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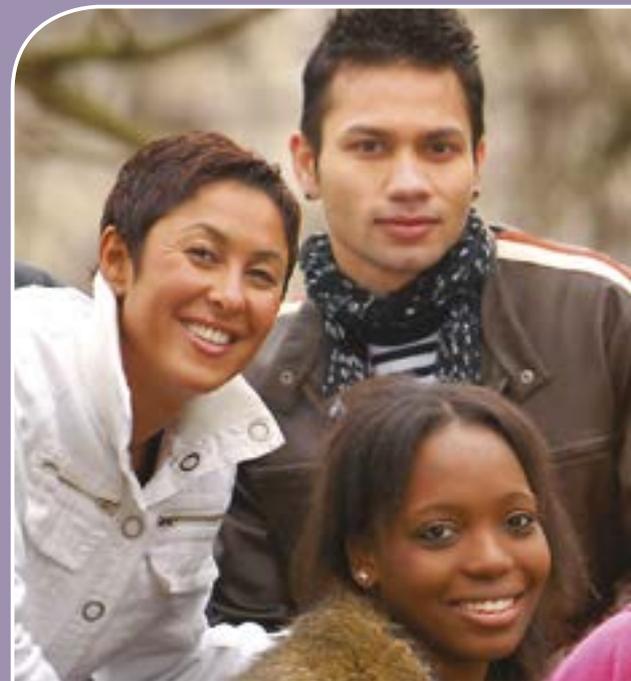


Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

## Diversity in Democracy

[www.gov.wales](http://www.gov.wales)

# Councils and Councillors: An introduction



September 2015

## 1. Why be a councillor?

People decide to become councillors for a variety of reasons. Often it is because they are active in their community, have a commitment to a particular political party or because they see something in their community that needs changing.

Whatever the reason, it's fair to say that they are often surprised by the range and volume of work required. That said, most councillors love what they do, even if it's usually more challenging than they expected.

Councillors (sometimes referred to as members – as they are elected members of a local authority) have to juggle a number of roles and responsibilities. Councillors need to balance the needs and interests of their community, their political party or group (if they are a member) and the council as a whole. Being a councillor takes personal commitment and to do the role effectively requires a significant amount of time, on top of personal and employment commitments. However, becoming a councillor is a rewarding and privileged form of public service and, if elected, you will be in a position to make a difference to the quality of other people's daily lives and prospects.

This guide for mentees has been developed by the Welsh Local Government Association which is the body that represents the interests of local government and promotes local democracy in Wales. It represents local authorities in Wales as well as the Fire and Rescue and National Park Authorities and works with authorities to support councillors.

This guide is intended to be used as a quick introduction to the basic information that you need to consider when planning to stand for office. You will probably need much more information than is contained in this overview so there are links throughout to further information available on the Internet and suggestions for questions to put to your mentor.

## 2. What do councils do?

Local authorities or councils play a central role in the governance of Wales, by providing the leadership and services necessary for successful local economies and sustainable local communities. There are 22 local authorities in Wales with some 1254 councillors. Things are likely to change during the next few years; this is covered in Section 3 below.

All local authorities in Wales are also known as 'unitary authorities' (unitary authorities are single tier councils which deliver all local government functions in an area). In England for example, the picture is more confusing as there are a mixture of single and two tier local government including unitary councils, counties and districts or borough councils).

Wales' councils deliver over 700 local services, including,

- **Education** e.g. Schools, school transport, lifelong learning
- **Housing** e.g. providing accommodation and administering housing benefit
- **Social Services** e.g. caring for and protecting children, older people and disabled people
- **Highways and Transport** e.g. road maintenance and traffic management
- **Waste management** e.g. refuse collection and recycling

- **Leisure & Cultural services** e.g. libraries and leisure centres
- **Consumer protection** e.g. trading standards, taxi licencing
- **Environmental Health and services** e.g. food safety and controlling pollution
- **Planning** e.g. managing local development and making sure buildings are safe
- **Economic Development** attracting new businesses and encouraging tourism
- **Emergency Planning** e.g. for floods or terrorist attacks.

As well as delivering local services, councils are by far the biggest employer in their area and contribute significantly to the local economy.

Councils have to provide certain statutory services as set out in legislation such as social care, environmental health inspection and planning and can provide other services at their discretion. Councils provide some services directly, work in partnership with other organisations, and commission others such as the private and third sectors, to provide services on their behalf. Councils are not motivated by profit although they do provide some trading services such as catering, and services for which there are private sector alternatives such as leisure centres.

Councils also have wider statutory duties, such as the Public Sector Equality Duty in advancing equality of opportunity and eliminating unlawful discrimination.

Councils are currently implementing the requirements of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This act places a legal requirement on councils to make sure that every decision they make takes account of the needs of future generations so, if elected you will need to understand how this requirement impacts on your decision making.

More about local government is available in the WLGA's Guide for Councillors ([www.wlga.gov.uk/member-support-and-development-publications1/a-guide-for-new-councillors-in-wales-2012/](http://www.wlga.gov.uk/member-support-and-development-publications1/a-guide-for-new-councillors-in-wales-2012/)).

Look at the services described on the website of your local council. What is your experience of using these services, do you think they are useful/efficient? Visit my local council [www.mylocalcouncil.info/](http://www.mylocalcouncil.info/) to see how your council's services compare to others.

Ask your mentor about who you could speak to in the council to find out more about each of the main services provided.

### 3. How might councils change?

The current structure of 22 local authorities has been in existence since 1996. The Welsh Government believes that local government should be reformed to meet the current and future challenges faced.

The plans of the Welsh Government have been informed by the work of the Williams Commission (which reported in January 2014) which suggested that governance was complex and scale was a problem which impacted on leadership and service performance. Williams recommended a merger of existing authorities down to between 10-12 authorities.

The Welsh Government originally proposed 12 authorities but announced proposals for between 8-9 authorities in June 2015.

It is anticipated that political parties will detail their proposals for local government reform in their 2016 Assembly election manifestos, prior to final plans and legislation being laid in the Assembly.

On current plans, it is anticipated that the next local elections will be (on the current map of 22 councils) in 2017, followed by further elections in 2019 on a new local government map, with new merged authorities coming into being in 2020. It is likely that there will be around a third fewer councillors in the new authorities.

Further details about the Williams Commission and Welsh Government proposals can be found at [www.gov.wales/topics/localgovernment/councils-to-change/?lang=en](http://www.gov.wales/topics/localgovernment/councils-to-change/?lang=en)

### 4. How are councils funded?

Although most people think that council tax is the main source of funding for councils, on average across Wales, it contributes only around 25% of council income. Indeed, most people don't realise that the 'Council Tax' bill they pay each year also contributes to local police and fire services!

The vast majority of local councils' funding comes from the Welsh Government, via what is known as the Revenue Support Grant. The Welsh Government also provides specific grant streams for specific programmes, projects or to meet specific targets. Councils receive over £4bn from the Welsh Government in 2015-16.

Councils face growing challenges due to the programme of public sector austerity by the UK Government. Councils' budgets are shrinking, at a time when needs are increasing and demographic pressures are growing. Councils are having to make difficult decisions around service cuts and job losses. Although Councils have local flexibility around how they prioritise and spend their resources some of the most expensive and statutory services like education, social services and housing must be funded to a level which delivers certain standards. This means that other discretionary services, those which are often most valued by the public, such as the local environment, libraries, leisure centres and the arts suffer when money is short. More about local government finance is available here: WLGA how local government is financed ([www.wlga.gov.uk/resources-how-is-local-government-financed](http://www.wlga.gov.uk/resources-how-is-local-government-financed)).

Councils also generate a small amount of income through charges and fees, such as car parking, leisure centre charges or planning fees.

Ask your mentor about how they are involved in financial planning and monitoring in their authority, what financial decisions have been taken recently? How are the public involved in the decision making? If you haven't already, have a look at your council tax bill and accompanying leaflet to see how the spend is broken down. Think about joining your council's citizen panel or equivalent to contribute your views to future engagement on council funding challenges and priorities.

## 5. What other bodies are involved?

Local councils work with a range of local and national partners and bodies in delivering local services, providing democratic representation and providing strategic leadership. Many of these partners will be local third sector or community groups, but a range will be public sector bodies or other levels of government.

There are five tiers of democracy in Wales:

- **The European Parliament** (4 Welsh MEPs) European Parliament website ([www.europarl.europa.eu/](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/)).
- **The UK Parliament** (40 Welsh MPs) UK Parliament website ([www.parliament.uk/](http://www.parliament.uk/)).
- **The National Assembly for Wales** (60 AMs – 40 constituency AMs and 20 Regional AMs) National Assembly website ([www.assembly.wales/](http://www.assembly.wales/)). The National Assembly is often confused with the Welsh Government; the Assembly is the Welsh parliament, the Welsh Government consists of Welsh Ministers and sets the national agenda for Wales in the areas of (for example) social services, education, the environment, planning, transport and economic development Welsh Government Website ([www.gov.wales/](http://www.gov.wales/)).
- **Local authorities** (also known as unitary authorities, county or county borough councils) There are 22 local authorities in Wales with some 1254 councillors.
- **Community and Town Councils** (735 councils and around 8000 councillors) In some cases councillors sit on both a county or county borough council (unitary authority) and a community or town council. Local authorities often work closely with their local community and town council. At the moment community and town councils deliver services such as maintaining playing fields, parks and open spaces, village halls, allotments and cemeteries. More information about community and town councils is available on the website of One Voice Wales the organisation that represents them. One Voice Wales ([www.onevoicewales.org.uk/OVWeb/Default.aspx](http://www.onevoicewales.org.uk/OVWeb/Default.aspx)).

Arrange to view a community council meeting near to you. Speak to the Chair about how they work with the local authority.

Ask your Mentor about how the Council works with their community councils? Do they have formal working arrangements?

Councils also work with public service partners such as:

- **Local Health Boards**
- **Fire and Rescue Authorities**
- **Police and Crime Commissioners**
- **National Park Authorities**
- **National Resources Wales**
- **Wales Audit Office, Estyn and Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales** – these organisations audit, inspect and/or regulate local authorities and their services, and report on the standards of service, governance arrangements and/or expenditure of public money.

Councils also work closely with neighbouring councils in designing, commissioning or delivering joint services.

There are many other organisations and bodies involved in local and national governance and service delivery. This guide provides background to local authorities, for more information about other organisations, visit the websites of the organisations above.

## 6. What do councillors do?

Councillors are people elected to represent their local community in the running of their local council. Councillors help determine how local services are provided, funded and prioritised.

It is estimated that on average, councillors spend the equivalent of three days a week on council business. Many employers recognise the value of the work of councillors and the skills that their employees will gain in the role and therefore provide time off or flexibility for you to undertake your council role. More information for employers is available at businesses supporting communities ([www.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/localgov/150605-did-businesses-supporting-communities-en.pdf](http://www.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/localgov/150605-did-businesses-supporting-communities-en.pdf)).

Being a councillor requires commitment, patience and resilience and can be demanding and stressful but very rewarding and interesting too. Here are some of the main roles councillors perform.

### Representing Communities

All councillors are advocates for their communities and are 'case workers' for their individual constituents when advice or support is requested. Much of a councillor's time is spent within their communities speaking and working with members of the public and community groups. This role is usually known as community leadership. For the individual councillor, being a community leader can mean a number of things. Acting as an advocate for the best interests of one's electoral division; lobbying for local concerns; influencing partner organisations to work to a common vision; resolving conflict amongst community organisations; encouraging community organisations to develop solutions in their own communities; balancing competing demands for resources when making decisions in the best interests of the whole authority area.

To be an effective Community leader, councillors need to speak to the community and be clear about the needs and feelings of constituents. Councillors will not be able to help everyone in the

way they would want but need to be honest and open about their decision making and make sure residents' views are heard – councillors are their voice in the council. Councillors will also need to be able to convey the policies and standpoint of the council to the community, making sure that they understand why, for example, decisions – sometimes unpopular ones – have been taken.

To engage effectively as a councillor you would be expected to:

- Know about your local community (also known as a ward or electoral division).
- Hold surgeries – regularly and often. These are opportunities for constituents to meet with you one to one.
- Communicate effectively – send newsletters, and always respond to phone calls, e-mails and letters. Use local media and social media such as social networking, blogging and Twitter to raise your profile and engage with the community.
- Network – get to know your area, the community groups, agencies etc. and be visible.
- Undertake casework on behalf of individuals and groups, you'll need to understand how far your role will allow you to help and when people should be referred to council officers.

Look at the Data Unit's website for demographic information about your area on the link here [infobasecymru](#)

It will tell you about the people who live in your area, about their education, health, ethnicity, age and much more.

## It's not all about meetings!

Councillors' roles in the council vary. The stereotypical view of councillors is that they have to sit through countless, long committee meetings; councillors are often judged by the media based only on their attendance at meetings!

Ask your mentor if you can spend a few days with them to get to know first-hand what it's like to be a councillor. You may wish to observe some council meetings or participate in scrutiny reviews or any public question forums.

Council meetings are important, and they can often be a time consuming commitment, but as the information above shows, councillors' key roles and time is spent in their communities, meeting with local people at local events or community meetings or working with council officers and partner agencies about local matters.

With regards to council meetings, the Council will have a constitution setting out decision-making structures and procedures, terms of reference for internal committees, roles and responsibilities of individual positions of office, standing orders for meetings, codes of conduct and financial regulations.

Most council meetings are open to the public, but on occasions, meetings or parts of meetings need to be held in private if confidential or sensitive information is being discussed.

Watch some webcasts of council meetings in different councils to compare style and content. They are easy to find, just Google a council name plus webcast.

Here is an overview of the committees that councillors might sit on:

- **Council** – All councillors are members of the full Council which sets the overall policies and budget.
- **Cabinet** – A small number of senior councillors will form the Cabinet or Executive Board. The Cabinet, led by the Leader, carries out the executive functions of the council.
- **Overview and Scrutiny** – all other councillors are active in the overview and scrutiny of the performance of the Council and other external bodies. Overview and Scrutiny is vital as it holds executive councillors to account for their decisions, policies and the performance of council services. Scrutiny members also play a valuable role in assisting with reviewing and developing policies as well as investigating issues of concern to the local community and the activities of other public sector bodies. Although Scrutiny committees do not make decisions they can make recommendations.

More information about scrutiny is available here: Centre for Public Scrutiny Website ([www.cfps.org.uk/](http://www.cfps.org.uk/))

- **Regulatory committees** – many councillors also sit on committees which deal with planning and licensing.
- **Other committees** – some councillors may also be members of other committees, such as audit or standards committee, or ad hoc committees such as appointments committees.
- **Other bodies** – Councillors are also appointed to external local bodies such as school governing bodies and local partnerships, either as representatives of the Council, as trustees or directors in their own right. Some councillors also sit on fire and rescue authorities and, where relevant, national park authorities.

Some councillors publish annual reports of their activities. Look at some council websites to read about a councillor's activities and achievements for the year.

Ask your mentor about the committee structure in their authority and their personal experiences of their role on different committees.

## Councillor Salaries

Councillors are entitled to receive a salary in return for the commitment and contribution they make. Councillors at all levels undertake a demanding and challenging role, which can affect their professional careers and can impact on work life balance. It is right that councillors are properly recognised and remunerated for this vital and valuable contribution to public life.

All councillors will receive a Basic Salary. This can change each year. In 2015/16 it is £13,300. Councillors are also entitled to travel allowances and those with caring responsibilities can also receive an additional care allowance of £403 per month. You will also be entitled to claim your basic salary whilst taking family absence such as parental leave. Councillors are also able to join the local government pension scheme.

Those councillors who undertake specific responsibilities such as executive/cabinet members, committee chairs or group leaders will receive additional payment. The size of this additional payment is calculated based on the size of the authority.

The framework for councillors' salaries is set by a body called the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales. The amount to be paid to councillors is set out in their annual report. More information at this link IRP report 2015-16 ([www.gov.wales/irpwsb/home/publication/2015-16/annual-report-2015-16/?lang=en](http://www.gov.wales/irpwsb/home/publication/2015-16/annual-report-2015-16/?lang=en)).

The Council will publish the details of your salary and any allowances that you receive.

## Councillor rules and regulations!

All councillors are expected to uphold the highest standards of behaviour. Councillors are bound by a statutory **Code of Conduct** which outlines what is expected of them in terms of behaviour and conduct; this code applies to councillors whenever they are acting or appear to be acting as a councillor. In short pretty much all of the time!

Breaches of the code can be referred to local authorities or the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and sanctions can include formal apologies, training or even suspension or disqualification from office. Councillors are expected to formally agree to the Code when signing their acceptance of office following election.

You can find the full text of the Code of Conduct at the Public Services Ombudsman's website here: Code of Conduct ([www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/~media/Files/CodeofConductguidance\\_E/Code of Conduct CCCBC NPA reissued March 2015 English.ashx](http://www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/~media/Files/CodeofConductguidance_E/Code%20of%20Conduct%20CCCBC%20NPA%20reissued%20March%202015%20English.ashx)).

Look in the Ombudsman's Casebook for examples of issues that have been referred for investigation and the findings. Code-of-Conduct-Casebook ([www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/en/publications/The-Code-of-Conduct-Casebook.aspx](http://www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/en/publications/The-Code-of-Conduct-Casebook.aspx)).

Ask your mentor about any historical local potential or actual breaches of the Code of Conduct and any action taken.

## 7. What do council officers do?

Officers are employed to manage the work of the Council and help councillors put their policies into action. Some posts in the Council are statutory, for example the Head of Paid Service (also known as the Chief Executive or Managing Director), the Section 151 Officer who is responsible for ensuring financial probity (usually the Director of Finance) and the Monitoring Officer who ensures the council's compliance with the law. The Head of Democratic Services works closely with all councillors makes sure that councillors and committees are provided with appropriate support.

Officers are politically neutral professionals, specialists in their field, with a duty to give councillors impartial advice to help them make the right decisions.

## 8. How do I stand for election as a councillor?

Almost anyone can be a councillor and it's very important that a range of different people are elected to represent different communities. You could be working or unemployed or in education. The mentoring programme can help you prepare to stand for office but it is no guarantee of success!

The rules about who can stand say that you need to be:

- at least 18 years old on the day of your nomination
- a British citizen, an eligible Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of any other member state of the European Union.

**AND** meet at least one of the following four qualifications:

1. You are, and will continue to be, registered as a local government elector for the local authority area in which you wish to stand from the day of your nomination onwards.
2. You have occupied as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the local authority area during the whole of the 12 months before the day of your nomination and the day of election.
3. Your main or only place of work during the 12 months prior to the day of your nomination and the day of election has been in the local authority area.
4. You have lived in the local authority area during the whole of the 12 months before the day of your nomination and the day of election.

**However, you can't be a Councillor if you:**

1. Are employed by the local authority in which you wish to stand or hold a paid office under the authority (including joint boards or committees). Note that you may be 'employed by the local authority', for example, if you work in certain schools or in fire and rescue services. A good rule of thumb is if you work for the public sector, check with your HR department to find out if you are unable to stand. The Electoral Commission website (link below) will also give you guidance.
2. Hold a politically restricted post in a local authority (if you are employed by a council, certain posts and all posts above the pay scale of spinal column 49 are politically restricted – check with your council for further details).

3. Are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order.
4. Have been sentenced to a term of imprisonment of three months or more (including a suspended sentence), without the option of a fine, during the five years before polling day.
5. Have been disqualified under the Representation of the People Act 1983 (which covers corrupt or illegal electoral practices and offences relating to donations).

A person may also be disqualified from election if they have been disqualified from standing for election to a local authority following a decision of the Independent Adjudication Panel for Wales.

This and further information is available on the Electoral Commission website here Electoral Commission ([www.electoralcommission.org.uk/](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/)).

**You can stand for election as an independent candidate or as a group/party political candidate.**

If you are a member or plan to join or stand as a member of a political party their agents will work for you. If you are standing as an independent member you will need to seek advice from different agencies. Further details about the major Political parties are available here:

- Plaid Cymru ([www.plaidcymru.org/](http://www.plaidcymru.org/))
- Welsh Labour ([www.welshlabour.org.uk/](http://www.welshlabour.org.uk/))
- Welsh Conservatives ([www.welshconservatives.com/](http://www.welshconservatives.com/))
- Welsh Liberal Democrats ([www.welshlibdems.org.uk/](http://www.welshlibdems.org.uk/))
- UKIP in Wales ([www.ukip.wales/](http://www.ukip.wales/))
- Wales Green Party ([www.walesgreenparty.org.uk/](http://www.walesgreenparty.org.uk/)).

If you want more information about the role of an independent councillor, the Local Government Association have a group for Independent Councillors. More information at this link. LGA Independent Group ([www.lgaindependent.local.gov.uk/](http://www.lgaindependent.local.gov.uk/)).

A full list of registered political parties is available from the Electoral Commission ([www.electoralcommission.org.uk/](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/)) where you can also find all the information you need as a candidate. i.e.

- standing for election
- campaigning
- accepting donations
- spending money
- your rights as a candidate, including access to election proceedings
- reporting after the election.

Ask your mentor about:

- Why they stood for office
- How they were selected as a candidate
- What they would do differently if standing for the first time again
- Whether they have been able to have the impact they hoped for
- The questions they were asked by the electorate when they were candidates.