

MAKE A DIFFERENCE, BE A COUNCILLOR

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Improving access to local government elected
office for disabled people

For more information about how to become a councillor or to find out more about the role, visit: www.beacouncillor.org.uk

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Being a councillor is all about giving back to your community, bringing your energy and passion and working hard to make a real difference – to local people and to wider society. A key role of a councillor is to represent their local community. Councillors are committed to raising awareness of issues and promoting the best interests of their local area. This is why councillors must be representative of their neighbourhoods and communities.

The Local Government Association (LGA) Councillor Census found that disabled people are consistently underrepresented on councils. In 2018 a record number of councillors declared a disability or long-term impairment – 16.1 per cent. Between 2004 and 2013 the proportion varied from 10.9 per cent to 14.1 per cent. This is despite just over 20 per cent of the population as a whole having a limiting long-term illness, condition or impairment. Further statistics can be found in the [2018 Councillor Census](#).

This guide aims to provide information to help you consider becoming a councillor. It covers key areas such as the role and expectations of councillors, how to become a councillor and the impact you can have as a councillor.

We have developed this guide with the help of disabled councillors to share their experiences.



WHAT DOES A COUNCIL DO?

Councils are involved in three main areas:

- representing the voice of the local community
- delivering services to meet the needs of local people
- improving the quality of life and wellbeing of the community.

Councils are vitally important for our communities, striving for improvement and innovation and working in partnership with other organisations and across boundaries for the greater good.

All councils work hard to improve the community's wellbeing and provide services that meet local needs. Councils are large organisations that play a big part in the local economy and affect the lives of people who live and work there. Councils vary in their structure, style, political leadership, and approach to service delivery. It's an inspiring and interesting place to be with a broad range of services, from nature and the environment, to social care and sports, and from education to procurement. You can make a difference to people, communities and wider society in many different ways.

The way councils work depends on what type of council they are. In England there are several types of council: district, borough, county, metropolitan and unitary councils. They are often referred to as local authorities. The council is led by democratically elected councillors who set the vision and direction of the council. Councillors take a strategic view of the needs of their community and help make plans and policies to achieve those goals. These are then implemented by the council officers through various departments. All councils have specific ways they work and make decisions on behalf of their local communities.

Most councils run in a similar way to central government, with a cabinet system. However, there are many councils which instead have a committee system or a mayoral system. No one system is intrinsically better than another and any can be effective in its democracy, accountability and working in the interests of local people. The council and local services are mainly funded by payments from central government to councils and the collection of council tax – although council tax makes up only about a quarter of a council's budget. In recent years, the role of councils has come to include wider responsibilities, for example improving health and wellbeing through collaboration with public health services. They also work with a variety of stakeholders and partners, for example the police and community groups to deliver community safety and crime reduction.

What services does the council provide?

Councils run more than 800 services (depending on the type of council). Many are visible to everyone but some you may only know about if you come into direct contact with them. Examples include:

- education and lifelong learning
- social services and health
- housing and regeneration
- refuse and recycling management
- roads and street lighting
- arts, sports and culture
- nature and the environment
- planning and regulation
- tackling inequality and building cohesive communities
- transportation
- events and festivals
- public toilets
- burial grounds
- economic and community development
- traffic calming measures
- youth projects
- leisure and recreation services
- fire and rescue services
- parks and playgrounds
- street cleaning
- community safety and crime reduction measures.

WHAT IS A COUNCILLOR?

Council areas are split into wards. At election time, residents in each ward elect between one and three councillors to represent them on the council. You can stand for election as a member of a political party, or as an independent candidate.

It is important that candidates understand the needs, views, and interests of different groups in the community, such as young people, older people, and marginalised groups, to represent the wide range of interests. This understanding means that once elected, councillors can work effectively with local people and partners to deliver on local priorities.

Councils run on different election cycles so check with your council when the next elections will take place – some elect the whole council once every four years, whilst some elect a third of their councillors each year with a fourth year without any elections. There may also be a by-election if a council seat becomes vacant at another time. All councillors are elected for four years.

Don't be discouraged if the next elections are a long way away – there is plenty to do and learn on the journey to becoming a councillor.

If you are thinking about becoming a councillor it is also important to ensure you have enough time to explore the resources and support available to you throughout the process. It will be helpful to spend some time considering your needs and discussing these in good time with your council, your political party (if you have one), and any organisations that will be able to offer you support. These include the [LGA](#) and organisations who support intersectional under-represented groups seeking elected office such as [Elect Her](#) and [Operation Black Vote](#).

Why do you want to be a councillor?

There are many reasons why you might want to be a councillor. Being a councillor is all about giving back to your community, bringing your energy and passion and working hard to make a real difference – to local people and to wider society. You might be concerned about what is happening in your local community, want to bring about positive change, or have some great ideas of how to enhance the local area:

- making sure people get the right services
- ensuring people's views are heard and considered
- applying your professional skills and life experience
- taking on a varied and highly fulfilling role
- gaining new skills, knowledge and confidence.

WHAT DO COUNCILLORS DO?

Being an effective councillor takes commitment and hard work. There are lots of papers to read and analyse so that you are in a position to vote for or against a proposal. You are not expected to be an expert on everything – you will have a wide range of support from your council and the LGA. There is also scope to specialise in areas where you have skills, commitment and time.

Preparing for council meetings, dealing with casework, holding surgeries and working with council officers to respond to residents' concerns will take up a significant amount of time. If you are considering being a councillor, it is important to discuss this with family and friends and make sure you and they fully understand what you are taking on.

As a councillor, you have the opportunity to help make your community more inclusive and accessible. Some councillors tell us that they notice issues affecting disabled people that a non-disabled councillor might not, whilst others share experiences of being put forward as a diversity or disability champion whilst also having skills or interests in other areas. Councillors have many responsibilities and you will be able to represent the broad views and needs of local people and help with a wide range of issues.

Responsibilities

- attend formal council meetings
- represent the council at external meetings
- familiarise yourself with the agenda and supporting papers, making sure you are prepared and able to take part in discussions and decision making
- develop strategies, policies and plans to promote the interests of your community
- respect other people's views even if you do not agree with them
- comply with the Code of Conduct at all times
- take part in voting and respect decisions made by a simple majority
- scrutiny – reviewing decisions and policies and striving for continual improvements
- represent the views and needs of local people, regardless of their political affiliations, even when they did not vote for you
- help lead, empower and bring the community together
- keep the community informed
- speak on behalf of the community
- casework – helping residents with problems and ideas
- represent your political party if you belong to one.

Being a councillor is a varied and wide-ranging role, and this list is not exhaustive.

In carrying out your role as a councillor, you will be expected to communicate with other members, residents and council officers, keep a record of your work and attend meetings. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, councils were able to meet in a hybrid way which allowed councillors to attend virtually via video conferencing. This temporary provision ceased in April 2021 meaning that councils had to revert to physical meetings from that date. Whilst some meetings are still able to take place remotely, you will need to travel to the council offices for some meetings including full council and committee meetings. Councils differ in the type of flexible and remote provisions available, so please discuss this with your council.

There is a range of support that you can access on the journey to becoming a councillor, for example, knowledge of how local government works and about specific service areas from the LGA, political support from your political party (if you have one) or the LGA's Independent Group, guidance from the Electoral Commission, and confidence-building and networking from organisations such as Elect Her and Operation Black Vote. Once elected, councillors receive training and personal development from councils, political parties or the LGA's Independent Group, and from the LGA's councillor learning and development offer.



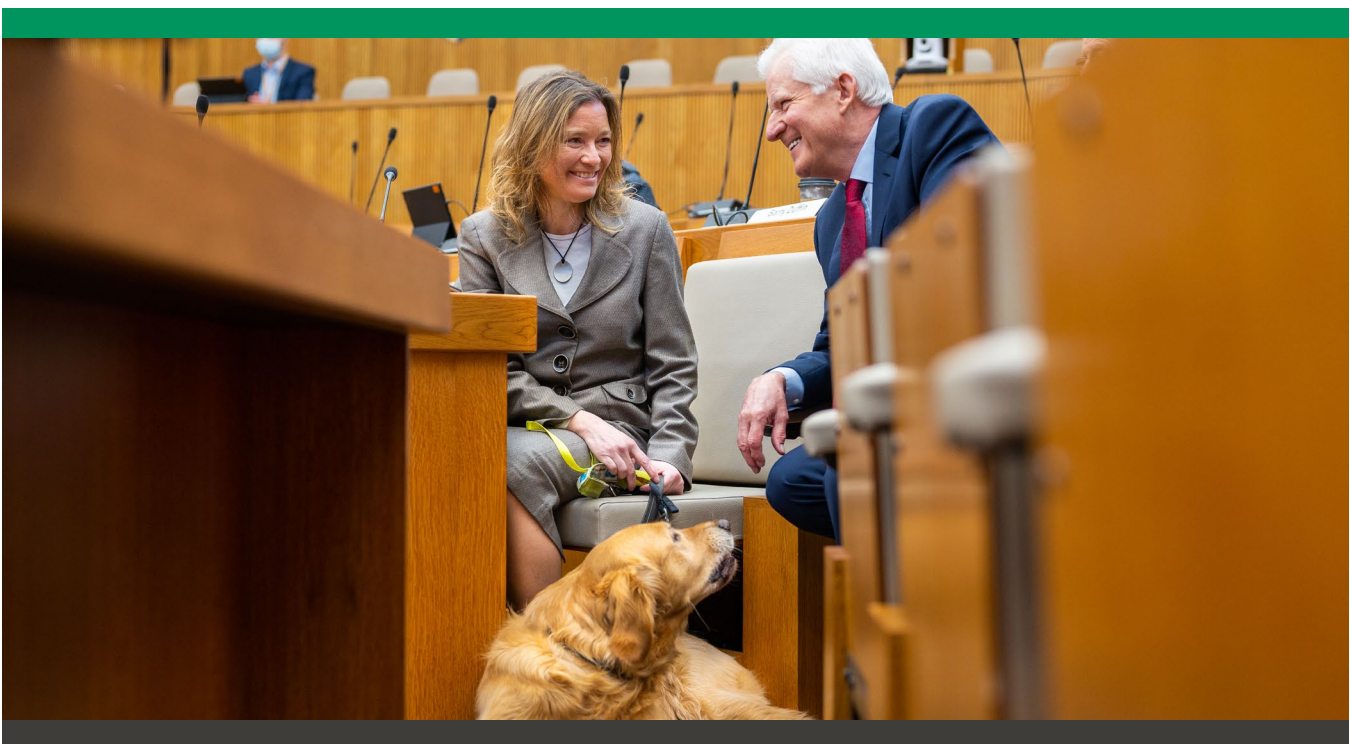
Removing barriers

The Equality Act (2010) prevents discrimination against disabled people, including disabled people who want to participate in political decision-making. You cannot be prevented from becoming a councillor because you are a disabled person. The Act requires political parties and public authorities to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people who contest any political position are not disadvantaged and are able to take part in the same processes and opportunities as non-disabled candidates. Many groups are under-represented in local government, and we know that this means they often face additional barriers. This includes disabled people entering politics and standing for election.

Once elected, your council has a legal duty to make any reasonable adjustments you need to carry out your work as a councillor. Examples of reasonable adjustments include:

- doing things another way, such as allowing someone with social anxiety disorder to have their own desk instead of hot-desking
- making physical changes to the workplace, like installing a ramp for a wheelchair user or an audio-visual fire alarm for a deaf person
- enabling people to work in a suitable area, such as on the ground floor for a wheelchair user if there are no lifts
- changing equipment, for instance providing a special keyboard for someone who has arthritis
- allowing councillors who become disabled to make a phased return to duties, including flexible hours.

You are not responsible for the costs of any reasonable adjustments. You may also be able to receive a grant from [Access to Work](#). For example, this grant can help pay for a sign language interpreter, adaptations to your vehicle so you can carry out your councillor duties or a support worker to help you. Towards the end of this guide we have provided a list of frequently asked questions based on the feedback and first-hand experiences of disabled councillors.



WHO CAN BE A COUNCILLOR?

You do not need any formal qualifications to be a councillor. Your life experience, everyday skills, passion and commitment to people and communities are really valuable, and it's important that councils reflect the local population. There are a number of useful skills to carry out the role but these are also developed through training and experience once elected. Councillors tell us that there is a steep learning curve but that it is worth it for what you can achieve.

However, you do have to meet some legal criteria. On the day of nomination, you must be:

- aged 18 or over
- be a UK, EU or commonwealth citizen and either
 - be registered to vote on the current register with the council
 - or have either worked or lived in the council area for one year
 - be an owner or tenant of any land or premises in the council area for one year.

You cannot stand to be a councillor if:

- you work for your council, or
- you hold a politically restricted post for another authority, or
- you are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order, or
- you have served a prison sentence (including suspended sentences) of three months or more within five years prior to the election, or
- you are a member of the police, armed forces or a judge, or
- you have been disqualified under any legislation relating to corrupt or illegal practices.

For more information you can check the [Electoral Commission website](#)

HOW DO I BECOME A COUNCILLOR?

Unlike parliamentary elections, there is no deposit required to run for council elections. However, you will need to ensure you have submitted the correct documents in advance of the election date.

Regardless of whether you have been selected by a party or are standing as an independent candidate, you will need to be officially nominated before the election. To do this, you will need to submit a nomination paper which details your name, address and political status. In all elections except to the Greater London Authority this paper will also need to be signed by 10 supporters who are registered to vote in the ward you wish to stand. The [rules for nomination as a candidate to the Greater London Authority](#) are slightly different.

You must also give your consent in writing to your nomination. All the necessary documents must be submitted 19 working days before the day of the election.

The process to become a councillor differs between candidates who are members of a political party and those standing as independent candidates.

Standing as a member of a political party

In many cases candidate councillors are also members of a political party. In these cases, your party will have lots of information about:

- the selection process
- campaigning to be elected
- the paperwork that needs to be submitted in order for your name to go on the ballot paper with the logo of your political party.

If you want to be a councillor for a political party but are not yet a member, make sure you get in touch with the party as soon as possible. Some political parties require you to have been a member of the party for a specified period before you are eligible to nominate yourself for election.

You may be required to go through a selection process within the party. Not every prospective candidate is selected and if you are selected it may be for a different ward to the one you live or work in (you can stand in any ward within the council area).

Your party will help you after the election to complete election expenses forms when required to be submitted. You can be allocated party volunteers to help you with campaigning. There is also the benefit of being able to talk to councillors to learn more about the role and gain lots of advice.

Please find contact details for political parties at the end of this guide.

There is guidance of what you need to do on the [Electoral Commission website](#) and specifically for [political party candidates](#).

Standing as an independent

You may decide to stand as an independent candidate and there is a range of support from the LGA's [Independent Group](#) available to you. You can decide which ward you want to stand for and control your own campaign. This means that you will be responsible for working out your views on local issues and services, organising your campaign strategy and the production and distribution of leaflets, and managing your social media presence. You will also be responsible for making sure your nomination papers are correct and submitting them on time, although your council's democratic services will be able to support with this. Please get in touch with the council in good time to discuss the support available. You will also be responsible for submitting your election expenses after the election.

The LGA provides support and briefings for people who want to stand for political parties and independent candidates including:

- filling in the forms
- election timetables
- expenses
- important contact details.

The LGA's Independent Group represents independents, residents' associations, and alternative political parties such as the Green Party by providing a voice at the national level. They also work with the cross-party LGA in ensuring that members' values and interests are represented. For independents, free resources and support are available through the [Campaign Corner](#) or [Be a Councillor](#) resource.

Any candidate (whether from a political party or an independent) can appoint an agent to manage the election campaign and finances. Almost anyone can be an agent but it should be someone you trust and who is capable of carrying out the responsibilities. You can be your own agent and if you do not appoint one, you will automatically become the agent.

There is further guidance on the [Electoral Commission website](#) and specifically for [independent candidates](#).

Campaigning

Campaigning can be extremely enjoyable, but it can also be very tiring, and it is important for candidates to manage their wellbeing. Some disabled councillors have told us they find that they are not able to get as involved in delivering leaflets as they would like but can instead enlist support in delivering these or campaigning in different ways that are accessible. You may for example decide to hold live sessions remotely or run events in a setting that works for you where people can come in larger groups rather than talking to many individuals on their doorsteps. Remember that during elections some public buildings will not be open for political campaigning. Most campaigns focus around key dates such as when the postal vote opens. You'll need to make sure your leaflets have landed before people can vote and not afterwards.

Vote counts

There are effectively two counts in the UK:

- the opening of the postal votes – these results are not declared until all voting has been completed and all votes counted
- the main count.

Typically, the postal vote is opened in a dedicated council room so please make sure that the Democratic Services team and/or the Returning Officer are aware of any accessibility needs in advance.

The main count will take place in a public building which must be accessible but there are often a few doors to navigate to reach the hall where the count takes place. Please inform Democratic Services and/or the Returning Officer of any needs you have. Candidates are not required to attend the count but if you do, be prepared for it to take a long time as they often last late into the night and can resume early the next morning. Ensure you have enough supplies with you and if you have a guide dog please ensure that adequate arrangements have been made for food and water bowls.

Congratulations, you're a councillor!

After being elected as a councillor it isn't unusual for new councillors to feel quite daunted about the tasks at hand and what to do next.

Your council will run induction training sessions and there will be support, training and networking opportunities through the political parties, the LGA Independent Group and the LGA. Support, information and training for new councillors (and ongoing support for councillors of all levels) is available from the LGA.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Everyone will experience the journey to elected office differently depending on political experience, and for disabled people, whether or not you had your access and support needs met (for example, if standing for a political party). Existing disabled councillors have told us about some of the barriers they've faced when standing for election, which we have summarised below:

Will I experience negative attitudes as a disabled councillor?

The councillors we spoke to shared a range of experiences, including some receiving negative or discriminatory attitudes by election opponents or by members of their own party. This is unacceptable and there are a number of ways to report and address such behaviours as set out by [The Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) including your political party if you have one, the council, the police, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Councillors tell us they have found that these questions become less frequent once they are elected.

The councillors we spoke to had a range of experiences of party and council responses to making reasonable adjustments. In some cases, they responded very quickly to the needs of new councillors. In others, the councillor found it a challenge to be provided with adjustments as simple as larger print documents. Councillors told us that the more experience the council and political parties had with making reasonable adjustments, the more responsive they were to do so. The Equality Act (2010) requires political parties and public authorities to anticipate and proactively meet people's needs in an inclusive way. Political parties do produce guides for disabled candidates which can be found on political party websites. Councils are also supported by the LGA and others to address barriers and anticipate needs, building these approaches into everyday working practices and culture.

Will campaigning for election and working at the council be accessible?

The Equality Act means that reasonable adjustments will be made for you at campaign events and when performing council duties.

When you are elected, your council should be accessible and make the equipment you need available. Some councillors told us that they had needed to take the initiative in starting this conversation, although councils should be proactive in discussing needs and reasonable adjustments and this should form part of the councillor induction process that takes place soon after an election.

Councils and the LGA offer induction training and resources to support new councillors and at councils, this includes conversations to identify and meet access needs and make reasonable adjustments. Councillors tell us that there is a steep learning curve but that it is worth it to deliver real improvements in the community.

You are not responsible for the costs of any reasonable adjustments. You may also be able to receive a grant such as [Access to Work](#) to pay for things like a sign language interpreter, adapting your vehicle so you can carry out your councillor duties, or a support worker.

How much time will I need to spend on being a councillor?

Whilst councillors can find the time commitment of the role challenging, they also report that it is a highly fulfilling way to give back to the community and ensure the quality of life and wellbeing of local people. For disabled councillors, there can be additional considerations to factor into daily life as a councillor.

Around 22 per cent of councillors spend 10 hours or less on council business. On average, councillors spend 22 hours a week on council business and 18 per cent spend over 30 hours a week on council business. However, this is completely dependent on the level of role – cabinet members or leaders will spend much more time on council business but will also receive higher financial compensation (called an ‘allowance’). Further statistics can be found in the [2018 Councillor Census](#).

Being an effective councillor requires commitment and hard work but the role can be done flexibly around other commitments. How much time you spend on your duties as a councillor is largely up to you and will depend on the roles and commitments each councillor takes up. You may want to consider how you would divide your time on a daily, weekly or monthly basis as well as consider practicality such as travel, any orientation and familiarisation required, or planning tasks in a way that manages energy and wellbeing. You may wish to discuss it with your family and friends to consider how to balance everything and gain their support in spending some of your spare time on council business.

By law, if you are working, 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 given will depend on your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer’s business. You should also discuss with your employer before making the commitment to stand for election.



Will there be support for me to campaign and do the job once elected?

Political parties generate funding for election campaigns. If you are standing as a member of a party, you should discuss the additional resources you might need with them. Remember that all elections have spending limits and money that comes from your party and donors will contribute to this limit.

If you are standing as an independent candidate, you can access advice and support from the LGA's Independent Group. You will be responsible for working out your views on local issues and services, organising your campaign strategy and the production and distribution of leaflets, and managing your social media presence. You will also be responsible for making sure your nomination papers are correct and submitting them on time, although your council's democratic services will be able to support with this.

Unlike parliamentary elections, there is no deposit required to run for council elections. There have in the past been government grants available to all disabled candidates to support campaigning for elected office. You should check with your council's democratic services and the LGA to see if similar grants have become available. You may also want to explore other organisations who help underrepresented people campaign for elected office such as [Elect Her](#) and [Operation Black Vote](#).

Will I be paid for becoming a councillor?

Being a councillor is not an ordinary job and does not pay a typical salary. To acknowledge the commitment made and cover costs on council business, councillors receive compensation called an 'allowance' as well as expenses. All councillors are entitled to a basic allowance. Those with additional roles may also receive a special responsibility allowance (SRA) which reflects the level of responsibility and expected time commitment. These roles can include being a member of the cabinet, chairing a scrutiny committee or being the leader of the council. Allowances are set by the council on the recommendation of an independent remuneration panel. Councils may also cover the cost of childcare or dependent care, along with travel and subsistence. You can find out the allowance amount in your area is by searching for 'councillor allowances' on your council's website.

Remember that seats on cabinets, committees and panels will reflect the political makeup of the council. If your party has won the most seats you are more likely to be appointed to the special responsibility roles.

Expenses cover a range of costs that a councillor incurs when performing their duties. They can include travel, subsistence and the cost of a carer for someone who is dependent on you while you are performing your duties as a councillor.

Although being a councillor does not provide an ordinary salary, the allowances you receive do qualify as an income for tax and benefits purposes. However, grants you receive such as Access to Work are not affected by how much you receive and are not taxable income.

A summary of allowances that are taxable as earnings is available from [the HMRC](#).

What is the work and life balance?

Councillors tell us that the role requires commitment, hard work and good time management; that no two days are the same; and that it can be challenging with a steep learning curve – but that ultimately, it is highly fulfilling with everything that one can achieve for the local area and wider society.

The time commitment depends on the exact duties each councillor takes on, but the role can be done flexibly. More information on the hours worked by councillors can be found on page 16 of this guide.

You will be expected to attend council meetings, information briefings and training sessions, held during the day or evening, depending on the council. There may be meetings with council officers and residents you represent, which are more likely to take place during the day. You will receive many emails, letters and phone calls from residents, businesses, and council officers. You will also need to read reports and other council documents and sometimes papers from central government in preparation for meetings. If you are appointed to the cabinet or any committees then these will add to your workload. It is important to factor in how long these tasks will take you and how to fit these into your daily routine. As mentioned earlier in this guide, reasonable adjustments can be made to make these duties and activities as accessible as possible.

While the role is demanding, all the councillors who contributed to this guide were clear that they found the work very fulfilling and had time for a personal life. This is particularly the case following the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, as many councils now provide more flexible, remote and hybrid working options for councillors. The temporary provision for remote council meetings ceased in April 2021, meaning that some council meetings are required to be held in person including full council and committee meetings. However, some other meetings that would have taken place in council buildings can be done remotely, allowing councillors to balance their duties with home life, improve accessibility and save on travel time. Councils differ in the type of flexible and remote provisions available, so please discuss this with your council.

Will being a councillor affect my benefits and taxes?

Councillors do not receive a salary but receive an income from their allowances. There are two types of allowances for councillors:

1. A basic allowance for all councillors.
2. A special responsibility allowance for councillors who have additional duties such as being a member of the cabinet or chairing a committee.

As an income, these allowances are subject to tax and can affect any means tested benefits you currently receive like Universal Credit and Employment Support Allowance. The grants you receive to help you in an election or to carry out your work as a councillor do not count as an income and so are not taxed and will not affect your benefits.

Benefits that are not means tested, such as Personal Independence Payments or Disability Living Allowance, are not affected by your allowances as a councillor. However, it is very important you make sure the work you do as a councillor does not contradict the basis on which you receive those benefits.

To help you work out how a councillor's allowances will affect your means tested benefits, Citizens' Advice recommends the online benefits calculator '[entitled to](#)'.

FURTHER INFORMATION

To learn more about becoming a councillor, you can contact beacouncillor@local.gov.uk or the Local Government Association's political offices.

LGA Conservative Group

lgaconservatives@local.gov.uk

020 7664 3264

LGA Independent Group

independent.groupLGA@local.gov.uk

020 7664 3206

LGA Labour Group

martin.angus@local.gov.uk

020 7664 3134

LGA Liberal Democrat Group

terry.stacy@local.gov.uk 020 7664 3235

rob.banks@local.gov.uk 020 7664 3204

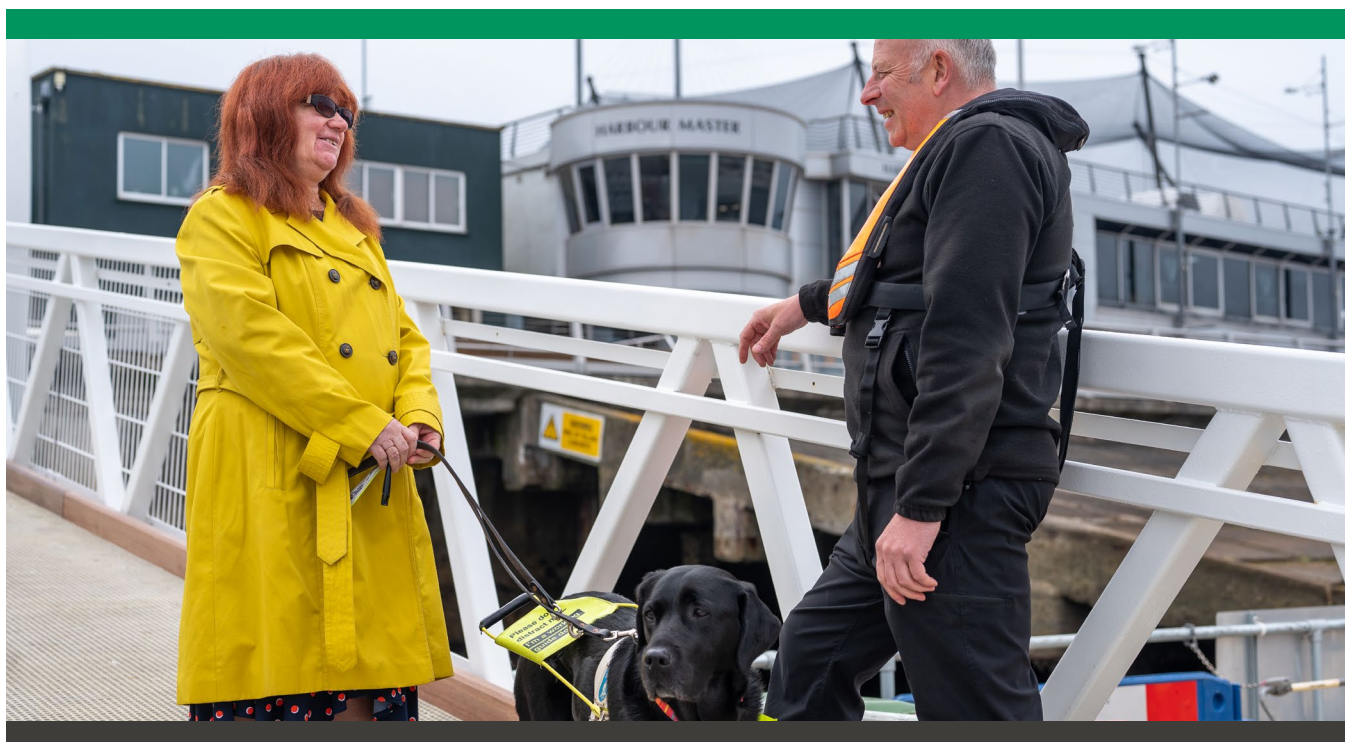
skype: lgalibdems

There is a wide range of support relating to life as a councillor such as frequently asked questions and resources on the following websites:

Be A Councillor

The Electoral Commission

The Local Government Association





Local Government Association

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