

people like you are councillors

Your guide to becoming a councillor in England



www.beacouncillor.org.uk

Leadership Centre for local government

be a councillor

Introduction

It might be the state of the nation, but then again it might be the state of a local park, community centre, school or service for older people that is making you think that things around your way need to change.

And you might be the person to do it.

Ever thought of becoming a local councillor? Perhaps you're already involved in local affairs and want to take the next step? Or perhaps you just like the idea of doing something worthwhile and rewarding, to help your local community.

Either way, this booklet should help you decide on whether to take the plunge and go for a seat on your local council.

You could be the new talent that your local council is so keen to find. You could be the future for the country, or at least your local area. There are roughly 20,000 elected councillors in England. Each representing their local community, all with their own reason for doing so.

You could be one of them; especially if you are one of the people under-represented on your local council - maybe you are under 45, a woman, or come from one of England's many ethnic communities?

Unlike the General Election, local elections are known in advance. In many parts of the country there are elections every year from 2010 until 2013. With many council elections less than a year away, now is the time for you to find out what's involved in being a councillor and if it is the right move for you.

What do councillors do?

Councillors are people who are elected to the local council to represent their local community. 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. However, being an effective councillor requires both commitment and hard work.

Every day, councillors have to balance the needs and interests of residents, their political party (if any) and the council. These will all make legitimate demands on a councillor's time - on top of the demands and needs of a councillor's personal and professional lives. Your role as a councillor often depends on your experience and commitment. Before you consider becoming a councillor you may want to discuss it with your family and friends to ensure that they understand that you will need their support and understanding. You may be spending a lot of your spare time on council business.

Becky Brunskill

✓ Likes to cook

✓ Lilly Allen fan

✓ Addicted to Facebook

✓ Local councillor



Conservative councillor in County Durham

Until last year I was working as a check out girl at Woolworths to pay my way through my course at Northumbria University, I never expected that I would celebrate my 21st birthday at the County Council.

I live and have grown up in an ex-mining village in County Durham. It's so true that all councils need a range of backgrounds, my experience as a young person has been vital when making decisions about looked after children in the County, transportation, education...the list goes on and on.

It was a daunting experience at first, but you have to dig your roots, keep asking questions and getting to know people whether inside the civic building or in your patch.

As a councillor you put in as much work as you want, the harder you work - the more you get back. The first thing I achieved was getting a burnt sign replaced. It was a simple task but sometimes the smallest things can make a huge difference to community pride. It's an addictive job where every day is different.

Nothing compares to the experience of being a councillor, you get a real insight into people's lives across all sections of society. You come across selfless people who dedicate their lives to their community, a project, an allotment or even a street. You soon come to learn that these people are priceless. Imagine if everyone did just one thing!

How councils work

This depends on the type of council. There are several types of local authority in England, for example District, Borough, County, Metropolitan, City and Unitary councils. You may also want to consider standing as a councillor for Town or Parish council elections. All councils have things in common in the way they work and make decisions on behalf of local communities.

Most councils are run on a system similar to that of central government, with an executive (or cabinet) to decide on policy and make decisions, and other councillors to scrutinise or examine them in detail.

All councils are large organisations which influence many aspects of the lives of people who live in their area. A large proportion of the work councils do is determined by central government. Local councils vary widely because of their style and approach to delivering these central government programmes, and it is here that local knowledge and commitment make a real difference.

Depending on the type of authority the 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 are mainly funded through payments from central government and the collection of council tax, although council tax only makes up about 25 per cent 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.

Other important responsibilities are the reduction of crime and improvement of community safety, usually achieved through partnership working with the police and voluntary and community groups.

Some councils also group together for such services as waste disposal.

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 the decisions taken by the councillors on the executive or cabinet
- regulatory, quasi-judicial, and statutory duties
- community leadership and engagement.

Councils now deliver a lot of what they do in partnership with other services and agencies. So you may have opportunities to sit on partnership boards or committees for health, education, and regeneration.

But remember that this will often involve additional meetings and background preparation.

Most councillors hold regular drop-in surgeries each month. Surgeries are a chance for residents to meet you and discuss their problems or concerns face to face. You may also need to spend time visiting constituents in their homes. On top of this you will also deal 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, will often need to be 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 a planning committee, which takes non-political decisions on planning applications.

The number and length of these meetings varies from council to council (your council will be able to provide more information on this). And if you are a member of a political party you will be expected to attend political group meetings as well as party training and events.

Henri Murison



✓ Green campaigner

✓ Lives in Newcastle

✓ Likes eating out

✓ Local councillor

Labour councillor in Newcastle

I decided to stand to be a local councillor because I believed I could do something to change where I live for the better. As a young person I had got involved in campaigns I cared about. That's what got me active in my local Labour party, standing side by side with other people who shared my ideals and principles.

When there was an opportunity to stand for the council where I live, I leapt into a campaign and won my seat. I was proud, because my victory was as much for all the volunteers and friends who helped me as a personal achievement. What we achieved was a victory for a vision of the future for Newcastle that I am proud to share.

I work hard on the side of local people. Together, we can achieve their aspirations for where they want to live. Working with them, I also fight for their ideals about the sort of world they want to be a part of. From planning a year long festival of local food, to working with local staff to sort out our back lanes, every day brings new experiences.

I am always busy with local events and getting out and about, but value most spending time with my wife and family. I enjoy all the culture available on my doorstep in the city, as well as walking and enjoying being in the outdoors. From retired long standing residents to students and local young families, I am lucky to represent a broad and diverse community. It never stops surprising me, or making me feel proud to be a part of it.

What kind of skills and experience do councillors need?

Groups made up of diverse individuals tend to make better informed decisions, so it is important that councils not only represent the communities they serve, but also have a wide range of skills and experience. That's where you come in.

Shan Alexander

✓ Retired Civil Servant

✓ Magistrate

✓ Mother and grandmother

✓ Local councillor



Liberal Democrat councillor in Stockport

I was not the first person to be a Mayor in my family. My late father Victor was the first Tamil Mayor of Kandy, Sri Lanka in the late 1940s. Maybe that was why I never saw any obstacle to becoming the first Asian mayor of Stockport back in 2005.

My father was my political inspiration and I was very proud to be following in his footsteps. I joined the Liberal Democrats because the ethos of the party fits my own; it is all there in the preamble to the constitution. I am a strong advocate of devolution, treating people equally and civil liberties, so the Liberal Democrats is the natural place for me.

I have lived in lots of places across the world. I was born in Sri-Lanka and lived with my family in Nigeria before moving to Cardiff in 1966, moving to Stockport in 1991. I have worked in many public sector organisations and I was the first Asian manager in the Welsh Office. I was also the country's first Asian woman JP, a role I still enjoy today.

It was a former Mayor of Stockport, David Brailsford, who pestered the life out of me to stand for the Marple South ward from which he was standing down. I said no for a whole year. As one of just a few black faces in Marple I did not think I could win. In the end I told them that if I lost it would be their fault; I won and I have not looked back since!

I have held many roles in the council, being Mayor was very special, but I have also vice-chaired social services, and was executive member for education and for leisure. Our authority is the only one in the region with over 100 primary schools and there is far more money in the primary sector as a result of my efforts.

During my life here in Britain, I have never seen the colour of a person's skin, despite what people have said to me, as it being an obstacle. I think I have shown that anyone can break through the glass ceiling.

The knowledge and experience you have picked up through your personal and professional life are important. While you don't need any special or formal qualifications to be a councillor, having or being able to develop the following skills, knowledge and attributes will help you in your role:

• communication skills

These include listening and interpersonal skills, public speaking skills, the ability to accept alternative points of view as well as the ability 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 advantages and disadvantages of each

• team working

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

• organisational skills

These include 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, on the phone and face to face at regular sessions called surgeries.

You might also have specific skills and knowledge gained from professional or personal experience or from working with other groups. These might be:

- the needs of specific groups, such as children and young people, older people or those with health problems
- an understanding of financial management and reporting processes
- legal and regulatory systems or procedures
- housing, regeneration or environmental issues
- or related to any of the many services and facilities provided by your local council

But don't worry if you think you don't yet have some of the skills or confidence to be a councillor. All councils have support, information and training available for new councillors.

Could I be a councillor?

The local council is the place where decisions affecting local people are made.

If you care about the area that you live in and the issues facing the people who live there you might want to find out more about how the council works and how decisions are reached.

Your interest might range from the level of council tax in your area, to local amenities and services or just the irritating speed hump outside your home.

Research tells us that often, the issues that concern people are crime, schools, transport and the environment. But there are as many issues as there are councillors.

Your local council can make a difference on all these issues and so can you as a local councillor.

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

How much time it takes being a councillor is largely up to you and the commitments you might take on as a councillor.

One council estimates the time commitment as ranging from between five and 20 hours a week. Your role within the council would determine just how much time you should be prepared to give to being a councillor.

You will be expected to attend some council committee meetings which are in some cases held in the evening so that councillors can attend after work hours.

Like most things in life, what you get back depends 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. Councillors say that some of the reasons include:

- wanting to make a difference and be involved in shaping the future of the local community
- being concerned about the area in which they live and wanting to ensure that their local community gets the services needed
- wanting to represent the views of local people and ensure that local community interests are taken into account
- wanting to pursue their political beliefs
- to contribute business or professional skills
- concerns about one particular issue, for example care for older people, the lack of facilities in an area, or traffic congestion

For some, it is an extension of what they are already doing. It might be that you are active in a political party, trade union, a charity, voluntary group or school governing body, and you see becoming a councillor as a next step.

Who can be a councillor?

The easy answer is almost anyone, as long as you:

1. are British, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union
2. are 18 years of age or over
3. are registered to vote in the area or if you have lived, worked or owned property there for at least 12 months before an election

Who can't be a councillor?

Some people can't be a councillor because...

1. they work for the council they want to be a councillor for, or work for another council in a politically restricted post
2. they are bankrupt or have been surcharged in excess of £2,000
3. they have served a prison sentence (including suspended sentences) of three months or more in the five years before the election
4. they have been disqualified under any legislation relating to corrupt or illegal practices

Independent or political?

There are two basic options - you can stand for election as an independent candidate or as a group/party political candidate.

The local political parties are already looking for people interested in representing them. Don't worry if you are not already a member of a party as they will be able to go through all the options with you. Some have special training and encouragement schemes for new people.

Will I get paid for being a councillor?

Councillors do not receive a salary. However, you will be paid a 'member's allowance' in recognition of your time and expenses incurred while on council business.

Each council sets its own rate for members' allowances. 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 off 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.

Can I be a councillor if I'm disabled?

The criteria for being a councillor are set out on page 11 and if you are disabled the same conditions apply. As a disabled candidate in an election you don't get any additional funds or support from your local council to help you canvass potential voters, although a political party may be able to provide some support.

However, once you become a councillor, your council will work with you to overcome any barriers there are to you being fully involved.

Being a councillor is not a full time job and may not affect any incapacity benefit you receive however individual cases will vary so please do check this with the Department for Work and Pensions.

To read about the experiences of Marie Pye, a councillor in Waltham Forest who is disabled, please visit <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 which political party or group they belong to.

Exactly what facilities you get depends on the council. Many councils will provide you with 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, the Internet and Microsoft Office packages but you can expect full IT training tailored to suit your needs. All councils also provide induction and training for new councillors on many other aspects of the job.

Blaine Robin

Occupational therapist

Lives in Southend on Sea

Founder of a social action project

Local councillor



Conservative councillor in Southend on Sea.

My name is Blaine Robin. "It's a nice name!" say many of my constituents. Many people think that Robin is my first name. Talking about my name is generally a good ice breaker because I am quite a sociable person and enjoy talking to people about most topics. Talking and listening is probably a good characteristic of a local politician.

I became an elected member for Kursaal Ward, Southend on Sea in the May 2008 local government elections. I won by 6 votes! It was really nerve racking not being able to tell from the ballot boxes whether I would win or lose. My labour opponent asked for a recount and then after the recount the result was confirmed. This was my third attempt in a tough Labour dominated ward and with a strong far right campaigning presence.

The transition from campaigner to councillor was steady. Officials in the Civic Centre and my council colleagues mentored and supported me through the early days. I am really honored to represent my ward and participate in shaping the towns development.

I particularly enjoy working with residents to help solve some of their problems that they bring to me. I would recommend anyone of any age to get involved in responding to the needs of their community.

First steps to becoming a councillor

To find out when your first chance to stand as a councillor is likely to be you can either contact the council concerned directly and ask for the electoral services department, or you can visit the Electoral Commission website - www.electoralcommssion.org.uk

Shiria Khatun

- ✓ Works with unemployed young people
- ✓ Keen and active walker

- ✓ Mother of four
- ✓ Local councillor



Labour councillor in Tower Hamlets

Being a community activist campaigning for social justice from an early age I had always had the motivation to help create change for the betterment of my local community. However on many occasions I found that my efforts lacked the influence required to actually make change happen – which prompted me to realise I had to be on the other side of the fence and get elected as a councillor.

I come from a humble background. When my father came to this country he worked as a foreman in a steel factory in Birmingham. While he worked long hours my mother was a housewife taking care of my sister, my brother and I. As a child I remember my parents talking about the Labour Party and how, in their opinion, that was the only party that recognised and represented labourers like my father. My interest in politics was always encouraged and I began social campaigning from an early age.

I really enjoy helping people, I try to spend as much time as possible on my casework to get effective results especially when I am dealing with a challenging issue that initially seems difficult to resolve. I have female Bangladeshi constituents that come to my house in the evenings to discuss and deal with issues or for help filling out forms. I also often end up catching up with people on the bus and taking up their enquiries.

I have excellent support in doing my job as local councillor, from my husband as well as from my relatives who live nearby and neighbours. This really helps me do the job well.

Once you decide you want to take it further and put yourself forward as a candidate for election, what's the next step? The answer depends to some extent whether you want to represent a political party or whether you would be an independent candidate.

If you want to represent a political party then the next step would be for you to get involved with your party locally as soon as possible.

By getting involved you will 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. If you want to stand for them the parties will expect you to be, or become, a paid-up party member.

At the end of this booklet there are contacts listed from each party and the independent group who can advise you on how to get in touch with your chosen party/group locally and answer your questions about how to become a candidate. Find their details on page 17.

If you are thinking of standing as an independent candidate your next step is to start building your profile so that local people know who you are, and working out your position on local 'hot' issues which are often crime, environment, schools etc. You'll need to know what your local council is doing about these issues as well as 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'll be challenged on your opinions.

Whether you have been selected by a party as a candidate, or are standing as an independent candidate, you must make sure you are officially 'nominated' as the election date draws nearer. This means getting 10 people to sign your nomination papers, and signatories must be registered electors of 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 visit www.beacouncillor.org.uk

Donal O'Hanlon

Risk consultant

Fly fishing enthusiast

Football Ref

Local councillor



Liberal Democrat councillor in Bury

I blame Vic D'Alberty, local councillor and parliamentary candidate. He was out leafleting one Sunday morning on my street. We knew each other from years before when I was a 'Young Liberal', and he asked me outright. I'd just been inspired by reading Stupid White Men by Michael Moore, so thought "Why not?" Until then all I had done was help with my local Neighbourhood Watch.

I thought it would be a great opportunity to get more involved in local issues. I was concerned about some very poor local decisions and inaction, especially planning matters. Since being elected I feel I have helped reinvigorate a sense of community, especially in the potential redevelopment of my local town centre. I like proving to people that we CAN change the world we live in, by fulfilling the promises I made when elected.

As well as making sure there is better representation for the people of Prestwich, especially those workers commuting to local towns like Manchester which is only 4 miles away, I feel a real involvement in the community that I didn't have before. It also helps make up for the solitariness of my day job. Getting elected and working as a team allows me to develop my 'soft' skills.

I have lots of outside interests, including learning to fly fish. It is a lot to juggle with a home with lots of animals and a job that has an unpredictable workload, but I am proud of being a councillor!

Useful contacts

To get in contact with your chosen local party/group the following people will be able to advise you:

If you would like to find out more about representing the Conservative Party, you can contact Rachel Peart, deputy head of local government at the Conservative Party on **020 7984 8048** or email rachel.peart@conservatives.com

www.conservatives.com/Get_involved/Become_a_Councillor.aspx

If you would like to find out more about representing the Labour Party, you can contact Dominic Murphy, local government officer at the Labour Party on **020 7783 1354** or email dominic_murphy@new.labour.org.uk

www.labourcouncillor.org.uk

If you would like to find out more about representing the Liberal Democrat Party, you can contact Anders Hanson, senior political officer at the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors on **01422 843 785** or email anders.hanson@aldc.org

www.BeALibDemCouncillor.org.uk

If you think you would want to stand as a politically independent councillor or represent the Green Party contact the Local Government Association's group for politically independent councillors on **020 7664 3224** or email independent.group@lga.gov.uk

The three largest parties have councillors' associations. You can find out more from their websites:

[Conservative Councillors Association](http://www.conservativecouncillors.com)

www.conservativecouncillors.com

[Association of Labour Councillors](http://www.labouronline.org/councillors)

www.labouronline.org/councillors

[Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors](http://www.aldc.org)

www.aldc.org

[The Local Government Association Independent Group](http://www.independentgroup.lga.gov.uk)

www.independentgroup.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](http://www.conservativedisability.com/index.htm)

www.conservativedisability.com/index.htm

enquiries@conservativedisability.com

[For the Labour Party](mailto:dominic_murphy@new.labour.org.uk)

dominic_murphy@new.labour.org.uk

[The Liberal Democrat Disability Association](http://www.disabilitylibdems.org.uk)

www.disabilitylibdems.org.uk

info@disabilitylibdems.org.uk

[Scope's guide to engaging disabled people](#)

The charity Scope has published a short guide to encourage disabled people to become actively involved in public and political life.

To download the guide visit www.timetogetequal.org.uk

[Department for Work and Pensions](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)

www.dwp.gov.uk

For more information on your local council and election arrangements there:

[Electoral Commission](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

[Information on your local council](http://www.upmystreet.com)

www.upmystreet.com

Up My Street can tell you the contact details for your local council, as well as what type of authority you live in and your local representatives. For advice on becoming a councillor you can contact your council's democratic services department.



Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



I&D&A

LACORS

LGE



Local Government Association

Independent Group

Leadership Centre for Local Government
Local Government House
Smith Square
London
SW1P 3HZ
Switch 020 7664 3131
www.localleadership.gov.uk