



WHAT DO LOCAL COUNCILLORS DO?

The UK's political system - and especially the local government system - can seem very complicated. This explainer looks at what local councillors are, how local councils work and how you can get involved in local politics to campaign for migrants' rights

WHAT IS A LOCAL COUNCILLOR?

A local councillor is someone who lives in the area and is elected by other residents to represent them on the local council. Local councils make decisions about how some public services are run in the area.

Most councillors are members of political parties, including some that only operate locally. Others are independents, who belong to no party.

Councillors are volunteers, but they get an annual allowance set by the council, and may be able to claim for some expenses. Committee chairs, executive members, council leaders and mayors get extra allowances.

WHAT DO LOCAL COUNCILS DO?

Local councils have the power to make decisions about a lot of key things that affect the lives of people in the local area.

Different types of council are responsible for a different range of issues in the local area.

County Councils run education, transport, planning, fire and safety, social care, libraries, waste management and trading standards services. Within each area run by a county council there are also **District and City Councils and Boroughs**, which run housing, rubbish collection, planning applications and council tax collection.

At a smaller level still there may be **Parish, Community and Town Councils**, which are only responsible for allotments, bus shelters, community centres, play areas and some local grants and consultations.

In London and some other large urban areas, these different layers do not exist and one **Unitary Authority** (a borough, sometimes together with a joint authority like the Greater London Authority) provide all of these services.

Some areas have directly elected Mayors who control a lot of local authority services and budgets. In other areas, mayors are elected every year and have a ceremonial role, chairing council meetings and attending local events.

As well as making decisions about local issues, councils can also make statements about what they think the government should do, even if it's about things that aren't within their power (for example, immigration policy).

HOW DO COUNCILS MAKE DECISIONS?

Councils are usually run by the party that has the largest number of councillors. However, if no party has a majority they may form a coalition.

Each local authority is broken up into **wards** – these are small local areas. Local councillors are elected to represent wards.

Some councils put aside a small amount of money for local councillors to plan activities in their ward. All local councillors are also usually consulted about local issues in their ward, like planning for example.

All other decisions are made at local authority level – this means that decisions are taken by committees, the council executive or cabinet, by the mayor if the area has a directly elected mayor or by full council meetings.

WHAT CAN COUNCILLORS DO?

The main role of a local councillor is to represent people in their local area and include their views in decision-making. Councillors exist to make sure that the local council runs the services the community needs, and runs them well. They must attend meetings of the council and any committees they are on.

Councillors can also help residents who have problems, especially if they involve local services like housing, education or social services.

If a local resident goes to their councillor with a problem, the councillor can raise the issue with people who work for the council. They may also be able to advise on local organisations who can help.

If that doesn't resolve the issue, councillors can refer residents to the local government or to services like the housing ombudsman, which helps with housing disputes.

Councillors are also members of committees. Committees may make decisions about services or hold the leader or mayor to account for their decisions.

This may be done through something called “scrutiny”: this is where they look at a particular issue or service area in detail and write a report, which the whole council must then discuss.

This can be a good place for councillors to raise relevant issues, and ask local organisations and communities to provide evidence.

COUNCILLOR OR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT?

There are similarities between local councillors and Members of Parliament (MPs). Councillors and MPs are all elected by people from their local area to represent them. However, local councillors have to live or work in the area to be able to stand as councillors. MPs do not, and often do not live in the area.

MPs represent their local community (also called a constituency) at the House of Commons in Westminster. This means that they are elected at a General Election, usually once every 5 years, and go to Westminster to debate with other MPs about issues like healthcare, policing and immigration.

The decisions that MPs take usually apply across the country, while the decisions that councillors take usually apply only in their local area. However, this doesn't mean that councillors are any less important. Local councils have the power to make decisions about key issues affecting all of our lives.

HOW ARE COUNCILLORS CHOSEN?

Local councillors are chosen by people from the local area (the ward) at local elections. Most local elections happen every 4 years. Local elections don't happen at the same time across the whole country – it's a good idea to sign up to your local newspaper or your council's newsletter, so you know when local elections will be happening in your area.

Sadly, not all residents are allowed to vote in local elections at the moment. In England and Northern Ireland, you must be 18 or over to vote in local elections. In Scotland and Wales, you must be 16 or over.

If you live in England or Northern Ireland, you are only allowed to vote in local elections if you are British, Irish, from the European Union or you are a qualifying Commonwealth citizen, which means being from a Commonwealth country and either having a valid visa, or not needing a visa to live in the UK.

The right to vote for EU citizens who arrived in the UK after Brexit are due to change in 2024 due to the new provisions in the Elections Act. We will update this section in due course. All EU citizens resident in the UK can vote in local elections in 2023 as previously

If you live in Scotland or Wales, you are also allowed to vote in local elections if you are a citizen of any other country and have a valid visa to live in the UK.

We think it is unfair that people who have lived in the UK for years and made their lives here aren't allowed to have a say in how decisions about their local community are made. The Migrant Democracy Project is campaigning for more voting rights for migrant communities – find out more [here](#).

However, even if you are not allowed to vote, you can still take part in local elections in other ways. For example, you can volunteer to support the campaign of the candidate you want to support, by doing things like distributing leaflets and going out to speak to people.

HOW CAN I CONTACT MY COUNCILLOR?

Everyone in the community has the right to contact their councillor, either by writing to them or by going to meet them. This is regardless of your nationality, your immigration status and whether you have the right to vote. Your local councillor represents everyone who lives in your local area, and that includes all residents.

You can find out who your local councillors are by entering the postcode of the place you live [here](#). Once you have entered your postcode, the website will show you a list of all the councillors (usually 2 or 3) who represent your local ward. You can click on one of their names to write to one of them individually, or click the link at the side to write to them all at the same time.

Be sure to include your name and address, and a brief description of why you are writing to them. You can write to your local councillors about an issue that is affecting you personally, or about something you think is important that you would like them to take action about (even if it doesn't affect you personally).

Once you send your message, you should get an automatic reply from the councillor to confirm that they have received your message. This automatic reply will usually say how long you should expect to wait to hear back from the councillor.

Please remember that councillors often have full-time jobs on top of their work as a councillor, so it can take them a while to respond.

Instead of writing your councillor a message, you can also meet them at something called an advice surgery, where a local councillor is available for one-to-one meetings with local residents who want to sort out a problem or raise an issue. Your local council's website will have details about when your local councillor holds advice surgeries, and where they are.