



Becoming a  
**Councillor**



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# How to become a Councillor

## **Are you interested in becoming a Councillor?**

Becoming a Councillor means standing for a ward in these elections, playing a role in providing services within the Tunbridge Wells Borough, and speaking on behalf of the community.

This leaflet will help you decide if you want to stand for public office, explain what's involved and introduce you to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in more detail.

## Can anyone become a Councillor?

**To become a Councillor you must be:**

- aged 18 or over (there is no maximum age limit)
- a British, Commonwealth or European citizen
- on the local electoral register (or have lived, worked or owned a property in the borough for at least one year)

You must also have the support of ten registered electors from the ward to complete your nomination papers.

## Why become a Councillor?

**People stand for election for all sorts of reasons including to:**

- speak on behalf of, and help their local communities
- pursue their political beliefs
- contribute business or professional skills
- shape the future of their community
- enjoy active involvement in their community
- help improve the quality of life in their area

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Councillors play a vital role in shaping and directing the effectiveness of local services. They work with the police, health and other public bodies, as well as the private sector, in order to achieve those aims.

## What's involved in becoming a Councillor?

There are three main areas of work

### **1 Representing people in your area**

People will come to you with problems and ask for your assistance, for example with a contentious planning application or problems with noisy neighbours. Groups and organisations will also expect your help, for example getting financial support for a new sports initiative. These issues may not always be related to the Council's area of activity.



## 2 Community leadership

The government is keen to encourage Councillors to take on the role of community leaders. This involves working with groups and organisations in your ward and the wider area. Such groups could include the police and health services to ensure that local efforts to improve the well-being of people in the borough are coordinated and effective.

You will undertake this role on behalf of your constituents.

## 3 Policy making

All Councillors are involved in decision-making. Councillors, as Members of Council and various committees, meet with other Councillors and groups to debate and approve Council business. Most meetings are open to the press and public. Councillors can influence local policies through:

- their role on Full Council (and for some, their role on the Cabinet)
- their role on committees (scrutinising work of the Cabinet and recommending policy developments)
- as members of management boards, of voluntary bodies and school governors
- as members of partnership boards
- as members of political groups (meeting separately from Council meetings)
- undertaking casework

As a Councillor, you will need to explain to your community why the Council has undertaken certain courses of action; this is often referred to as political accountability.

## What about political membership?

Councillors don't have to be a member of a political group, although in practice most are. This is entirely your choice. If you wish to stand as an Independent, you may submit your nomination papers directly to the Council's Returning Officer.

However, if you wish to stand under any form of political grouping, you should contact a representative of that group.

## How is Tunbridge Wells Borough Council made up politically?

Details on the political make-up of the Council can be found on the Council's website [www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk](http://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk) or are available from the contacts at the end of this booklet.

## Can I get time off from 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 on your responsibilities as a Councillor and the effect of your absence on your employer's business. You should discuss this with your employer before making a commitment.

## How much time am I expected to commit?

The time commitment varies depending on the number of committees you serve on, and whether or not you become a chairman or vice-chairman of a committee or advisory panel.

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You will receive a large volume of paperwork to read on issues for discussion at Council meetings. This is to keep you involved in the process and to provide an opportunity for you to contribute on behalf of your constituents.

As a Councillor, you are likely to have to deal with constituents' enquiries at home.

An average minimum time commitment of around six to eight hours per week is likely. You are required to attend regular meetings of the committees that you are a member of.

Councillors must attend a meeting at least every six months or be disqualified.



## How long could I be in office for?

Councillors serve a four-year term. If you are elected at a by-election within this four-year term, you serve for the remainder of that period of office.

## How does the Council work?

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council affects the daily lives of over 100,000 residents and businesses.

The Council employs around 400 people headed up by the Chief Executive. Council officers are employed to advise the Council, carry out its decisions, and oversee the statutory requirements of central government.

The Council provides a wide range of services, from waste collection to economic development, from tourism to street cleansing, etc.

Each year the Councillors elect a Mayor from among themselves. The Mayor is the civic head and represents the Council at events throughout the borough, regionally and nationally.

Each Councillor represents a particular area, known as a ward, but also has responsibilities for the whole of the Tunbridge Wells borough. There are 20 wards.

## The Cabinet Councillor

Key roles for these members are:

### Strategic leadership

Councillors with Cabinet responsibilities or portfolios act as strategic leaders for their Council. They lead an area(s) of work, including for example, partnership working or policy development and implementation.

### Strategic management

Councillors with Cabinet responsibilities are responsible for working closely with chief officers and senior managers to monitor and coordinate the implementation of council policy and decisions. This requires considerable time and a need to respond to situations as they arise. Overseeing budgets and forward planning are also key elements of this role.

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## The Non-Cabinet Councillor

Most Councillors have a non-Cabinet role.

Specific roles for non-Cabinet members include:

### Overview and Scrutiny

Non-cabinet Councillors have a role in overseeing and scrutinising how Cabinet members of a Council lead the Council, in particular through membership of the Council's Scrutiny Select Committees. This requires reviewing policy development and implementation, contributing to that process and monitoring the outcome.

Holding Councillors with Cabinet responsibilities to account is an important role and central to ensuring checks and balances are in place under the modernised Council decision-making structures.

### They can:

- make recommendations on the Council's policies and budget
- set up small 'task and finish' groups or help scrutinise specific areas
- 'call in' decisions made by the Cabinet (but not yet implemented)
- make recommendations to the Cabinet on whether decisions made are appropriate, or need reconsidering

### Regulatory

The Cabinet process largely replaces the system of decision-making by committees.

However, committees reflecting the political membership of the Council continue to exist to look at 'quasi-judicial' decisions. These are planning and licensing decisions, such as granting planning permission, licensing certain premises, licensing taxis, and so on.

## Ethics

An integral part of becoming a Councillor is a commitment to high ethical standards to maintain the public trust and moral authority of the Council. It is therefore a requirement of every Council in England and Wales to have a Standards Committee to ensure good ethical governance. The Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Standards Committee is responsible for ethical governance matters both amongst Members of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council itself and the fifteen Town/Parish Councils within the Borough. The Standards Committee is comprised of Borough Councillors, Town/Parish Councillors and Independent Appointed Members.

The Borough Council and Town/Parish Councils are required to adopt a Code of Conduct for Members. The Standards Committee is responsible for dealing with allegations that a Member has breached the Code of Conduct. Most allegations are dealt with by the Standards Committee itself, although in certain circumstances the Standards Committee will refer the case to Standards for England. Further information about the role of the Standards Committee can be found on the Council's website.

## Will I receive any payments?

Yes. The Council has an Allowances Scheme consisting of a:

- basic allowance paid to all Councillors
- IT allowance
- travel and subsistence allowance
- a special responsibility allowance paid to Councillors who hold the Chairmanship and Vice-Chairmanship of certain committees and sub-committees

## Do I have to sign any undertakings?

Yes. When you become a Councillor you are expected to sign to say you undertake to observe the Code of Conduct expected of members, and you will need to complete a register of interests, including financial and personal interests.

Council officers are employed to advise on and carry out the decisions of Councillors.

## What support will I get from Council officers?

Council officers are employed to advise on and to carry out the decisions of Councillors. They are committed to help you fulfil your duties as a Councillor and are able to offer advice or support on any issue. If you are a member of a political group, or other group, support and assistance will also come from other members of your group.



## Can I get help with my paperwork?

### **At Tunbridge Wells we offer Councillors support in various ways:**

- helping with enquiries and complaints from your constituents
- dealing with Councillors' enquiries
- providing Council stationery and business cards
- booking external meetings/seminars and making the necessary travel arrangements
- administering members' allowances

You will be offered help with purchasing a PC and printer for use at home with e-mail and internet access. You will have access to a members' room and meeting rooms.

## Will I need to work at home?

You are required to work at home reading your papers, preparing for meetings and dealing with enquiries from the public. As already mentioned, all Councillors purchase a PC, look at reports online and respond to e-mails from their constituents.

## Will I receive any form of training?

Induction seminars aimed at providing you with the necessary information to begin your role are held after elections. These cover the Council's basic functions, the decision-making system, local government finance, and also introductions to directors and their services.

In addition, every Councillor is given the opportunity to receive training. Some training will be required for all members in matters such as the Code of Conduct. Other training will be required if you take on a particular responsibility such as a member of a planning or licensing committee. Training in a range of skills aimed at helping you develop your role is available to you if you wish. And lastly, member briefings take place every two months on topics of interest.

## What are the next steps?

The formal election process begins with the publication of the Notice of Election in March each year. After this, you can formally register your intention to stand for election by submitting your nomination papers.

The Elections for the Tunbridge Wells Borough take place on the first Thursday in May. A third of the Council is elected in three years out of four. Nomination papers enable you to provide a description of yourself. Normally, this would indicate any membership of a political party or whether you are standing as an independent.

## Nomination papers

### **These are available from:**

Electoral Services  
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Royal Tunbridge Wells  
Kent TN1 1RS

Phone: 01892 554106  
e-mail: [nicky.timms@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:nicky.timms@tunbridgewells.gov.uk)

If you have any questions about the contents of this booklet please contact:

## Member Support

Mike McGeary  
Democratic Services Manager  
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Phone: 01892 554179  
e-mail: [mike.mcgeary@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:mike.mcgeary@tunbridgewells.gov.uk)

ELECTIONS  
Nicola Timms  
Elections Team Manager  
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Phone: 01892 554106  
e-mail: [nicky.timms@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:nicky.timms@tunbridgewells.gov.uk)

## How to become a Councillor



If you require this information in large print,  
on audiotape or in any other format, please contact us  
on **01892 526121**.

This is an adaptation from the original design and content of 'becoming a Councillor' published  
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