

people like you are councillors



www.beacouncillor.org.uk

LONDON
COUNCILS

Introduction

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.

There are 32 borough councils in London, with a total of 1,861 councillors between them. Every one of them will have to stand for re-election in the next London borough elections in May 2010.

Read on to see if you would like to join them.

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 borough 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.

Before you consider becoming a councillor you should 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.

London's government

There are two levels of local government in London.

Firstly there are the 32 London boroughs. They each have a council which is elected every four years by local residents. In total there are 1,861 councillors across London representing 7.5 million residents.

The councils are responsible for running most local services in their areas, such as:

- education
- social services
- housing and regeneration
- waste collection
- recycling
- roads and street lighting.

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.

But 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.

Regional government

Pan-London work and policy is co-ordinated by the Greater London Authority (GLA).

The GLA is headed by the Mayor of London, who is responsible for budgeting and strategic planning of transport, the police, fire and emergency services, cultural strategy and economic development for the London region.

The Mayor sets the annual budgets for:

- the Greater London Authority
- the Metropolitan Police
- Transport for London
- the London Development Agency
- London Fire Brigade

Anjana Patel

- Amateur dancer
- Keen volunteer
- Mother of two
- Local councillor



Councillor in Harrow

I had a full time job when I was first elected as a councillor, but when I became a portfolio holder I gave up full-time employment and become a full-time councillor in order to do it justice. I have been a single parent for the past 19 years with two wonderful sons, aged 20 and 25.

As a single parent I made a point of spending a lot of time with the boys as they grew up. Now they're grown up I still make a point of having at least one break a year where my family is the focus.

I got involved because I wanted the system to work better - for me and the many that would come after me. I wanted to make a difference for the local community. During the course of my career as a banker I realised that a lot of good things can be done if committed professionals play an active role in public life.

Every time I help someone it makes me feel good. I find it very rewarding.

How councils work

London's 32 boroughs are each managed by a council elected every four years. Each borough is divided into smaller geographical areas called wards, usually around 20. Voters in each ward elect councillors (usually three).

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.

Your role as a councillor often depends on your experience and commitment.

All London councils are large organisations that 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 they take to delivering these central government programmes, and it is here that local knowledge and commitment make a real difference.

Each council is responsible for many services including:

- arts, sports and culture
- community safety and crime reduction
- education and lifelong learning
- environment
- housing
- planning and regulation
- social services and health
- tackling disadvantage and building strong, stable communities
- taxing and spending
- transport

What is expected of a councillor?

The councillor's role and responsibilities include:

- representing the ward they are elected in
- decision-making
- developing and reviewing council policy on a range of issues
- scrutinising the decisions taken by the councillors on the executive
- regulatory 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 up to three 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. Check your local council's website for more information.

And if you are a member of a political party you will be expected to attend political group meetings. You will also normally be expected to attend political group meetings before council meetings, as well as party training and events.

Matt Cooke

- Runs marathons
- Loves modern music
- Enjoys a drink in town
- Local councillor



Councillor in Haringey

I currently run a busy office in Westminster but I used to be a musician which meant I got to travel a lot. I've seen a lot of cities across the world, but for me London stands apart as the greatest city in the world. Its diversity is incredible and there's always so much going on.

As a student I was President of the University of London Union and I'd been a Labour Party member for some time when I began to think more could be done in the ward where I live to engage and advocate for the community. Eventually I thought I should do more than just talk about it - so I stood, and won.

I think I'm lucky to live in the ward I represent, I love my area, but that does mean my council and domestic lives are never very far apart.

In my spare time I enjoy keeping fit (*I run and play squash*), spending time with my friends and keeping up with London's amazing arts scene.

'Being a local councillor gives you the chance to transform your local community by unlocking the ideas and vision of the people within it. What is more important than that?'

What kind of skills and experience do councillors need?

Diverse groups 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.

James Allie

- Keen cyclist
- Housing campaigner
- Solicitor
- Local councillor



Councillor in Brent

I have always believed that if there's something you're not happy about you need to do more than just complain. I've been brought up to get involved and take responsibility.

It's all been worth it, but I am particularly proud of being one of the people to change the way housing serves communities. My work has allowed property developers to develop mixed tenure housing schemes that mean poor people are not ghettoized and build new communities that will break the cycle of poverty.

My private life and my council life don't have any distinct lines between them; they're both part of one whole thing. I go to a lot of council functions and I like to take friends and family along, although I make a point of ensuring I see each of my five godchildren on their birthdays and at holidays.

I've lived in Brent for 20 years and have had numerous opportunities to move somewhere else but always felt that the best place to live in London is right here. In London everything is possible. The diversity and the can-do attitude make London a very exciting place and if you believe in something you need to get involved.

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 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 in London 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, across London, the issues that concern most 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 London 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 usually 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 borough 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' to reimburse you for 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 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 should not affect any incapacity benefit you receive.

Visit www.beacouncillor.org.uk and read about the experiences of Marie Pye, a councillor in Waltham Forest who is disabled.

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. Usually, you will be provided with a computer for your home, paid-for internet access and an additional telephone line and/or mobile phone.

You will be using email, the Internet and Microsoft Office packages. You can expect full IT training tailored to suit your needs.

Florence Nosegbe

Loves shopping

Fundraiser

Sound of Music fan

Local councillor



Councillor in Lambeth

I grew up and went to school locally. I think I was really fortunate because some of my friends from school didn't have the family life and support I had.

And there were some real problems with the area. Now I'm determined the next generation shouldn't face the same problems we did. I think it's right that I put something back. That's why I got involved.

I work for Islington Council so I'm local government through and through. My personal and council lives fit together well, with the help of my family, friends and partner who are all very supportive. They are understanding and really help to keep me grounded.

If I could go back and do it again I would pay more attention to my diary and be firmer about not agreeing to attend every meeting I was invited to. There aren't enough days in the week so when council and community meetings clash you have to let someone down.

I was involved in the campaign to elect the first ever Youth Mayor in Lambeth. Some of the young people who took part had been expelled from school and were beginning to think they would always be on the outside. They really got into it. It was great seeing them take part - it's things like that which are going to make a better future for us all.

First steps to becoming a councillor

Your first chance to stand as a councillor is likely to be in the next London council elections that take place in 2010, although if a vacancy occurs before then you may have the opportunity to stand as a candidate in a by-election.

Laura Sheppard

- ✓ Railway manager
- ✓ Loves the seaside
- ✓ Football fan
- ✓ Local councillor



Councillor in Waltham Forest

I came to London as a student and I've never left. I was involved in the local party when someone asked me if I might be interested in standing as a councillor as this was my home and I cared about what happened around here. There's a great mix of people with a whole range of needs and I'm glad to be able to assist.

I continue to work for Network Rail as a stakeholder relations manager. My boyfriend works in politics so he understands what's involved and required from me as a councillor, but I am learning to strike a balance with my working life. I'm a great Middlesbrough fan, so I try and get to all of their away matches in London. And I love to watch the cricket if I can.

At 22 I was very young when I started, and that was only a couple of years ago. It's been a steep learning curve but I've enjoyed it all. The support I've had from other councillors has been really important to me.

What makes it worthwhile is when constituents say thanks. It makes all the meetings, paper work and long hours seem very worthwhile. I feel better for getting involved.

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 because they are already starting to recruit their candidates for the 2010 elections. 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.

The political advisers at London Councils can advise you on how to get in touch with your chosen party 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 nomination papers, each signed by a registered elector 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

Pauline Tunncliffe

✓ Dress designer

✓ Saxophonist

✓ Mother of two

✓ Local councillor



Councillor in Bromley

Until a couple of years ago I was a full time designer. Then I became a councillor, and a year later the mayor of Bromley so now I'm a full time councillor and a part time dress designer, but I'm really flexible.

When I won my seat it was a wonderful feeling, the trust so many people had placed in me in response to me knocking on doors and listening to them. I'm a people person and love to get involved and be able to help. There's such an amazing range of things to become involved with.

Like any parent, it's a constant juggle. My girls are fairly independent - I brought them up to be that way. This house works well through teamwork, compromise and bribery. But my girls are great and really do get involved. As the mayor I had little spare time, but got invited out to see lots of wonderful things.

There have been many times when I have been outside my comfort zone, with new and challenging experiences. I don't have a background in local government or party politics, so I was a bit awestruck at first but quickly became used to it. Being a councillor is too important not to do it properly.

Useful contacts

Conservative Party:

Barry MacLeod-Cullinane, political adviser at London Councils.
Tel **020 7934 9502**, e-mail barry.mc@londoncouncils.gov.uk

Conservative Disability Group

www.conservativedisability.com

enquiries@conservativedisability.com

Labour Party:

Sam Elliot, political adviser at London Councils.

Tel **020 7934 9521**, e-mail sam.elliott@londoncouncils.gov.uk

Labour Party Disabled Members Group

Contact Stephen Aselford, stephen.aselford@googlemail.com

Tel 020 8684 7716

Liberal Democrat Party:

Laura Willoughby, political adviser at London Councils.

Tel **020 7934 9503**, e-mail laura.willoughby@londoncouncils.gov.uk

The Liberal Democrat Disability Association

<http://disabilitylibdems.org.uk>

info@disabilitylibdems.org.uk

Independent:

If you think you would want to stand as a politically independent councillor, contact the Local Government Association's group for politically independent councillors

independent.group@lga.gov.uk, telephone **020 7664 3224**.

Other parties:

For further information contact **020 7934 9906** where you can leave a message which will be answered as soon as possible.

Council democratic and electoral services:

Barking and Dagenham

Tel: 020 8215 3000 Email: 3000direct@lbbd.gov.uk

Barnet

Tel: 020 8359 5577 Email: ero@barnet.gov.uk

Bexley

Tel: 020 8294 6147/6148 Email: elections.office@bexley.gov.uk

Brent

Tel: 020 8937 1366 Email: electoral.services@brent.gov.uk

Bromley

Tel: 020 8313 4364 Email: electoral@bromley.gov.uk

Camden

Tel: 020 7974 5944 Email: asha.paul@camden.gov.uk

Croydon

Tel: 020 8726 6300 Email: electoral.services@croydon.gov.uk

Ealing

Tel: 020 8825 7777 Email: elections@ealing.gov.uk

Enfield

Tel: 020 8379 8582 Email: elections@enfield.gov.uk

Greenwich

Tel: 020 8921 5184 Email: elect@greenwich.gov.uk

Hackney

Tel: 020 8356 3232 or 020 8356 3233 Email: info@hackney.gov.uk

Hammersmith and Fulham

Tel: 020 8753 4466 Email: electoral.servicesadmin@lbhf.gov.uk

Haringey

020 8489 2951 or 020 8489 2953 Email: elections@haringey.gov.uk

Harrow

Tel: 020 8424 1067 Email: elections@harrow.gov.uk

Havering

Tel: 01708 432444/432445 Email: elections@havering.gov.uk

Hillingdon

Tel: 01895 250251 Email: electoralservices@hillingdon.gov.uk

Hounslow

Tel: 020 8583 2137/2110/2095 Email: elections@hounslow.gov.uk

Islington

Tel: 020 7527 3110 Email: electoral.services@islington.gov.uk

Kensington and Chelsea

Tel: 020 7361 3444 Email: elect@rbkc.gov.uk

Kingston Upon Thames

Tel: 020 8547 5026 Email: electoral.services@rbk.kingston.gov.uk

Lambeth

Tel: 020 7926 2685/2144/2544 Email: electoralservices@lambeth.gov.uk

Lewisham

Tel: 020 8314 6086 Email: electoral.services@lewisham.gov.uk

Merton

Tel: 020 8545 3407 Email: electoral.services@merton.gov.uk

Newham

Tel: 020 8430 3082 Email: elections@newham.gov.uk

Redbridge

Tel: 020 8708 7171 / 7172 Email: electoral.services@redbridge.gov.uk

Richmond Upon Thames

Tel: 020 8891 7775 Email: electoral.services@richmond.gov.uk

Southwark

Tel: 020 7525 7373 Email: electoralenquiries@southwark.gov.uk

Sutton

Tel: 020 8770 5120 Email: committee.services@sutton.gov.uk

Tower Hamlets

Tel: 020 7364 5012 Email: electoralservices@towerhamlets.gov.uk

Waltham Forest

Tel: 020 8496 4562/020 8496 4433/020 8496 4223

Email: electoral.services@walthamforest.gov.uk

Wandsworth

Tel: 020 8871 6023 Email: electoral@wandsworth.gov.uk

Westminster

Tel: 020 7641 2730 Email: electoralservices@westminster.gov.uk



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