

Be a councillor

A job description for district councillors





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So you're thinking of becoming a councillor?

The fact you're reading this means you're interested in becoming a councillor and that is the first step!

If you're the type of person who cares about your community, has a good rapport with your neighbours and a desire to improve your area then becoming a councillor may be the perfect choice for you.

This booklet is going to give you an outline on what you need to know about becoming a councillor and how to proceed once you've made the decision to run for election.

So read on and let us tell you what being a councillor is all about.



Councillor Richard Blunt, Leader of North West Leicestershire District Council:

"There is a spotlight on you when you're making decisions and trying to resolve issues. You must remember you can't solve every problem and that can be frustrating."





North West Leicestershire

North West Leicestershire lies at the heart of the National Forest and is covered by open fields and beautiful woodland with small villages and market towns dotted throughout. There are 93,500 people living in the district with a total of 38 wards to be represented of which we hope all will be hotly contested. The main settlements in the district are:

- Ashby-de-la-Zouch (12,530)
- Castle Donington (6,416)
- Coalville (21,411)

Figures courtesy of 2011 census.

Each ward has one councillor, elected to represent the interests of the people living in that ward.

The North West Leicestershire District Council Offices are located on Whitwick Road in Coalville and house the majority of council services as well as the council chamber, where important meetings are held.



What is a district councillor?

So you may be interested in becoming a councillor but you're not too sure what one is exactly. Well a district councillor is someone who has been elected, by the public, to represent a specific area within the district.

As a councillor, you will take on what's known as 'case work'. Your job is to listen to members of the public- also known as your constituents- and act on any concerns they may have. You can work with council officers to resolve any queries or concerns and report back to the person.

You will also be expected to play a part in decisions about council services.

The biggest meeting you must attend is Full Council. As the title suggests, this is when all councillors meet to debate issues, ask questions of the leadership and make decisions on council business. Full Council meets around every six weeks.

You may also be nominated to sit on a number of other committees, which handle specific parts of council business:

- **Planning Committee** – receives and decides on planning applications
- **Licensing Committee** – decides whether to grant, refuse, reinstate or remove licenses – from taxi drivers to alcohol sales
- **Audit and Governance Committee** oversees all audit and governance matters including the regulatory framework and accounts
- **Policy Development Group** – its key function is holding the Cabinet to account to ensure the decision making process is accountable and transparent.



What attributes does a councillor need?

Leadership – This is one quality that will help greatly in your bid to become an elected member. People need to feel they can trust you and want to believe in your decisions, so a sense of leadership is key. This will also help advance your career as a councillor - if people feel you're a good leader, they will follow and vote.

Knowledge of the area – Knowledge of the area where you are running for election is essential. You should know what facilities the area has and hasn't got, what the people are like and how the area can improve. How can you represent an area if you know very little about it?

Honesty – People always say honesty is the best policy, and it is true. If you're honest with your constituency about what you can deliver, they won't be disappointed. If you're honest with the media, you will never be caught off guard with a surprise story. Honesty is the best policy and a great quality to have.

Excellent communication skills – The ability to communicate is a skill a councillor cannot do without. You will be expected to communicate with everyone – face to face with members of the public, with officers working at the council, and possibly even with the wider community through the media.

Confidence – This is a necessity, as you will be meeting new people all of the time, from talking to the people you represent through to standing up and speaking in a Full Council meeting. You must have the confidence to do these things with ease.

Trustworthiness – As an elected member for a ward, the people have to trust you to represent them in a way which benefits them and reflects their values and ideals. If people do not trust you and don't trust you to deliver what you said you would, they won't vote for you.

Compassion – Compassion is key to understanding your constituency's problems and is essential to helping resolve them. You must care about your work and your ward; you must empathise with the people complaining and be compassionate enough to act on it.



A little more about being a district councillor

One big question is how much time will being a councillor take up? The answer to that is however much time you decide you want to spend on it. It could range from spending a few hours a week to a few hours a day, depending on what duties you decide to take on. Either way, your time as a councillor will be split between your two key responsibilities; your ward and the council.

Your responsibilities to your ward are:

- Listen to and represent the views of the residents
- Make sure council and other services are delivered effectively in your ward
- Try to secure extra resources for your ward
- Help out individual ward members on specific issues (case work).

As a councillor you will find a lot of your time is taken up by your residents. You will be their first port of call with any concerns, queries or complaints. You will then work in tandem with council officers to address the residents' problems and feed back to them. You will also be there to explain council policy and procedures and make sure they are being implemented effectively in your ward.

Your responsibilities to the council are:

- Help form policy
- Help develop the council's budget and agree the level of Council Tax
- Make or scrutinise decisions.

These are just a few of the responsibilities you will have at the council. You work for the people of your ward but you work for them in conjunction with the council and its officers.



Who can become a councillor?

To become a councillor you must be:

- 18 or over and a UK, EU or commonwealth citizen
- Registered to vote in the district of North West Leicestershire or for the preceding 12 months you must have occupied as owner or tenant, any land or premises in the district or resided in the district or had your principal place of work in the district.

You cannot stand if you:

- Work for North West Leicestershire District Council
- Hold a politically restricted post for another authority
- Are bankrupt
- Have served a prison sentence, including suspended sentences, of three months or more within five years prior to the election
- Have been disqualified under any legislation relating to corrupt or illegal practices.

Also candidates do not need any specific qualifications. However life experience and knowledge of your area is essential.

Political Parties

You do not have to belong to a political party to run for election. You can run as an independent if you like and have no affiliation with any party, although the majority of people become councillors as a result of joining a political party. If you are standing as a candidate for a particular party then you will need to be a member of that party's local organisation.

The bottom line is, if you want to become a councillor but do not belong to a party, running as an independent is your way forward.



Councillor Alison Smith MBE, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Community Services at North West Leicestershire District Council: *“Committees can meet during the day so you need to establish if you can get the time off work on a regular basis before agreeing to sit on these committees. But my best advice is, being a councillor can be very rewarding; however don’t think you will change the world overnight.”*

Training and Development

By this point you must be wondering what happens if you're elected. Well don't worry, you will not be expected to jump straight into the job without any support or training.

When you are newly elected the council will provide a selection of induction courses aimed at providing you with the skills and training you will need to fulfil your role as a councillor.

The training programme provided by the council includes:

- Your role as a Councillor
- Speaking in public
- IT training
- Local government finance
- Equality and diversity
- Ethical conduct for members

If you are a member of a political party or another group then they could provide you with training and support of their own.

So do not worry, you will not be expected to be able to do the job of a councillor as soon as you're elected. As you can see there are plenty of training and development opportunities for you to enable you to become the best councillor you can be.



Councillor John Legrys, Labour Councillor for Coalville: *"A Councillor is something you are, not just something you do. It takes over your life. I get a lot out of the sense of community being a Councillor gives. When thinking about becoming a councillor you must ask yourself "Who are you doing this for?" If it is just personal ambition, don't bother."*



Training and Development

What support will you receive if you are elected?

- You will receive all the information you need to deal with ward matters. This is provided by council officers who are always there to offer advice and information to councillors as and when they need it.
- There is a department in the council called Democratic and Support Services. The officers in that department are available full time to offer support for councillors.

These are just a few examples of the support you will receive if you are elected. So fear not, you won't be doing this alone, the council are there to help.

Will you get paid for being a councillor?

There is no salary for being a councillor however you will be paid an allowance. This is to reimburse you for time and expenses incurred while on council businesses.



Councillor Janet Ruff, Labour Councillor for Ibstock and Heather: *"I was asked if I would stand after attending a meeting about major spending cuts. My advice to new councillors would be to be yourself, represent for the benefit of others, have empathy with different viewpoints and be a good listener."*



Are you still interested in becoming a councillor?

If your answer to the above question is yes then fantastic! That's the biggest decision you will have to make and now you've made it, what do you do next?

Well, next comes the electoral process which we will go into in more detail in the next booklet. If you would like more information please contact the Electoral Services department:

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