

Becoming a councillor



Leicester
City Council

Contents

Introduction	3
Why become a councillor?	4
What is a ward?	4
Who can become a councillor?	5
Do councillors need any qualifications?	6
Do I have to belong to a political party or group?	6
City mayor	6
How decisions are made	6
What councillors do	7
Councillors as community leaders	8
Ward community meetings	9
How much time is involved in being a councillor?	10
Are councillors paid?	12
What support will I receive if I am elected?	13
Will I receive any training?	14
Will I get time off work?	14
Probity and integrity	15
Political conventions	17
I'd like to become a councillor – what do I do next?	18
Election process	19
Useful contacts	21

Introduction

This information is for anyone who is thinking of standing for election and wants to find out about the role of a councillor.

All Leicester City Council seats are up for election in May 2019. This offers you the perfect opportunity to stand as a representative of your local community to become a city councillor (also known as an elected member).

The local election process for Leicester City Council begins in March 2019 when a notice of election will be published in public places throughout the city. If you are thinking about standing as a candidate you will have to formally submit your nomination papers. Information about the nomination process and what candidates need to do is available further on in this document.

Why are councillors important?

Councillors play a key role in the city:

- They are a voice of the community, representing local people and communities
- They are champions of the users of local services
- They help shape future services for the benefit of local people, working in partnership with organisations such as the police, voluntary and community sectors, health and other public bodies and the private sector
- They oversee Leicester's biggest employer, the city council, which employs around 13,000 staff
- They play a major role in making local government work by developing a better quality of life for the people of Leicester

Why become a councillor?

There are many reasons why people decide to become a local councillor:

- They want to make a difference and be involved in shaping the future of the local community
- They are concerned about the local area in which they live and want to ensure that their local community receive the services needed
- They want to represent the views of local people and ensure that local community interests are taken into account
- They want to pursue their political beliefs
- They are concerned about one particular issue: for example, care for older people, the lack of facilities in an area, or traffic congestion

For some people, it is an extension of what they are already doing, as they are active in a political party, trade union, or school governing body, and they see the next step is to become a councillor.

To help strengthen local democracy, Leicester City Council is very keen to attract people from a broad range of backgrounds to stand as candidates.

Information is available from the Local Government Association 'Be a Councillor' webpage at beacouncillor.co.uk

The 'Be a Councillor' Guide and 'Be a Councillor: A Guide for Disabled People' are available at: beacouncillor.co.uk/resources

The Independent Be a Councillor Booklet is available at: local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/be-councillor-booklet-6c2.pdf

What is a ward?

Councillors are elected on a four-year term to represent a number of local residents in an area called a ward. A ward is a geographical boundary used to divide the city up into different areas. There are 21 wards with each one having either two or three councillors depending on its size.

Who can become a councillor?

Local government needs different kinds of people who are capable, vibrant, energetic and engaged with a commitment to local people and the local area.

To stand for election, on the day of nomination, you must:

- be 18 or over; **and**
- be a UK, EU or qualifying commonwealth citizen

Also, you must fulfil at least one of the following:

- be registered to vote in the local authority area
- be the owner or tenant of any land or premises in the local authority area during the whole 12 months preceding nomination
- have worked in the local authority area during the last 12 months as your principal or only place of work (including unpaid)
- have lived in the local authority area during the last 12 months

You cannot stand if you:

- are employed by Leicester City Council
- hold a politically restricted post for another authority
- are subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order (or interim order) in England or Wales
- have served a prison sentence (including suspended sentences) of three months or more within five years prior to the election
- have been sentenced to a term of imprisonment of three months or more (including suspended sentences) without option of a fine, during the five years before polling day
- have been disqualified under the Representation of the People Act 1983.

The Electoral Commission's website includes candidate and agent guidance and is available at: electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent/local-elections-in-england

Do councillors need any qualifications?

No, you do not need any specific qualifications to become a councillor.

Life experience is probably the best thing you can bring to the role.

Do I have to belong to a political party or group?

No, although the majority of people become councillors as a result of joining a political party. However, some people stand for election as independents (candidates who do not belong to any political party).

If you are thinking of standing as a candidate for a particular political party, you will need to be a member of that party's local organisation. See contact details on page 21.

City mayor

At the same time as councillor elections, an election is held for the city mayor. The city mayor is elected by and represents the whole city, rather than a specific ward, for a four-year term, concurrent with the councillors' term of office.

How decisions are made

All councillors meet together as the council. These meetings are normally open to the public and take place around seven times per year. The council is required by law to take certain decisions, such as setting the council's budget and council tax, and approving a number of key plans and strategies. The council also appoints a range of committees covering such matters as planning, licensing, audit and standards.

The city mayor is responsible for all the council's executive functions which are not the responsibility of full council or its committees. He/she appoints the executive to assist in the day to day running of the council. Executive decisions are open to the public, except where personal or confidential matters are being discussed.

The council has an overview select committee and scrutiny commissions which hold the executive and partner organisations to account by scrutinising policy and practices and suggesting developments to service and best practice.

What councillors do

Councillors are elected to represent a number of local residents in an area called a ward. The role of a councillor can be very varied and it is up to each individual councillor how they work. Councillors have responsibilities to their ward, to the council and to the community.

Council responsibilities:

- To help form policy
- To help develop the council's budget and agree the level of council tax
- To help make or scrutinise decisions

Their role on the council as a whole is to plan, run, monitor and develop council business. Councillors are essential to deciding what is in the public interest amidst a range of conflicting issues and views.

As a councillor you are a member of the council, and could also be on the executive, a scrutiny committee or a regulatory committee. You will meet with other councillors from all political groups, to debate and approve council business in a formal setting. Most meetings are open to the press and public. There are written rules set by law which govern behaviour and procedures at these meetings and enable councillors to take part effectively.

Councillors as community leaders

Supporting wards at a time of unprecedented financial pressure on the council requires strong local leaders who can listen to their community and bring partners together to implement a shared vision of how they can improve their areas.

As a councillor, you will have a key role to play in representing and leading the communities in your ward and working with neighbourhood governance arrangements such as ward community meetings.

The Local Government Association has suggested two key elements to this role:

Community leader

- stimulating local organisations and individuals to take up opportunities to express their views
- representing local level concerns and perspectives
- maintaining a link between the users and providers of services
- encouraging the community to organise services for themselves
- working with other community leaders in the voluntary, community and business sectors
- offering vision and direction to local groups, and building support for that vision
- brokering agreements between different interests and partners
- contributing as an effective partner in neighbourhood arrangements, including those that deliver delegated function.

Source: November 2005 The Neighbourhood Agenda and the Role of the Elected Member

Community advocate

- speaking up for – and on behalf of – residents and groups
- encouraging residents to engage and participate
- participating in plan making and planning decisions
- communicating residents' concerns to the council and other providers: for example, the police
- ...but at the same time not losing sight of the strategic context of the council area as a whole.

Ward community meetings

Ward community meetings are held across the city bringing the council closer to communities. They are led by ward councillors. They give residents the opportunity to work with council departments and other agencies, such as the police and health service providers, to identify local issues and improve their neighbourhoods.



How much time is involved in being a councillor?

It is for you to decide the level of commitment you are able to give to being a councillor. It also depends on your role within the council and the number of duties you decide to take on. It could range from a few hours each week to a few hours each day at busier times.

You need to consider the following issues:

- How your role as a councillor will impact on any family and personal relationships. You will need the support and understanding of people close to you as you may be spending a lot of your spare time on council business.
- The people you represent will look to you for help in dealing with their problems. You are likely to receive a lot of correspondence and a great many telephone calls – and not every caller will phone at what you think is a reasonable hour!
- Most councillors hold at least one drop-in surgery each month, where members of the public can speak to their councillor without needing to make an appointment. Some hold two or even three surgeries each month. You may spend some of your time meeting constituents and you may also have to meet with officers of the council to help you with any issues.
- There are usually seven full council meetings each year, which you will be expected to attend. These are formal meetings with other council colleagues from all political groups. Meetings start at 5pm and could last up to three hours, sometimes longer, and you are likely to be a member of at least one committee.

Nearly all committee meetings are held in the evening around 5.30pm.

Your meetings and commitments may not be evenly spread out so some weeks you may be out more evenings than others.

If you would like more information on the current year's cycle of council meetings please email committees@leicester.gov.uk

The average length of a committee meeting is approximately two hours but this varies.

- Many councillors represent the council on one or more outside bodies (external partnerships or organisations on which the council is represented). Background reading and attendance at meetings of these bodies would increase your time commitment.
- For most of the meetings you attend there will be papers that you will need to read beforehand. These papers can be quite detailed and take time to read and understand.
- If you are elected as a chair, spokesperson or appointed by the city mayor as a member of the executive, the role can be very demanding and time consuming because you will take responsibility for some of the council's £750 million expenditure each year.
- If you are a member of a political party there will be additional calls on your time to attend political group meetings. Political groups require their members to attend group meetings in advance of council meetings and possibly training events/seminars organised by the political party.

A councillor's typical week

In one week you could have a scrutiny committee meeting, a seminar, be representing the council on an outside panel or partnership, have a political group meeting (if you are a member of a political group) and be holding your monthly ward surgery.

You will receive a lot of information as a councillor so managing this and prioritising it will be important if you want to make an impact and not spread yourself too thinly across too many areas.

It is worth remembering that there are lots of officers in the council who will be happy to provide you with briefings and help on specific issues.

Are councillors paid?

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

Every councillor in Leicester is entitled to a basic allowance, currently £10,556 a year, paid into a bank account in 12 monthly instalments, along with an additional £1,205 per year to cover council-related travel and subsistence within the city, and a telecommunication and support allowance of £312 per year.

If you undertake a specific role, such as the chair of a committee, you may also receive a special responsibility allowance. You can only receive one type of these allowances. Financial support is also provided for those with caring responsibilities to help, for example, cover childcare costs.

For more information about the members' allowance scheme please visit the council's website at leicester.gov.uk/your-council/councillors-and-wards/councillors-allowances

Further information on allowances will be available during the induction period in May 2019.

Allowances are classed as earnings so can be taxable and can have a direct impact on any benefits you receive. If you think this may affect you it may be worth exploring with Department for Work and Pensions or the tax office.

What support will I receive if I am elected?

- The member and civic support team provides support to meet the needs of councillors.
- A councillors-only website helps you to find information you need.
- Information to help you deal with ward matters.
- You will have access to office space and meeting rooms at City Hall or Town Hall.
- You will be offered IT equipment for use on council business, with email and Internet access, and a mobile phone.
- You will be able to access health and well-being services that are available to council employees, such as physiotherapy, occupational health, counselling, and support from the health and safety team.
- If you need any other help or assistance after you have been elected don't be afraid to ask.

Will I receive any training?

When you are newly elected there is an induction period. If you are a member of a political or other group, they may offer training and support. The induction programme provided by the member and civic support team includes details of support provided by the team, an opportunity to meet senior officers within the council, an introduction to council services and signposting to relevant departments.

Specific training for councillors is provided on topics such as:

- welfare reform
- local government finance
- Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts
- chairing skills
- introduction to scrutiny
- IT training

Councillors will be linked to a relevant officer within the council who will act as a single point of contact to access advice and guidance during the induction period.

Will I get time off work?

If you are working, by law your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to perform your duties as a councillor. The amount of time off will depend upon your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer's business. You should discuss this with your employer before making the commitment.

Probity and integrity

The conduct of councillors is formally governed by the code of conduct. This sets out the rules that all councillors should work to. In Leicester this forms part of the political conventions which all officers and members must follow. All councillors are required to sign the declaration of acceptance of office, which includes an undertaking to observe the code of conduct and political conventions. Breaches of the rules may be considered by the standards committee.

The general principles detailed in the council's constitution, which all councillors must follow, are:

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest

Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Respect for others

Holders of public office should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers and its other employees.

Duty to uphold the law

Holders of public office should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place in them. There are also two very important provisions by which councillors are bound at all times:

These are:

- they should not do anything which brings their council or office into disrepute.
- they should not misuse their official position to their own advantage or to the disadvantage of others.

Political conventions

As ground rules for transparency and consistency in everyday working relationships, the conventions are based on these principles:

- councillors have a 'need to know' the information reasonably required to perform their role
- officers must serve the whole council objectively and provide unified advice
- political processes and councillors' different roles are a legitimate part of local democracy
- councillors cannot be involved in any matter where they or their family/business have an interest.

The full version is available on request and will be made available to all councillors. The political conventions document is reviewed on a regular basis and all councillors approve any changes at a meeting of full council.

All councillors agree to follow the general principles, code of conduct and political conventions so as to ensure high standards in the way they undertake their duties. The standards committee ensures there is appropriate training and advice on the code.

I'd like to become a councillor – what do I do next?

Nominations

Once you have decided to stand for election as a city councillor you will need to be proposed and seconded by two people and also to have eight further people as assentors to your nomination.

Full details of the electoral process, including the nomination procedure, will be available upon request at the end of March 2019 by emailing electoral.services@leicester.gov.uk

The nomination pack includes nomination forms, timetables and guidance notes. The timetable for the next local election is available on request. As a candidate you will be invited to a meeting held by the council to hear about postal votes, where the count of the votes will be held, where the polling stations are going to be and to ask any questions you may have.

It is your responsibility, or your agent's, to present nomination papers to the returning officer before the statutory deadline.

Nomination forms

What you need to know before you complete your form

- Do not submit your forms at the last minute – there may be a mistake in your papers and you will need time to rectify this.
- When collecting your 10 signatures, it is useful to take a copy of the voters' list with you. You can then compare the name with that on the nomination form and write down the assessor's number. The name and number should be exactly the same.
- It is important to read the nomination papers and supporting material and make a careful note of when each of the various papers needs to be returned. The returning officer can help with any queries.
- Make sure the people nominating or seconding you have nominated you alone.

Look out for a candidates and agents briefing in early spring 2019.

Election process

Electoral register

In the run up to the election candidates can have a free copy of the electoral register for the ward for which they are standing. This lists residents who can vote at the next election and a map showing the ward boundaries.

Do I need an election agent?

You can take on this role yourself but it is helpful to have an agent.

If you are in a political party, it may be that one person takes on the role of agent for several candidates.

It is the agent's responsibility to ensure that forms are sent in at the correct times and to keep a clear and accurate record of financial expenditure, to be submitted after the election.

You should work closely with your agent as a double check.

What are polling agents and counting agents?

These are all safeguards to ensure a fair election.

Polling agents are people you can nominate to go into the polling stations to ensure that they are being run fairly. They cannot ask the polling clerks who has or has not voted.

Counting agents are nominated to attend the count to ensure a fair and accurate count of votes.

You do not have to nominate either of these, though you may find friends and helpers are keen to attend the count.

Election expenses: who pays?

If you decide to stand for election and spend money on your campaign, it is important to note that you have to pay for your own publicity material, property, services or items used for the campaign. However, if you are a member of a political group or some other group, you may find that financial help is available. You will need to check this with your political party or group.

Furthermore, although you or your party/group pays for the election expenses, you must keep all your receipts. You will need to submit a statement of election expenses, supported by receipts, shortly after the election. This is done to make sure that the money you spend on the election campaign does not go over the set limit of £600, with an additional 5p for every entry in the ward register of electors for which you are seeking to be elected.

If you have any queries about election expenses please contact electoral services:

0116 454 2000

Email: electoral.services@leicester.gov.uk

Useful contacts

Political parties

Labour

East Midlands Labour
23 Barrett Lane
Beeston
Nottingham
NG9 6AD
Tel: 0115 943 1777
Email: eastmidlands@labour.org.uk

Liberal Democrat

Leicester City Liberal Democrats
59 St Albans Road
Leicester
LE2 1GF
Email: contact@leicester-libdems.org.uk

Conservative

City of Leicester Conservative Association
123-125 Clarendon Park Road
Leicester
LE2 3AJ
Email: office@leicesterconservatives.com

Independent candidates

Local Government Association Independent Group
18 Smith Square
Westminster
London
SW1P 3HZ
Tel: 020 7664 3224
Email: independent.groupлга@local.gov.uk

If you are interested in other political parties, please visit the register of political parties on the Electoral Commission's website: electoralcommission.org.uk

Local government

Local Government Association

The LGA is a voluntary body that works to improve public services

Webpage: local.gov.uk

Email: info@local.gov.uk

Tel: 020 7664 3000

18 Smith Square

Westminster

London

SW1P 3HZ

Electoral Commission

Guidance and information on standing as a councillor

Webpage: electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent/local-elections-in-england

Email: info@electoralcommission.org.uk

Tel: 020 7271 0500

3 Bunhill Row

London

EC1Y 8YZ

The LGA publishes a number of workbooks for councillors which cover a range of important topics: **local.gov.uk/councillor-workbooks**

They also produce a councillors guide which summarises the key information needed.

