

# Becoming a District Council or



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# the role of a councillor

## Introduction

Do you want to improve your local area? If so, then you are an ideal candidate to become a Councillor.

There are 410 local authorities in England and Wales with over 21,000 elected Councillors.

Becoming a councillor is a uniquely rewarding experience. You will be responsible for making decisions on behalf of local residents as well as having the opportunity to help your local community. It will also allow you to develop many different sides to your personality – the ability to speak in public; to debate and to persuade your fellow councillors of the benefits of your proposals; and the opportunity to work with council officers to help solve your constituents' problems. Although training will be offered to you as a new councillor, you will find these abilities will develop naturally.

As a councillor you will discover that the more involved you are the more enjoyable and rewarding the work becomes.

Councillors have many different roles but the first thing to note is that all councils are different. Being a Councillor is hard work; you have to find an equilibrium between the needs and interest of your residents, voters, political parties (if you belong to one) and the local council.

Whilst carrying out your role as a councillor, it is important to remember that you have been elected by local people to represent, plan, run and develop council business. You will be working to make decisions about local issues and improving the quality of life for the people in your ward.

## Decision Making

The policies and general direction of the council are debated and agreed by the elected members. Councillors then play a crucial role in scrutinising those policy decisions once they have been implemented and in monitoring the

council's performance across a whole range of areas.

Several councillors are selected to serve on the Executive Committee and take part in decision-making. Executive Committee members propose the policy framework and ensure its implementation. Councillors who are not members of the Executive Committee play a role in scrutinising policy decisions and suggesting improvements.

There are currently six members on the Executive Committee on Malvern Hills District Council including the Leader of the Council and senior councillors responsible for particular aspects of policy/service delivery (planning, environmental health etc). These are known as 'portfolio holders'. Portfolio holders work closely with council officers and are responsible for the specific details of their brief as well as ensuring the implementation of agreed policy decisions. As these decisions affect the level and quality of services received by the people you will represent, they will have a significant effect on the way the council operates.

If you are not a member of the Executive Committee you will still have a very important role to perform. There are a range of committees to serve on, dealing with matters such as planning applications and licensing issues. You may also be called upon to become a member of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee which can review the decisions made by the Executive Committee or serve on a 'Task & Finish' group to develop a particular area of policy.

One of the most important roles for all councillors is to act as the representative of their local community. This includes addressing problems on behalf of your residents as well as acting as a community leader and being an important point of contact between the local community, the parish/Town Council and the District Council.

# the role of a councillor

## Representation

The Council is divided up into electoral areas called 'wards'. Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC) is made up of 38 councillors representing 22 wards. The wards have between one and three councillors each.

Your primary role as a councillor is to represent your ward and the individual citizens who live in it. You are the bridge between the community and the council. This applies to every councillor whether you are Leader of the Council or a newly elected backbencher. Your activities at a local level should include:

- Representing your ward within the council and other agencies.
- Holding surgeries: this is a good way of giving residents face-to-face contact. Surgeries are usually held in a local building people know such as a community centre.
- Undertaking casework on behalf of an individual – this is an essential part of your activities. The extent to which you are approached depends on many factors: the size of your ward, if you are on any committees, and how often you put out regular leaflets listing your contact details.
- Campaigning on local issues and winning resources for your ward. Once elected, councillors often neglect campaigning for their ward but this should become even more important. It is essential that you maintain regular contact with groups in your community and are seen to support them.
- Supporting local partnerships and organisations.
- Explaining council policy and ensuring that each policy has been carried out fairly.

## Staying in touch

In order to represent your constituents effectively, you will need to keep in constant touch with them to find out their concerns. This can be done in many different ways.

One of the most effective ways is producing regular newsletters. This will show that you are

interested in people's views all year round and, by publicising yourself and your work, you will raise your profile. Newsletters also offer an opportunity to advertise your contact details so that residents can get in touch easily.

Surveys are another way of keeping in touch with your constituents. They make residents feel that their views are appreciated, help you gain information about local issues and provide you with details of many potential supporters.

You should also make a list of local community newsletters, contact the editors and see if they would be happy to publish contributions from you. As long as your contributions are free from party politics and concentrate on informing residents of local issues, most editors will be happy to include contributions. This will also help to increase your profile.

Many councillors are increasingly using websites. Email is also a good and efficient means of communication.

## Helping your constituents

Being an elected representative is a role of fundamental importance. You will be contacted by your constituents with requests for help and you are likely to receive a lot of post, emails and phone calls.

In terms of helping your constituents with their problems, you are not expected to be familiar with every single detail across a range of policies. Your job is to represent your constituents' concerns to the council and try to get the problem solved.

You will not be able to solve every single problem but you should be able to make a difference to many of those who request your help. However, you should bear in mind that many people contact their local councillor for help on issues that are not the responsibility of the local authority. In these cases you should try to put people in touch with other relevant agencies which can help.

# what do councils do?

In Britain there are two distinct types of local government structure - unitary or two tier (District and County) when deciding whether to become a councillor it is important to bear in mind the differences between them.

For much of England, including Worcestershire there is a two-tier structure, with each area being covered by a District and a County Council. Outside of London there are also Parish and Town Councils.

## District Councils

District Councils have various responsibilities including: refuse collection, housing, licensing, planning, supporting voluntary organizations, leisure facilities, town centres, environmental health, car parking, markets and protecting the environment. There are 238 District Councils.

## County Councils

County Council responsibilities include: education, social services, libraries, roads, street lighting, the fire service, planning and consumer protection. There are 34 County Councils. It is possible to serve as both a County and a District councillor.

## Unitary Authorities

These are responsible for all powers delegated to local government. Their responsibilities therefore include: education, housing, social services, highways, street lighting, licensing, refuse collection, environmental and planning matters, leisure services etc. There are 46 unitary authorities in England. In some parts of England instead of having a two-tier structure there is a single 'Unitary Authority' (also known in some areas as 'Metropolitan District').

## Parish and Town Councils

There are 10,000 Parish and Town councils in England and Wales which are made up of nearly 70,000 councillors. Parish / Town Councils exist where there are anything from 100 residents to over 50,000.

Local government services and local authority responsibility

	Metropolitan/London authorities			Shire/Unitary authorities		
	Joint Authority	Met councils	London Borough	District councils	Unitary	County councils
Education		*	*		*	*
Housing		*	*	*	*	
Planning Applications		*	*	*	*	
Strategic planning		*	*		*	*
Transport planning		*			*	*
Passenger transport	*				*	*
Highways		*	*		*	*
Fire	*				* <sub>1</sub>	*
Social Services		*	*		*	*
Libraries		*	*		*	*
Leisure & Recreation		*	*	*	*	
Waste collection		*	*	*	*	
Waste disposal	*				*	*
Environmental Health		*	*	*	*	
Revenue collection		*	*	*	*	

1 Joint fire authorities in counties that have unitary authorities in them. These are combined fire authorities.

# eligibility and getting elected

If you wish to stand for election, you can do so as an independent candidate or as a member of a political party. If you wish to stand on behalf of a political party you should contact the local branch secretary or constituency office – the contact details will normally be available on the party's website. In either case you will need to know the key dates, when you can obtain nomination papers, how much you can spend on election expenses, and how to get further advice.

If having read the following sections of this booklet you require any further information or clarification please contact the Electoral Services Office by calling 01684 862212/862200. Staff working for the Returning Officer are available to answer any queries and send you nomination papers.

The Returning Officer is the Chief Executive of Malvern Hills District Council.

## Who can stand for election?

In order to be eligible for election to the District Council you must:

1. be a British or Commonwealth citizen, a citizen of the Irish Republic or a citizen of another EU Country;
2. be aged 18 years or over; and
3. Either:
  - a) Be registered as a local government elector anywhere within the District; or
  - b) have owned or occupied any land or other premises anywhere in the District throughout the period of 12 months preceding the date of nomination; or
  - c) have had your principal place of work in the 12 months preceding the date of nomination anywhere within the District; or
  - d) have lived anywhere within the District throughout the 12 months preceding the election

You can stand for election in any of the district wards.

Your qualification in accordance with the paragraph above does not have to relate to the ward in which you seek election.

You cannot stand for election in more than one ward. If you are nominated for more than one ward then you must withdraw all but one nomination by 12 noon on 7th April 2011.

Certain people are precluded from being district councillors:

- Paid employees of Malvern Hills District Council.
- Holders of politically restricted posts with Malvern Hills District Council or any other Local Authority.
- Persons who are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order.
- Persons who have been sentenced to 3 months imprisonment or longer (whether or not the sentence was suspended) without the option of a fine within the last 5 years.
- People disqualified under certain enactments relating to corrupt or illegal election practices.

## Election timetable

The timetable for the election on 5th May 2011 is as follows:

Publication of Notice of Election/ First date of submission of nominations - **25 March**

Last day for receipt of nominations - **Noon 4 April**

Publication of Statement of Persons Nominated - **Noon 6 April**

Notice of appointment of election agent - **Noon 7 April**

Notice of withdrawal of candidature - **Noon 7 April**

Last day for requests for a new postal vote or to change or cancel an existing postal vote or postal proxy facility - **5.00pm 14 April**

Last date for new proxy applications - **5.00pm 21 April**

# eligibility and getting elected

Publication of Notice of Poll - **8 April**

Notice to be given of Counting/Polling Agents - **26 April**

Polling Day - **7.00am to 10.00pm, 5 May**

Candidates return of expenses forms - **10 June**

These dates and times are laid down by statute and must be strictly adhered to. The Returning Officer has no discretion to depart from these times. Late applications or nominations cannot be accepted.

Nomination forms will be available for collection from Electoral Services, The Council House.

## Register of electors

If you intend to stand as a candidate you are entitled to one free copy of the Register of Electors for the Ward you are contesting. It will be supplied to you at the time of your nomination. Additional copies of the Register are available at a charge.

## Nomination

In completing the form your name must be inserted in FULL do not use initials for your forenames.

The persons signing your nomination paper must live in the ward you are contesting. They must sign the form with their usual signature, although it is helpful for checking if their names are also printed in capitals. The person's electoral roll number must be as shown on the Register published on 1 March. A person may only sign as many nomination forms as there are seats to be elected for that ward.

A candidate may not use a description which is likely to lead voters to associate him/her with a political party unless that description is authorised by a certificate signed by or on behalf of the party's registered nominating officer which must also be received by the Returning Officer not later than noon on 4 April. A candidate who is not seeking election in the name of a registered party may only use the

description "Independent" or, alternatively no description at all.

The description must not exceed 6 words in length. Please do not use hyphens or other characters to reduce the apparent length of the description or this may invalidate the nomination.

You must also indicate on the Consent to Nomination form whether you wish the political party's registered emblem (or one of its registered emblems) to appear against your name on the ballot paper. If you do not indicate on your nomination paper, the emblem will not automatically be included on the ballot paper simply because you are standing on behalf of that party.

It is helpful if the completed Nomination paper, Consent to Nomination and Certificate in relation to political parties are all submitted together.

**Please do not leave it until the last minute to bring in your nomination paper as this does not leave time to correct any mistakes and may result in you being prevented from standing for election.**

Please submit your Nomination paper as soon as possible after the Notice of Election has been published (you can of course start completing the forms and gathering the required signatures prior to that date). The elections staff will be happy to check the forms for you but cannot complete the forms on your behalf.

## Election agent

You do not have to appoint an election agent but, if you do, you must submit the Notice of Appointment by 7 April. You may change your election agent after that date by giving notice in writing.

If you do not appoint an election agent you will be deemed to be your own agent and all correspondence for the election agent will be sent to you.

# eligibility and getting elected

## Expenses

You may incur election expenses of up to a maximum of £600 + 5p for each registered elector within the ward that you are proposing to contest.

## Campaigning

You need to find out what the important issues are for your voters and let them know what you stand for. Finding out about the key issues locally can be done in several ways:

- Reading the local paper
- Canvassing – by knocking doors and by phone
- Compiling a questionnaire/survey to find out the issues which concern voters the most

Once you have found out about your electorate you will need to spread your message. There are several ways of doing this:

- Leafleting
- Coverage in local newspaper articles and the letters page
- Organising a petition or survey
- Talking to the electorate about issues on a street stall or door-to-door
- Lobbying other councillors.

If you publish any election literature please note that it must bear the name and address of the printer and publisher.

Election material must not be “fly posted” on any public property and must not be posted on private property without the permission of the owner.

## Hours of poll

Hours of poll on **5th May** will be **7.00 am to 10.00 pm**.

## Count

The verification and counting of votes for the election will take place at The Rothsilde Suite at

The Bank House Hotel, Bransford, Nr Worcester as soon as practicable after the poll closes. You will be advised later of the exact arrangements.

## Some words of caution

There are a number of corrupt and illegal practices. Broadly a corrupt practice involves bribing or using undue influence to obtain votes. An illegal practice might involve the making of a false statement about the personal character or conduct of another candidate or paying others to canvass, display notices or pay for transport for voters to and from the polling station. Failing to display the names and addresses of the publisher or printer of any election material is also an illegal practice.

# what to expect if you are elected

## Term of office

MHDC Councillors are elected for four years unless they are elected at a by-election or in exceptional circumstances such as a boundary change. If you are elected at a by-election you will have to stand again at the next normal election for the seat.

## Code of Conduct

Since May 2002 every authority has been required to adopt the Code of conduct that sets out the rules member should abide by.

Your 'Declaration of Acceptance of Office' requires you to abide by the Code of Conduct and you are legally obliged to register your interests within 28 days of taking office. This will mean giving details of any property you own, employment or business interests or other groups you belong to (these details will be open to the public inspection). Areas covered by the Code of Conduct include councillors not abusing their position and not misusing their authority's resources. Councillors are bound by the code whenever they are conducting council business or representing the council. You can breach the code if at any time you act in a way that brings the authority into disrepute or if you use your position to improperly secure for yourself or any person an advantage or disadvantage.

(The Coalition Government has proposed to introduce changes to the standards regime and ethical framework as it applies to Councillors and you should check for details)

## Training

There will be a programme of induction for all councillors after the elections. As well as this the Council will continue to support councillors' development needs during their term of office.

A continuing programme of training and development will be available. Councillors may also attend specific conferences and seminars that are relevant to their areas of work.

Councillor support is provided by the Democratic Services team. Part of this team's role is to provide support to councillors in their representational role and to be a point of contact, providing information and maintaining effective channels of communication between officers and councillors.

## Support

As a councillor you will rely heavily on council officers to provide you with information on both general and specific matters. You are most likely to turn to officers when you need information in relation to a constituent's enquiry, but they will also provide administrative support in relation to any committees that you sit on.

There is a Members' Room for your use with computer and telephone facilities.

## Methods of Working and IT Requirements

The Council increasingly relies on information technology and electronic means of communication both internally within the organization and in the delivery of services with public. Councillors will be expected to play a full role in this way of working and the public increasingly expect to be able to contact their local representatives via e-mail.

All Councillors will therefore be expected to provide themselves with a suitable PC or laptop and a home internet connection (preferably broadband). The cost of this can be met from the Councillors' Basic Allowance (see later). The Council will provide all Councillors with an individual e-mail address which is to be used for all Council business and which will be published as the Council's website. Councillors will also be provided with access to relevant Council IT systems and electronic information.

## The time commitment

Before making your final decision about whether you want to become a councillor you should find

# what to expect if you are elected

out the typical pattern of meetings at the council to see whether they could be accommodated into your lifestyle. It is worth speaking to someone who is already a councillor for advice on this. Details of all meetings can be found on the Council's website.

Remember that in a sense you will become public property – your name and address will be available to the public. The amount of your time taken up with council business will depend on the extent of your involvement, your political activities and what role you take on the council. Most councillors serve on at least two committees as well as the full council. Also bear in mind preparation time for meetings; agendas and papers will be sent to you in advance.

As a member of the council you will be expected to attend meetings. There will also be workshops, briefings and occasional training seminars which you will be invited to attend with officers and other councillors.

Outside the council meeting, your representative role will involve you making yourself available to the electorate. As previously mentioned there are various ways you can do this such as holding ward surgeries. The people of your ward will expect you to lead local projects to improve and protect your area. You will also be expected to have regular contact with the Parish and Town Councils operating within your ward.

An understanding employer is a definite advantage, and you may be entitled to some time off under Section 50 of the Employment Rights Act (1996). If you are self-employed ensure that your business can allow you time for council duties.

There is no fixed time that you are expected to spend on council business – the time spent preparing for and attending meetings, dealing with casework etc will be anything from a few hours each week to a few hours each day. Some periods will be less busy than others, for example meetings are scaled down during the summer. As a rough guide, it has been estimated that councillors spend an average of 16 hours a week on council business.

Although the time commitment may appear to be daunting, the key thing to remember is that the vast majority of councillors are volunteers who do manage to juggle their role as a local representative with the competing demands of family, work and other commitments. Where necessary the Council will also pay towards child care and the cost of looking after dependent relatives while you attend Council meetings (see below).

## The financial cost

Councillors do not get a salary for the work they do. It is regarded as voluntary and therefore councillors are paid an allowance which is designed to reimburse costs incurred doing council business.

While allowances for councillors vary from council to council, you should not be left out of pocket. Allowances are agreed by each council independently and are then approved by an independent assessment process.

Each councillor is entitled to a basic allowance (currently £4,200, which is subject to tax) and this is paid in monthly instalments. It is designed to cover your costs such as travel to and from meetings, dealing with your casework and administration costs.

You can also claim for travel and subsistence allowances when you represent the council at external meetings or special conferences. In addition, there is also a child care and dependents' carers' allowance for attendance at meetings payable on production of receipts, up to an agreed maximum cost per hour.

The council will also provide a special responsibility allowance to those who undertake additional duties such as Leader of the Council, portfolio holders, overview & scrutiny chairs and opposition leaders.

# conclusion

Being a councillor allows you to pursue your political beliefs and contribute to your community. It can be a career enhancing activity, allowing you to develop leadership and analytical skills and to obtain practical, managerial work experience. Working in local government can also be a good stepping stone if you desire to further your career in politics; many MP's began their political careers as councillors.

Becoming a councillor is an important achievement. Most councillors enjoy the fact that they have the opportunity to take decisions that will improve the quality of life in their local community. Having the opportunity to represent constituents and speak and act on their behalf is a unique privilege.

If you require this document in large print, Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call the Customer Service Centre on 01684 862151

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