

MAKE A DIFFERENCE BECOME A **LABOUR** COUNCILLOR

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A guide for Labour Party members

Cover image: **Councillor Saima Ashraf**, Barking and Dagenham

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CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Be a Labour Councillor	5
What is a councillor, and what do they do?	5
Some frequently asked questions	7
What is the time commitment?	7
Can I afford to do it?	8
Do I need any training?	8
What about dealing with harassment and abuse?	9
How can I find out more?	9
How do I become a Labour councillor?	10
Getting selected as a candidate	10
Getting elected as a councillor	14
Costs, legal issues and probity	15
Being a Labour councillor	16
Serving the community	16
Representing the community	17
Representing the Labour Party	18
Working with others	18
Making rules and regulations	18
Knowing the ward	19
Representing local voices	19
Communicating and influencing	20
Managing casework	20
Further information and support	21
Acknowledgements	22

FOREWORD

Being a Labour councillor is both a great privilege and a great responsibility. All over the country Labour councillors are making a real difference to their communities and delivering for residents despite lack of finances. Councillors will have had their own reasons for running, but all of us would agree that the role offers the chance to make a huge difference to the quality of life for local people.

Councillors are responsible for £1 in every £4 of public spending and oversee vital public services including adult and children's social care, local transport, education, and public health, and operating important community resources such as children's centres, libraries, parks and leisure centres. Councils also collect and dispose of waste, keep streets clean, and manage millions of council homes.

The LGA Labour Group has produced this guide because we want to encourage more Labour members to consider standing for council – particularly from under-represented groups. It contains information about the role of councillors and councils, and how the Labour Party selects and supports its candidates. It also explains what's involved in being both a candidate and a councillor and suggests steps you can take to help you to decide whether getting involved is something you would be able to do.

The electorate and the Labour Party rightly expect high standards from their councillors, and the job of representing communities can be time-consuming and challenging. But if you want to play your part in protecting important services and helping to develop new solutions to problems affecting your community, then getting elected is something to think about. It gives you an opportunity to be part of shaping the future of your community and your community and be part of deciding how services are delivered.

As you will see from this guide, becoming a councillor can be both useful to your community and stimulating for you. Being an effective councillor requires both commitment and hard work and requires that you balance the needs and interests of residents, the Labour Party, and the council itself. You may already be a campaigner, community activist, school governor or active trade unionist. If so, you have a great basis for taking up public office, and becoming a Labour councillor can be a great next step. But there is no template for an 'ideal' Labour councillor: people who do well are likely to be committed, determined, and willing to learn, but all kinds of other experiences are also invaluable, and you should never underestimate what you have to offer.

BE A LABOUR COUNCILLOR

What is a councillor and what do they do?

Councillors are elected by communities (organised into geographic areas called wards or divisions) to represent them and to run their council. Councillors are expected to be active in the life of their local community and act as the voice of their constituents, raising any local concerns on a range of matters related to the work of the council. This work includes raising income (mainly through the collection of the council tax, but also through commercial activity), service provision (for example, child protection, social services, dustbin collection, highway maintenance and so on) and representing the council's interests at local and regional level.

Labour councillors are also expected to represent the Party and its policies, and to feed back to members about what is happening.

Councillors are also often expected to work with politicians at a national level and to work with them on issues of local importance which have national implications.

Those elected to leadership roles in the council will be expected to take the lead on strategy for the future of the local area (for example, regeneration and planning) and to articulate a vision for that local area.

Councillors are elected for four years unless they are elected at a by-election, in which case they must stand again at the next normal election for the seat.

The frequency of elections varies from council to council, with some holding them only once every four years (often called 'all-out' elections, because all the councillors are elected at the same time) and other holding them once a year for three years, and then having no elections in the fourth year (often called 'by thirds' because a third of councillors are elected each year, whilst the fourth year is known as 'fallow').

Councillor Lynne Worall

Leader, Thurrock Council

Being a councillor is about service, dedication, and making a real difference in people's lives. It's about listening to residents, standing up for their needs, and working to build a stronger, fairer community. Every decision I make is guided by the belief that local government should be accessible, accountable, and driven by the voices of the people we serve. It's an honour to represent my community and to play a role in shaping its future.



Councillors are often referred to as 'members of council', or 'elected members'. Being an elected member is a uniquely rewarding experience where you can make a real difference to the lives of local people. But it can also be challenging, particularly at a time when local government generally is facing tough financial decisions which can have far-reaching implications for local services. Labour elected members work as part of a team of councillors to make the best possible decisions on behalf of the people they represent.

The council is controlled by either the political party which has a majority of councillors (overall control) or, if no one party has a majority, there may be a coalition of parties or a minority administration. The Labour councillor's role will vary depending on whether Labour is in control or in opposition, but generally speaking will include some or all of the following broad responsibilities:

- Developing strategies and plans for the area, balancing different needs, identifying priorities and ensuring that resources are used wisely and effectively.
- Providing democratic accountability for public services and ensuring that those who deliver services are accountable in delivering quality and value for money.
- Bringing together individuals and agencies in the area, and across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors to tackle social, economic and environmental challenges.
- Carrying out specific legal or 'regulatory' duties and ensuring sufficient scrutiny of council plans, policies, decisions and spending.
- Acting as community leaders in getting local people involved in all aspects of decision making and the shaping of services.
- Working with the national Labour Party to support and implement national and local policies.

Labour councillors are also expected to hold advice surgeries for constituents, attend regular Labour Group meetings and play a full part in the life of the Party locally.

A significant part of all these responsibilities is the work that councillors do at a neighbourhood level, representing the people of their electoral ward. There is evidence that councillors who develop and nurture a good reputation in their ward earn the respect of the electorate, who - in turn - repay them at the ballot box. In itself, this is a compelling reason for taking the role of the ward councillor seriously.

But the need to be effective as a ward councillor is about much more than this. Representing people in the ward and the wider community, understanding the issues and concerns they face and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action and make a difference is the most important task that any councillor undertakes. Significantly, it is also often the role that local people value most.

Action Points: Go online and explore your council's website. Find out what services they provide, how they are organised and what their budgetary position looks like.

SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Being a Labour councillor can be a rewarding experience. It requires individuals who are able, willing, and prepared to scrutinise or take decisions about matters that affect the lives of citizens and who are prepared to be accountable for those decisions. Being democratically elected gives councillors a special status in public life; it brings with it opportunities to contribute to society, but also responsibilities to act fairly and within the law.

Together with Labour MPs, town and parish councillors, and other elected representatives, Labour councillors are also responsible for the public reputation of the Labour Party in the area.

There are therefore a number of things you need to think about before you decide you want to take this on.

What's the time commitment?

Being a Labour councillor is very worthwhile, but it does also require time. You will need to balance your council and Labour Party commitments with your personal and work lives, and this can sometimes cause conflict. For this reason, you need to talk to the people around you before you stand and make sure that they understand (as far as possible) what you are intending to take on.

You will also need to talk to your employer, if you have one, and explain that you will need some time off to carry out public duties if you are elected. There are legal requirements about this, which the council will be able to advise you about, but you will still need to manage time carefully.

Councillors currently have no legal entitlement to maternity or paternity leave. However, a number of councils have their own schemes, and some Labour Groups are prepared to make local arrangements. Moves are on hand to change this so that all councillors have these rights, but for the short-term check locally on what the position would be if you have a baby or adopt.

If you already have caring responsibilities, you will also need to think about how to manage those. That said, there are many people looking after children or dependent adults who make excellent local councillors, particularly since they often have direct personal knowledge of the services, they are responsible for providing or overseeing. Help and advice is also often available from a variety of sources.

Action point: Make a list of all the things you currently do. Think about how you could manage your activities and commitments to add council and political work. Is everything you do essential? Could you combine things? Who might help you with some of them? Who do you need to talk to about it?

Can I afford to do it?

Councillors do not receive a salary for the work they do as it is regarded as voluntary work. However, they are paid an 'allowance' which is designed to reimburse the costs incurred in undertaking council business. The system of allowances adopted by most councils is designed to ensure that elected officials are not left out of pocket. It covers costs such as travel to and from meetings and dealing with casework and administrative costs. Councillors can also claim for travel and subsistence at external meetings or special allowances when they represent the council at conferences. In addition, there may also be a childcare and dependents' carers' allowance for attendance at meetings payable on production of receipts, up to an agreed maximum cost per hour.

If you are on benefits, you are strongly advised to take advice on how becoming a councillor might affect your position. Although not a salary, your allowances will be classed as income and would affect any benefits you may receive.

The council also provides a special responsibility allowance to those who undertake additional duties such as the leader of the council, portfolio holders, scrutiny chairs and opposition leaders.

Action point: Find out more about the allowances scheme run by your council. Think about your own financial situation, taking into account what you might lose (for example, through having to take unpaid leave, or through benefit changes) as well as what you might gain. Make sure that you understand the financial implications for both you and your family of you becoming a councillor. But remember, too, that being a councillor is not a job, and that voluntary service to both the community and the Party are part of what is expected.

Do I need any training?

It is important that both the Labour Party and local government have councillors who reflect and represent the communities they serve and have a broad range of skills and life experience.

You don't have to be highly educated or have a profession. Skills gained through work, education, bringing up a family, caring for a sick or disabled relative, volunteering or being active in faith or community groups are just as valuable.

In addition, the Labour Party organises some training for people thinking of standing for election, as well as for candidates, and all councils provide training for both new and experienced councillors.

However, although you don't need any particular training to stand for election, you do need to think about what skills and attributes you have, and how they might help.

For instance, councillors are expected to be available to enable constituents to come to them with problems. This means that they need to be able to listen, to represent others, to keep confidences, and to resolve conflict. They also need to be good communicators, problem solvers and time managers. Very few people will have all these skills when they first stand for election, and most of them can be developed with training and experience.

Remember that knowledge and skills are not the same thing; it does not matter at this stage if you do not have a detailed working knowledge of how local government finance works, because the council will probably make training on that available to you if you are elected. What does matter, however, is that you have a willingness to learn and an ability to bring together many of the different strands and demands that go to make up the annual budget process.

Action point: Make a list of the skills (as opposed to knowledge) you think you have. Ask friends and relations what they think. Think about how all the things you do in different areas of your life have helped to develop the kinds of skills listed above. Be honest, but don't underplay yourself – most people have a much wider range of skills than they think they have.

What about dealing with harassment and abuse?

There is no doubt that anyone in elected office might face abuse, both online and in person. This has been growing in recent years and has been the subject of a lot of debate. You will need to think about this, but it is also worth remembering that, although many of the people you will deal with will have strong views and may disagree with you, most are not abusive. There is advice available on how to deal with online trolling and maintain personal security, and organisations such as the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Jo Cox Foundation are actively working on how to deal with the problems some councillors face.

Threats to your physical safety, whether made online or face to face, should always be reported to the police and, when you are a councillor, to the Chief Executive of your local authority.

Action point: Review your social media presence and think about how you could manage it if you are a candidate or get elected. Find out what advice is available and talk to current councillors in your area about how they deal with safety issues both on and offline.

How can I find out more?

There is more information below in the section called 'Once you're elected', as well as online. The LGA also produce other useful resources.

Councillor Nazia Rehman

Cabinet Member, Wigan Borough Council

Being a councillor has been a great privilege. It gave me an opportunity to make a positive and a tangible difference to my community and advocate for the causes I feel passionate about.

In today's ever-changing world, it's a genuinely rewarding role that allows you to shape the future of your area, and influence critical decisions on transport, housing, education and public services. Becoming a councillor enables you to make your communities better places to live and work.



HOW DO I BECOME A LABOUR COUNCILLOR?

Before you can be a councillor you must get elected. Where possible the Labour Party stands candidates in every vacancy and is always looking for good new people to get involved. Like everything else, there is a procedure to go through, but it is not complicated and there are lots of points at which you are offered help and support.

Getting selected as a candidate

The first thing that will happen is that the Labour Party Local Government Committee (LGC) in your area will invite people to express an interest in becoming candidates, and some training may be offered. Any training opportunities should be made use of; not only will you learn more about local government in your area, but you will also meet other potential candidates as well as local party officials and councillors.

There is then a more formal (but simple) process in which you fill in an application form, usually online. You may also be asked to produce a portfolio of information about you and your campaigning activity; this will be straightforward and generally asks for detail such as when and where you have been involved in Party and community activities. You will then be interviewed by the LGC so that they can decide whether you are suitable to be a Labour candidate, and, if so, if you are ready. If you are accepted (which most people are) your name will then be added to the local Panel of Candidates – this is a list of everyone whose application has been accepted from which Labour Party branches will choose candidates.

Councillor Liam Robinson,

Leader, Liverpool City Council

Councils play a vital role in making people's lives better, whether that is by making sure our streets are clean or by providing high quality new homes. It is so important that Labour Councillors come from all walks of life, as we can only improve things for our residents if we understand our communities. That is why it is so important to me that I ground myself in my Kensington & Fairfield ward, speaking to residents as much as possible and letting their experiences inform my decision making.



The application form will ask you about your knowledge of local government, the political situation in your area, and your campaigning experience. It will also ask you to agree to accept the Labour whip (that is, to maintain collective responsibility and discipline if you're elected as a councillor), as well as various questions around probity issues (see the section on costs, legal issues and probity).

The interview will follow much the same lines, so be prepared to expand on whatever you have said in your written application rather than just repeat it.

The interview should not be too alarming; the Party is keen to be understanding and helpful, and they also want to see as wide a diversity of people standing as possible. However, the Party does want to ensure that people who want to represent it meet required standards, and so although the interviewers will tend to be encouraging, they may also want to explore any inconsistencies in what you say, or points in your application which raise specific issues, or something you have written or said which may be unclear or which they think may not be true.

In all cases, answer as clearly and concisely as possible. Listen carefully to questions and answer what you are asked, not what you might think they should have asked. Remember, too, that the interview will be time-limited; the chair of the interviewing panel should tell you about this at the start of the interview. Some chairs will stop you if you spend too long answering a question, but others won't. It is your responsibility to ensure that you leave yourself enough time to say everything that you want.

If you use social media remember that you should not be engaging in any activity on it which would bring you or the Party into disrepute, or which is racist, sexist, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic, or antisemitic or which attacks or shames people on the grounds of disability, age or appearance. If there is any questionable material in your social media presence you may well be asked about it at your interview, and the Party will always reserve its right not to have as a candidate anyone who breaches its policies on hate speech or discrimination.

Most interviewing panels will be made up of three members, with at least one from outside your own council area. This means that although you may know some of the people interviewing you, you will not know them all. You should treat the interview as though all three are strangers and aim to do your best to impress them; even people who have met you before will be interested to hear about new aspects of your life or experience and may not necessarily have seen you at your best.

The interview will begin with the chair explaining the process and the interviewers introducing themselves. The first question is likely to be along the lines of 'Why do you want to be a Labour councillor?' This question is partly designed to put you at ease, but it is also one which you need to be able to answer clearly and openly. Make sure that you can do this; if you answer the first question badly it is likely to affect your confidence for the rest of the interview.

Councillor Anthony Okereke

Leader, Royal Borough of Greenwich Council

Serving as a Labour Councillor has been the privilege of my life – it's a chance to make a real difference. As the leader of the Royal Borough of Greenwich, I'm proud of our council being a leader in London, delivering record numbers of council homes, investing in frontline mental health services for children and achieving real results in cutting carbon emissions. These are the sorts of challenging but rewarding people centred policies you get to deliver on the ground when you're a Labour Councillor. As John Smith said "The opportunity to serve – that is all we ask".



The remaining questions are then likely to divide down into three basic areas:

- about your campaigning activity
- about your knowledge of local government and Party policy around it
- about political and probity issues.

If you have weaknesses in any of these areas, take some steps to remedy them; for instance, if you have not done any campaigning during recent elections the interviewers will want to understand why not. There are many good reasons why you may not have been able to campaign, but make sure that you can explain them and that you are not defensive about them. In particular, do not say anything which is not true.

Similarly, make sure that you have a good grasp of what is going on in local government in your area; read the local media and online sites, understand the basics of the council's budgetary position, and know what the main issues are in the local community.

In the third section you will be asked a series of more closed questions which normally require short (or even one word) answers. These are straight forward and the general content of them is covered by the sections on 'Probity' and 'Being a Labour councillor' below.

Action point: Start making notes for your application form and interview. Identifying your strengths and weaknesses – for instance, if you don't know much about the challenges local government faces in your area do some research to find out.

Once you've been accepted onto the panel of candidates your name, contact details and statement will be circulated to all the branches in the area who are looking to select candidates for the next set of elections. In a number of cases branches will have existing councillors who are likely to be reselected, but others will be looking for new candidates.

In councils with all-out elections, wards or divisions will usually be looking to select up to three candidates; in those with elections by thirds they will be looking for one (possibly two if there is to be a by-election in the same ward).

Like the panel application process, the selection process is straightforward.

The branch holds a meeting open to all its members, to agree a small number of people from the panel of candidates to interview. This is known as the 'shortlisting meeting'. If you are a member of the branch you may attend, provided that you have not already expressed an interest in standing. If you have not done so publicly, and attend the start of the meeting, you must leave the room as soon as your name is suggested.

In some shortlisting meetings there may be special requirements to select women candidates; this is part of the Party's long-established commitment to increasing the percentage of Labour women councillors so that every Labour group is at least 50 per cent female.

The meeting will choose a shortlist of candidates to attend the selection meeting; this can be any number but must be one more than the vacancy to be filled – thus, if the members are selecting one candidate they must shortlist at least two people, but if they are selecting three, they must shortlist at least four. (There are a small number of circumstances in which this requirement does not apply, and these, together with the detailed selection procedure, can be found in Appendix four of the Labour Party Rule Book.)

Anyone shortlisted is invited to a selection meeting at which they will be asked to make a short speech and answer questions from members. This meeting will usually be held at least seven days after the shortlisting meeting, though in the case of by-elections it may be much sooner.

Each candidate will be asked to speak for a set period of time and then answer questions for a set period of time. These periods will have been agreed by the shortlisting meeting and are not flexible or negotiable. The times might be, for instance, five minutes for speaking and ten minutes for questions, but they could also be much longer. You will be told when you are invited to the meeting what the times are; make sure that you prepare accordingly.

Your speech is your opportunity to tell people about yourself, your achievements, and why you would be the best person to represent the Labour Party in that ward, so make sure that you prepare it thoroughly. Ask relatives and friends to help you with it – successful speeches are rarely solo efforts. Remember that although you must not go beyond the length of time allocated for your speech, you do not have to use it all; for instance if you are told that you can speak for up to ten minutes, a good five minute speech is likely to be much better than a rambling ten minute offering in which you just try to fill the time. Whatever the length, make sure that what you say counts!

When you have finished speaking the chair will take questions from the members who are present. These can be about anything from very local issues to the council's budget, but if you know the area and you've thought about the main issues you are unlikely to get anything you can't answer. Remember not to take up too much time answering the first question, since people want to hear you deal with a range of questions, not just one or two.

Members then choose their candidate by secret paper ballot. If there are only two candidates, the one with the most votes will win outright. If there are more than two it will be an eliminating ballot. For this, the vote will be done in rounds, with the person receiving the fewest number of votes eliminated at each round.

The result will then be announced straightaway to the meeting, and although it will still have to go through an approval process with the LGC it is usually effectively final.

Action points: If you're not used to making speeches, find someone who can help you to practice. Remember that you don't need to be an inspirational professional speaker, but you do need to be able to get your point across clearly and show people why you would be a good person to be their candidate or councillor. Think, too, about the kind of questions you might be asked; what are the important issues in the area, and what kind of challenges is the council facing? You don't need to know all the answers, but you should be able to demonstrate that you understand the question, and that, on key issues, you have an opinion.

Getting elected as a councillor

Unless you are a candidate in a by-election, the election will happen on the first Thursday in May. Between your selection and election day you will be expected to lead Labour's campaigning in your ward, and, in particular, to talk to voters and listen to their concerns. This can be done on the doorstep or by phone, and there are various kinds of events you can hold as well as leaflets and letters you can distribute.

You may be asked by the Local Campaign Forum (LCF) to sign a candidate's contract which covers what is expected from you during the period before the election. If so, make sure that you understand what it entails and that you are prepared to abide by it. It should be straightforward and cover the areas that you would expect – campaigning, probity, and so on – but if you have difficulties with it discuss them and find solutions rather than refuse to sign.

You will have an agent (or campaign manager), and that person will be responsible for organising the detail of the campaign. As polling day approaches things will get busier, and more will be expected of you, so remember to be proactive in making sure that you still have time for family and work, and that they understand why you may sometimes be preoccupied.

If you are elected you will be expected to start immediately, so make sure in advance that people such as your family and employers know this.

Action Point: Find out about elections that are in the news and get a feel for the practicalities and points of interest. Once you are selected, talk to your Branch officers and members about how your campaign will be run. Remember that all elections require teamwork; you may lead the team, but you will find it hard to win an election alone.

COSTS, LEGAL ISSUES AND PROBITY

People talk about politics being an expensive business, and if you're standing for Parliament, it can be. But getting selected and/or elected locally need not be and usually isn't. There are no expenses or payments for being a candidate, but once elected councillors do receive allowances (which increase as the level of responsibility they assume increases).

There are some legal constraints on who can and can't be a local councillor. By and large these are fairly obvious, and most councils publish them in the elections section on their websites. In addition, the Labour Party has some requirements for candidates, but, again, these tend to be straightforward.

One of the things that everyone expects of public representatives (at every level) is that they are open and honest about their financial dealings. You will be asked to complete forms declaring your financial and property issues both when you are selected and elected, and the main thing to remember is: if in doubt, declare it.

Councils adopt a 'Members' Code of Conduct' which sets out rules for how its councillors should behave. Councillors also need to declare any personal and/or prejudicial interests at any decision-making meetings before items are discussed and will also be expected to do this at Labour Group meetings (see below). Following election, all newly elected councillors will be required to sign a written undertaking to abide by the code of conduct and will also be required to complete a register of interest form.

Areas covered by the code of conduct include councillors not abusing their position and not misusing the council's resources. Councillors are bound by the code whenever they are conducting council business or representing the council. It is a breach of the code to act in any way which brings the council into disrepute or to use your position as a councillor to improperly secure for yourself or any person an advantage or disadvantage.

The Labour Party has similarly high standards, and those who do not meet them may find themselves suspended and barred from being a candidate at the next election.

Councillors also have a number of legal responsibilities, and these will be explained at various points in the process of becoming a councillor. The Local Government Finance Act 1992 requires the council to set a balanced budget, and this is also an obligation under Labour Party rules. A council which fails to set a legal budget risks intervention from the Secretary of State, and the running of services by government-appointed commissioners for an indefinite period of time. Councillors voting for an illegal budget could also be in breach of the Code of Conduct.

Some of the council's functions – for instance, planning and licensing – are called 'quasi-judicial' and are covered by specific rules. In particular, decisions in these areas must not be party-political or the subject of political group decisions prior to the relevant committees. It is each individual councillor's responsibility to ensure that they understand the rules and abide by them.

Action point: Check what the legal requirements for being a councillor are and that you meet them. Think about what interests you might need to declare and make a list of them; don't forget to include your home, particularly if you own it.

BEING A LABOUR COUNCILLOR

If you are elected you will take up office immediately, and although it may seem a little intimidating at first there will be training and support to help you settle in. The council will almost certainly run some kind of induction for new councillors, and, in terms of the work in the ward, you will find that much of it will follow on naturally from what you were doing before the election.

There are also a number of learning and development programmes for councillors, and support from council officers and others.

As indicated earlier, there are several key roles that councillors are involved in:

- serving the community
- representing the community
- working with others
- making rules and regulations.

Serving the community

Providing public services is the main function of the council. Councils provide hundreds of different services, from highways and adult social services to education and refuse collection. Providing services to meet community needs requires the development of policies for services, as well as the planning, delivery and resourcing of them. Councillors, therefore, have a key role as:

- policymakers
- decision takers
- 'scrutineers' of the effectiveness of the council in delivering services.

All councillors are required to attend the meetings of the 'Full Council'. This is the sovereign body of the council, which oversees the development of policymaking. It has the sole authority to set the annual budget of the council and to determine the amount of council tax to be levied on local residents. Councillors are able to ask questions at Full Council and consider the minutes of other council meetings that have taken place during the preceding period. This might involve considering and agreeing new council policies or revisions to existing policies.

From time to time, it will be inevitable that you are unable to attend a council meeting, for instance because of illness. In such cases you should make sure that both the chief whip and the council are aware of the situation. By law, all members are required to attend at least one council meeting in a six-month period, and failure to do so, or to agree an appropriate leave of absence, will result in disqualification and a by-election.

Beyond the Full Council, councillors can be involved in roles relating to the cabinet, scrutiny or the regulatory committees. All members of the council may also be appointed to local organisations covering their ward or a group of wards – these may be called something like ‘area committees’, or ‘area assemblies’ and will include local community groups as well as councillors and service providers.

Representing the community

Councillors are elected and have democratic legitimacy. They represent all of the people within the council’s communities (including those who did not vote for them). Councillors, therefore, act as:

- representatives of their constituents
- community leaders, providing a focus for development and improvement within their ward and, in some cases, the council as a whole.

The task of representing a group of several thousand local people can be complex because of the patterns of change in social and political life in recent decades. Many councils have become increasingly diverse and, in some areas, there can be a frequent movement of people in and out. Understanding the nature of a ward is not always as easy as it seems.

Some situations will require a degree of conflict resolution. Planning and licensing applications, for instance, can generate considerable disagreement. You may feel that your role is to try to balance the competing interests, or you may yourself have a strong view. In either case, you should remember that both planning and licensing are quasi-judicial functions, and that you should follow the council’s guidelines on lobbying, decision-making, and declaration of interest.

The way that councillors carry out their ward duties can vary enormously, depending on their time, energy, interests and commitment. The sorts of activities that can help councillors to act as a bridge, or conduit, between the council and its communities will also be heavily influenced by the make-up and nature of the constituents concerned. As such, there are no hard and fast rules about the best ways of representing people’s views or engaging with them. However, some of the most common activities include:

- **Understanding the ward or division** – the demographics, the key issues facing local people and the way that services are being delivered.
- **Representing local voices** – being a channel of communication between the communities served, and the council, and speaking up for the unheard, for example, younger, older or disabled people.
- **Communicating and influencing** – ensuring that the views of local people are taken into account when decisions are made by the council or outside bodies and matters are reported in the media.
- **Managing casework** – listening to and responding to requests from individuals and groups in the community, resolving problems, identifying failures in service delivery and balancing competing interests and objectives.

Representing the Labour Party

You will also be expected by the Party to attend regular Labour Group meetings. The Labour Group consists of all the Labour councillors in the council, plus representatives from the local party. The Group considers matters of policy (including the budget) and takes decisions about them which may be binding on members, and for which you will be expected to vote at council meetings, though this will sometimes vary depending on the circumstances.

The Group will also elect a leader and other office holders to help run it. The Group may sometimes hold planning and away days to help members think through the practical and political implications of decisions. The only issues upon which the Group cannot take a collective decision on are those known as 'quasi-judicial' or regulatory – that is, in areas like planning applications and licensing, or on issues which are deemed to be matters of conscience.

You will be expected to be accountable to Party members. Many Labour councillors provide regular written reports of their activity to Labour Party members as well as being available to speak about their work to members at Party meetings. In addition, the group whip will be asked to keep a record of councillors' activity which may be used to help determine whether a councillor is put forward to stand again for the Labour Party.

Working with others

The council needs to plan and deliver its own services but will also often take the lead in drawing together the activities of a whole range of public bodies and the business and voluntary sectors in the area. This means identifying a common agenda and linking the plans of partner organisations with those of the council, to address the needs of communities collectively and effectively. A key part of this is ensuring that partner agencies work collaboratively in sharing information and resources where it is feasible and sensible to do so.

Making rules and regulations

Councils have a distinct role in acting as a legal and regulatory authority. This includes administering rules that Parliament and central government has laid down and making and administering its own rules, for example, the determination and enforcement of local planning policies. Much of this work is carried out by the council's regulatory boards and committees.

In making or administering rules that affect the rights and responsibilities of local people - and which include the granting or refusal of permissions – councillors who sit on relevant committees and panels, must:

- pay attention to relevant considerations (and ignore irrelevant ones)
- consider and weigh up the evidence on each issue on its merits
- act fairly and within the law.

Knowing your ward or division

As we have seen, knowing as much as you need to about your ward or division is not always as easy as it seems. You may have lived in the area for many years. But the chances are that you will not know all the communities who live there or all of their issues and concerns. If you are a new councillor, it is essential that you get to know the area you represent. The people who come to you looking for help can tell you quite a lot, but you will also need to find other ways of getting to know the key facts.

Your council will hold a wealth of information analysed at ward level. This data is essential in helping to formulate and review policies and services but can also help ward councillors to understand the nature of the area and community needs.

Representing local voices

The task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals can be tricky. But generally speaking, the broader your range of approaches to community contact, the more people you are likely to reach.

While representing individual voters, councillors often try to keep in touch with as wide a range of people in the ward as possible. This will involve going to meetings and events, meeting people on a one-to-one basis, and listening to different views about what is needed or what should be happening.

Ward councillors may become involved in, or lead, local campaigns. This could involve anything from campaigning for a zebra crossing to starting or supporting a food bank and might involve:

- consulting to find out how widespread support for the idea is
- helping to organise a campaign group of those who can assist
- organising petitions or public meetings
- helping people to make presentations or ask questions at committees
- engaging the local media and publicising the campaign on websites or blogs.

Occasionally there will be conflicts of interest requiring sensitive judgement, eg dog owners, parents of young children and walkers might disagree about the use of a local leisure park. Representing these different views in an open and reasoned way will require you to be proactive in finding out as much as you can about the situation before coming to a view.

Because councillors represent all the people in the ward, not just the people who voted for them (or, indeed who voted at all) you may well find yourself having to advocate for people whose views are under-represented, unspoken or frequently ignored, or with whom you do not agree. You may also find that local Labour members are in disagreement with what others in the local community want, or with what the council is doing. Navigating between differing opinions, and, where possible, bringing people together to find a way through is a key part of a councillor's job.

Because councillors are often one of the main link points between local people and the council, you will also need to be able to provide information as clearly as possible to help them to understand local government services and processes. This becomes easier once you are a councillor and understand them better yourself.

Communicating and influencing

The biggest challenge for ward members is often in getting the council or an outside body to take local views into account when making decisions. There are various ways of doing this, but the first requirement is to understand what those views are of yourself.

People are much more inclined to listen and pay attention if they feel that the person speaking to them knows what they are talking about, is committed to getting the best outcome, and has credibility as an elected representative. The ways in which you can achieve this include:

- Preparing for meetings by studying the agenda and making sure you are properly informed and fully prepared about the issues to be discussed. Avoid 'hijacking' a meeting and raising issues which are pertinent to you but irrelevant to the debate.
- Playing an active part in the debate and forming sound conclusions based on what is best for the community – and abiding by any majority decisions.
- Ensuring, with others, that the council's deliberations and decision-making procedures are properly managed – being robust in your scrutiny.
- Representing the whole electorate and not just those who voted for you, listening and then representing the views of the community when discussing council business and working with outside bodies.
- Maintaining proper standards of ethical behaviour as an elected representative of the people.

Another key feature of the communicating and influencing role is the impact that councillors have on the local media. In a democracy, the media is a vital mechanism for ensuring the transparency of local political decision-making and for holding councils and elected members to account. There is a generally held assumption that local government gets a 'bad press', but evidence suggests that local media, in particular, are willing to present local government in a positive light, if handled in the right way.

At the end of the day, local press, television and radio journalists want a story to cover. These may often be the main source of information on local government for both interested and disinterested citizens and councillors can use their communication and influencing skills to ensure that a balanced and accurate account is given to the media in the first instance.

Managing casework

Some councillors find casework the best part of their role and relish the opportunity to sort out problems for people in their communities. Other councillors find it less fulfilling, but whether you love it or not it needs to be done as effectively and efficiently as possible. Casework can come from a variety of sources, including email, social media and surgeries, and you should make sure that whatever arrangements you have suit the constituents you are serving as well as you yourself.

Some councils use electronic casework systems, in which case you will be given training.

Remember that you cannot please all the people all of the time, and that you will not be able to solve all the problems people come to you with. Sometimes you will have to say 'no' to things people want you to do, and at others you will feel overwhelmed by the scale of some of the issues you are dealing with. Try to remember that as long as you do your best you will have done as much as anyone can reasonably expect of you.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Useful organisations and websites

Local Government Association

Labour Group

18 Smith Square
London, SW1P 3HZ
020 7664 3263

local.gov.uk/lga-labour

The Labour Party

20 Rushworth Street
London, SE1 0SS
0345 092 2299

labour.org.uk

The Local Government Association

An invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government.

local.gov.uk

Association of Labour Councillors

Contact councillors@labour.org.uk for more information

The Electoral Commission

Independent elections watchdog and regulator of party and election finance.

electoralcommission.org.uk

The Jo Cox Foundation

Works, amongst other things, on issues around respect in political life.

jocoxfoundation.org

Labour Party Regional Offices:

East Midlands

eastmidslabour.org.uk

Eastern

easternlabour.org

London

labourinlondon.org.uk

North

labournorth.com

North West

labournorthwest.org.uk

South East

labour-southeast.org.uk

South West

laboursouthwest.org.uk

West Midlands

westmidlandslabour.org.uk

Yorkshire & Humber

yorkshireandhumberlabour.org.uk

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In the course of writing this we have naturally drawn on earlier work, and particularly on guidance produced by the LGA. This guide also incorporates elements of the learning and development workbook for potential electoral candidates produced by the LGA.



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