



How to become a Councillor

Are you interested in becoming a Councillor?

Becoming a Councillor means that you will be responsible for speaking up for and representing your local community, and will work on behalf of that community to make it a better place.

This leaflet will help you decide if becoming a Councillor would be right for you, and explain how the process of standing for election works.

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 people in the area you want to represent (who are also on the electoral register), and they will need to sign your nomination papers before you make your application.

Why become a Councillor?

Councillor Ben Chapelard:

I became a Councillor by accident. Almost two years ago when I moaned to my local councillor about parking issues his response was 'why don't you do something about it?' Well,



what could I say!? So here I am representing St James' Ward where I live and I haven't looked back since!

It has been a great experience in many different ways. I've been lucky to meet so many interesting new people. I have also enjoyed trying to get my head around some (complex) local issues. Helping people with their problems can be very rewarding. Issues such as speeding and poor street lighting may seem trivial to an outsider but they really matter to locals. Not being a political animal, it has been a steep learning curve but I have tried to contribute lots of enthusiasm and fresh thinking.

I'm a full-time teacher and father to a lively toddler but am lucky to have a very supportive family. Life can be pretty manic but I wouldn't have it any other way!

Give being a Councillor some thought. If you have read this far then we need people like you! You don't have to aspire to be Prime Minister or even an MP to get involved and make a difference!

Councillor Nicholas Rogers:

I have always loved Tunbridge Wells. It's a fantastic place to live with so much to offer. Having been born and brought up here, I felt that I wanted to put something back in to the community and to play my part in making Tunbridge Wells the best it can be.

Being a Borough Councillor is a great way to make a difference. Apart from being able to help any of my residents with local issues, I am also able to have a say in the future direction of Tunbridge Wells. The



first six months or so are quite daunting because of the range of things its possible to become involved with, but I soon saw this as an opportunity to make my mark.

I work full time, with a demanding job in the transport industry, and the balance between work, council and home can be a challenge. It's tough to have to let anyone down but with careful time management it is more than possible to get the best of all worlds. I love being a Councillor and am looking forward to what the next few years bring.

Councillor Victor Webb

'I became a Councillor to take the concerns of ordinary people into the Council Chamber and to protect the interests of our local communities and our nation through good governance.



I have lived in Tunbridge Wells all my life and my children were educated at local schools. I want to see a better future for all and the voices of ordinary people to be heard. Most

of all I want my children to be able to say who governs them and how, and I will do my best through my term of office to see that this comes about.

National policies and even international policies have a great impact on how local authorities operate and impact their financial policies.

By profession I am a Law Costs Draftsman and have a very wide experience of our legal system and process. This helps me to deal with people's problems and concerns.'

What's involved in becoming a Councillor?



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, but they will always relate to the development of your local area, and as a Councillor you'll have the ability and authority to do something about it.

Community leadership

Councillors are community leaders. They work closely with their communities, on behalf of their communities, and for the benefit of the whole community. Working with other organisations is a big part of this, and leaders from groups such as the council, the police and health services often work together to ensure that local efforts improve the well-being of people in the borough and are coordinated and effective.

Making decisions

All Councillors are involved in making decisions. Councillors regularly meet with other Councillors, local groups and organisations to debate each decision, and find the best solution for the area. Nearly all meetings are open to the press and public, and Councillors have a responsibility to get their communities



involved with the decision-making process. As a Councillor, you will need to explain to your community why the Council has made these decisions.

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.

Those people who don't want to represent a political group stand as an 'independent Member'. If you want to stand as an Independent Member you'll be responsible for completing the nomination papers yourself and sending them in to the Council by the cut off date.

However, if you want to stand for a political party, your first step would be to contact the local representative, who will then talk you through the process.

How is Tunbridge Wells Borough Council made up politically?

The Council is elected by thirds, which means that a third of the council is elected in three years out of four, with no elections taking place on the fourth year. As such, the Council's political make-up can change annually. Details on the current political make-up of the Council can be found on the Council's website www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk or are available from the contacts at the end of this booklet.

Can I get time off from work to be a Councillor?

Yes.

If you are working, by law your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to do Council work. 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 take on more roles and responsibilities such as Chairman of a Committee once you become a Councillor.

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.



You will need to do a certain amount of work at home, and be able to respond to requests for help, advice and information in your own time.

An average time commitment of around six to eight hours per week is likely, but this can vary greatly depending on a number of things. You are required to attend regular meetings of the committees that you are a member of.

Councillors must attend one meeting at least every six months, or they will be disqualified.

How long could I be a Councillor for?

Councillors serve a four-year term of office. If you wish to stand again and get re-elected you will serve another four-year term. There is no limit to the amount of times you can stand for election.

How does the Council work?

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council affects the daily lives of over 100,000 residents and works on behalf of businesses and organisations in the area.

It employs around 400 people known as officers, and they are employed to give professional advice to Councillors, carry out their decisions, and oversee the statutory requirements of central government. So if you become a Councillor, you won't be doing it on your own!

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

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 their local area, known as a ward, but also has responsibilities for the whole of the Borough of Tunbridge Wells.

The Cabinet Councillor

Some Councillors are chosen to take an executive lead on decision making within the Council. 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 partnership working or policy development and implementation.

Strategic management

Cabinet Councillors are responsible for working closely with chief officers and senior managers to monitor and coordinate the implementation of Council policies 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.



The Non-Cabinet Councillor

Most Councillors are not Cabinet Councillors, and have other roles to play. These roles for the Borough Council include:

Overview and Scrutiny

Non-Cabinet Councillors are responsible for overseeing and scrutinising how Cabinet members lead the Council. 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.

Scrutiny involves:

- *make recommendations on the Council's policies and budget*
- *set up small 'task and finish' groups or help scrutinise specific areas*
- *examine decisions made by the executive leadership*
- *make recommendations to the leadership on whether decisions made are appropriate, or need reconsidering.*



Regulatory

Other committees perform work known as 'regulatory' work, where the Council is acting in a 'quasi-judicial' manner. This means they are making legally binding decisions on matters such as planning and licensing, and it is the Councillor's role on these committees to determine, according to Council policies and central government legislation, whether an application should be approved or refused.



Ethics

An integral part of becoming a Councillor is a commitment to high ethical standards. This is in order to maintain public trust in the Council and the decisions it makes. Councillors are required to be fair, open and honest in all of their work on behalf of the Council.

The Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has a Standards Committee, which is responsible for overseeing ethical matters relating to the Council, and for assessing complaints made against members of the Council. The Council maintains a Code of Conduct and this is used to assess whether a Councillor is acting in an appropriate manner or not. 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*
- *a travel and subsistence allowance*
- *a special responsibility allowance paid to Councillors who hold the Chairmanship and Vice-Chairmanship of certain committees and sub-committees. More information on how Councillors are remunerated can be found at www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk*

Do I have to sign any undertakings?

Yes.

When you become a Councillor you will need to sign a Declaration of Acceptance of Office, and agree that you will undertake to observe the Code of Conduct expected of members. A Register of Interests, which details your financial and personal interests and is open to public inspection, also needs to be included.

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 and you will have access to a Members suite at the Town Hall, which includes a computer room, library and formal meeting room.

Will I need to work at home?

Yes. You are required to work at home reading your papers, preparing for meetings and dealing with enquiries from the public. All Councillors work via a computer and through emails/internet. Some Councillors purchase a specific PC or laptop for this, using their allowance.

Will I receive any form of training?

Yes.

When you become a Councillor induction seminars are given aimed at providing you with the necessary information to begin your role. 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 skills and subject based training. Some training is mandatory. Other training is advisable if you take on a specific role or responsibility. 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 current issues and 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. The elections for the Borough of Tunbridge Wells normally take place on the first Thursday in May. After the Notice of Election you can submit your nomination papers and formally register your intention to stand for election.

These nomination papers enable you to provide a description of yourself, and will indicate any membership of a political party, or whether you are standing as an independent Councillor.

Nomination papers are available from:

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

Phone: 01892 554106 e-mail: electoral.registrations@tunbridgewells.gov.uk

If you have any further queries on the role of a Councillor, or how to stand for election, please contact the Local Democracy Officer, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Town Hall, Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 1RS.

Phone: 01892 554179 e-mail: electoral.registrations@tunbridgewells.gov.uk

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

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