping to identify new political talent and encouraging people to consider becoming councillors. You have an unrivalled knowledge of the issues that matter to the local electorate. In the course of your work you will come across plenty of passionate, proactive and capable people who have the potential to make great councillors but may never have considered it. By encouraging them to get involved you can strengthen your local political team and ensure that everyone works together to effect real change.

The national ‘Be a councillor’ campaign was launched in 2009 and is coordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA). In 2012 we are re-launching the campaign and, for the first time, asking MPs to join the hunt for new talent. Improving the reputation of local government is a long-term priority for the LGA, and improving the quality of local councillors plays a critical part in that ambition.

Effective local casework

You may have begun your own political career as a councillor. Even if you took a different route into politics, you will be very familiar with the work of councils and their elected members. You will know that the best councillors can make your working life easier by sharing some of the responsibilities, duties and challenges. Conversely, inefficient councils and councillors can have a negative impact on the workload of their MP.

“I didn’t see anyone representing the views of families like mine and prioritising the things that matter to them.”

Councillor Abi Brown, Conservative, Stoke-on-Trent

By taking action to ensure that councils are full of the best local talent, we can reduce the amount of casework that lands on your desk. If local issues are dealt with in a timely, sensitive and democratic manner, fewer people will feel the need to take up issues with their MP or complain about actions taken or decisions made by the council.

There is an urgent need to ensure that councils are able to connect to the aspirations and needs of their citizens, and the best way to do this is to ensure that the most capable people are encouraged to be councillors. If we can harness the talent that already exists within our communities, people will feel more connected to their local councils.

What to look for

Becoming a councillor is a rewarding form of public service. It is, however, very hard work, and many councillors balance their council responsibilities with a full-time job and busy home life. Energy, commitment and the desire to improve people’s lives are crucial qualities in potential councillors. Support will be provided to help them develop the professional skills they will require, but there are some key personal qualities that prospective councillors need to possess. Look for:

- raw energy and the desire to improve things
- team player
- reliability
- loyalty
- the ability to communicate.

Passion is also critical. People who complain about the council are often people who want to do something about making it better. They are already halfway to being an activist. Why not encourage them to take that passion in a new direction and stand for election?

Moving away from the ‘usual suspects’

Ensuring that councils better represent their electorate is not simply a case of encouraging more diversity in terms of age, gender or ethnicity, although that can help to make councils more vibrant and relevant. It is also important to raise the quality of all councillors. We need different kinds of people willing to put themselves up for election so that parties get a choice of quality candidates.

MPs can help to identify people who are ordinary enough to be representative, but extraordinary enough to be representatives. In modern councils with multi-million pound budgets and wide-reaching responsibilities, the traditional system of selection, where candidates were chosen from a small number of committed party activists or simply because it was ‘their turn’, is no longer fit for purpose.

“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.”

Councillor Laura Robertson-Collins, Labour, Liverpool

Why aren’t talented people coming forward already?

It may be as simple as never having been asked. People can also have outdated or incorrect ideas about the work of a council or what it means to be a councillor. They may know very little about the political system or be intimidated by the hierarchy of local party political organisations.

People tend not to consider themselves a potential councillor until someone else sees it in them. As an MP you are ideally placed to recognise talented local people and encourage them to consider becoming a councillor.

In 2011, fewer than 450,000 people were members of the UK’s three main political parties, which represents around one per cent of the electorate (BBC estimate based on party reports and House of Commons Library). We risk ignoring a huge amount of potential if we confine the recruitment of councillor candidates to local party members and activists. Looking out for other sources of potential talent can lead to the discovery of some real gems.

Where to look

You could consider approaching people in the following categories:

- people involved in community or voluntary groups
- helpers who enjoy getting involved in your election campaigns and provide feedback
- chairs of tenants’ associations
- local business leaders
- your own political assistants and other paid party political officers
- neighbourhood forum members
- people who complain to you about the council
- people who respond to party political broadcasts
- people you meet at your constituency surgery
- people you think could do the job well
- school governors, JPs and members of learning and health trusts
- acquaintances from faith groups, community groups or charities
- student activists.

“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.”

Councillor Jack Hopkins, Labour, Lambeth

What to say

A survey of local election candidates revealed that for two-thirds of them, being encouraged by someone else had been a factor in their decision to stand. You could be that person. People will be flattered if you, as their local MP, suggest they have the potential to make a great councillor.

Emphasise the benefits of being a councillor: the opportunity to change people’s lives, to meet people from all walks of life, develop professional skills, the sense of belonging to your neighbourhood, and the practical support that will be provided by the council (along with the small but significant remuneration).

Encourage mutual acquaintances to reinforce the message, and point the potential candidate towards useful sources of information such as the websites and publications listed below. Introduce them to trusted councillors or party activists who can be positive role models and can provide all the information, guidance and support needed to turn this new recruit into a valuable member of your local political team.

The timescale

Local elections take place every year up until the 2015 general election. By taking action now you have time to influence and strengthen your local political team in time for that key date. Most councillors sit for four years but councils run different electoral cycles: some elect the whole council every four years, but most elect one-third of councillors each year (with no election in the fourth year).

May 2012: elections are due to take place in 36 metropolitan councils (one-third of councillors in each), 18 unitary authorities (one-third in most), 74 district/borough councils (one-third in most).

May 2013: 27 county councils (all up for election), seven unitary authorities (all councillors in most).

May 2014: 32 London boroughs (all up), 36 metropolitan councils (one-third), 19 unitary authorities (one-third), 74 district/borough councils (one-third in most).

May 2015: 36 metropolitan councils (one-third), 30 unitary authorities (all up) and 19 unitary authorities (one-third), 127 district/borough councils (all up) and 67 district/borough councils (one-third).

Further information

Information for people in England and Wales who are thinking about becoming a councillor can be found at www.beacouncillor.org.uk where they can also download a step-by-step guide. From the same website you can download a more detailed guide on how to encourage people to stand for local elections.

Hard copies of both publications can be ordered from the Local Government Association (LGA), free of charge, on 020 7664 3131 or email info@local.gov.uk

The three main political parties have web pages that explain how to become a councillor:

Conservative: www.conservatives.com/get_involved/become_a_councillor.aspx

Liberal Democrat: www.bealibdemcouncillor.org.uk

Labour: www.labourcouncillor.org.uk

They also have councillors’ associations:

Conservative Councillors Association: www.conservativecouncillors.com

Association of Labour Councillors: www.labourcouncillor.org.uk

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors: www.aldc.org

Some people choose to stand as independent candidates, and the website for the LGA’s independent group can provide useful information for them: www.independentgroup.lga.gov.uk



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