

# Be a Councillor 2012

Candidates Guide: Welsh Local Elections 2012



WLGA • CLILC

July 2011



# Contact

## Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)

The Welsh Local Government Association ([WLGA](http://www.wlga.gov.uk)) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, with the 4 police authorities, 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities as associate members. It promotes better local government, its reputation and to support authorities in the development of policies and priorities which will improve public services and democracy.

The WLGA is a political, representative organisation, with all 22 councils playing a full and active role, with key activities conducted by and mandate provided through the 22 Leaders and 79 WLGA Council members. Further useful information is available on our website [www.wlga.gov.uk](http://www.wlga.gov.uk)

### WLGA

Local Government House  
Drake Walk  
Cardiff  
CF10 4LG

Tel: 029 20 46 8678  
Fax: 029 2046 8601

**Published:** July 2011

**Copyright:** WLGA

**ISBN:** 978-1-906423-55-1

Electoral regulations and procedures guidance is available from the Electoral Commission [www.electoralcommission.gov.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk).

The Welsh Government has contributed funding to the production of this Guide.

With thanks to the Local Government Leadership Centre (<http://www.localleadership.gov.uk>), which coordinates the 'Be a Councillor' campaign in England.

This publication has been produced by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) for candidates contesting the county and county borough councils elections in May 2012.

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Top tips: A number of 'top tips' have been provided throughout by serving councillors based on their experiences as candidates and councillors.

### Our thanks go to the contributing councillors from:

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, Bridgend County Borough Council, Caerphilly County Borough Council, Carmarthenshire County Council, City & County of Swansea, Conwy County Borough Council, Gwynedd Council, Monmouthshire County Council, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Flintshire County Borough Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.



# 1. Why become a councillor?

If you are reading this guide, the chances are you are already interested in becoming a councillor.

There are many reasons why people decide to stand for election as a councillor, but **the common driving factor** is a desire to help improve people's lives or to put something back into the local community.

For many people, it may be an extension of what they are already doing, whether voluntary work with local community groups, school governing bodies, trade union activity, community councils or through their employment which may involve partnership work with their local council.



Typically, some of the reasons for becoming a councillor include:

- wanting to make a difference and help shape the future of the local community;
- to raise or tackle concerns about particular local issues, such as support for local businesses, the local environment or local community facilities and services;
- representing the views of their neighbours, friends and the wider community or providing a voice to particular under-represented groups;
- following political beliefs or supporting a particular Political Party; and
- developing personal or business skills.



“The most important part of being a member for me is the chance to improve things in my community and make a real difference to resident's lives”

## 2. What do councillors do?

There are a wide range of public perceptions about what councillors do on a day to day basis.

In reality, councillors have to juggle a number of roles and responsibilities and no day is the same. Councillors need to balance the needs and interests of their community, their political party or group (if they are a member) and the council as a whole. Being a councillor takes personal commitment and to do the role effectively requires a significant amount of time, on top of personal and employment commitments. However, **becoming a councillor is a rewarding and privileged form of public service.** You will be in a position to make a difference to the quality of other people's daily lives and prospects.



Councillors are people elected to represent their local community in the running of their local council. As a councillor you would have an important role in the major decisions that affect people's lives. Local councils are responsible for a whole range of services; waste, recycling and environmental services, schools, social services, planning, housing,


benefits, libraries, transport, leisure facilities and many more. As a councillor you will help determine the way these services are provided, funded and prioritised.

Your influence will make a difference to the quality of people's lives and where they live. You will need to balance the best interests of your community or ward residents, the wider borough or county residents, your political party (if you have one), and the council.

All councillors are advocates for their communities and are 'case workers' for their individual constituents when advice or support is requested. Whilst councillors do spend time in council meetings, **much of a councillor's time is spent within their communities speaking and working with members of the public and community groups.**

Councillors' roles in the council vary within the governance structures of the Council. The Council will have a constitution setting out decision-making structures and procedures, terms of reference of internal committees, roles and responsibilities of individual positions of office, standing orders for meetings, codes of conduct and financial regulations.

All councillors are members of the full Council which sets the overall policies and budget. A small number of councillors will form the cabinet or executive board with all other members being active in the overview and scrutiny of the performance of the



Council, other organisations and external bodies. There are regulatory committees which deal with the planning and licensing functions. Councillors are also appointed to external local bodies such as school governing bodies and local partnerships, either as representatives of the Council, as trustees or directors in their own right. Some councillors also sit on police authorities, fire and rescue authorities and, where relevant, national park authorities.



“Inexperience is a virtue as effective challenge can come from the new elected member, you have a fresh approach. Challenge is important and so are politeness and research.”

A common role for all councillors however, irrespective of any formal position or membership of a committee is that of ‘community leadership’. For the individual councillor, being a community leader can mean a number of things. Acting as an advocate for the best interests of one’s ward; lobbying for local concerns; influencing partner organisations to work to a common vision; resolving conflict amongst community organisations; encouraging community organisations to develop solutions in their own communities; balancing competing demands for resources when making decisions in the best interests of the whole authority area.



# A week in the life...

To give you an idea of what it's like to be a councillor here are some real life examples of typical 'weeks in the life' of a councillor:

## **Monday**

Working at home today. Go for a walk around the village and notice that someone has slyly disposed of rubbish on a public footpath. Call into the Memorial Hall where the builder is starting an improvement scheme today (arrange to take photos Friday). Send e-mail to council about the rubbish on the public footpath. Leave home at 6.15pm to travel to a meeting of the Political Group. Give lift to three other councillors. Back home at 10.00pm.

## **Tuesday**

Get up early to do house work. Leave home at 8.45am and notice that rubbish has been left after cutting grass verges of main road. Phone council. Working today so in the Lunch hour, call in to visit the firm that is updating our village website. Back home at 5.00pm – deal with e-mail from constituent about the building site next door to him. Go for a walk to see the site. From 6.00pm onwards – time with family.

## **Wednesday**

Day at the Office and in the evening meeting of village environmental group to discuss running a stall at a festival.

## **Thursday**

No work today as I only do three days a week. Get up early to take my daughter to school by 7.00am. Leave home at 9.15am to go to WLGA Conference in Llandudno. Lunch time – phone conversation with officer about problems at the building site. Phone the paper to confirm photo session for tomorrow. Leave at 4.30pm and go to School governors meeting. Home by 7.00pm. Deal with e-mails between 8.00pm and 9.00pm.



# A week in the life...

## **Friday**

9.30am – meeting with community policeman at community centre. 10.00am – over to the Memorial Hall to meet the builder and take photos for the paper. 10.30am till midday – meeting of community councillors and committee at community centre. I'm there every Friday morning to deal with ward matters. Friday afternoon – free time 4.00pm till 5.00pm – deal with e-mails, conversation with correspondent about the Memorial Hall. Go out for a meal with my four children as it's my birthday tomorrow!

## **Saturday**

Weather great and get chance to go for a walk and relax with friends. Discussion about recycling bins with constituent at the pub in the evening and chat with chairman of the football club about their new kitchen... and various other ward matters (that's the trouble with going for a pint in the village!)

## **Sunday**

Day with the family. Go for a walk in the evening. 8.00pm till 10.00pm – read committee papers for next week, organize next week's schedule, do paperwork and deal with e-mails.





# A week in the life...

## Monday

Drove 45 miles for a meeting, with a fellow-councillor from another party. This allowed us to reduce our carbon footprint, discuss the meeting agenda and share ideas on current issues facing local government. The meeting was one of a series of an Improvement Working Groups set up to examine how the running of Arts, Archives, Libraries and Museum Services could be improved and a substantial savings made. After the meeting, which I chaired, the Group visited and spoke to staff at the highly rated Archives Unit and a Quaker Museum I'm also a member of a city council, with the press regularly attending its meetings. In the evening, I attended one of its planning meetings,

## Tuesday

Took the bus (carbon footprint again!) for a meeting of the Development Scrutiny Committee, whose role is to contribute constructively to policy and apply a critical eye to the Council's performance in areas of social and economic development. Today we progressed a proposal to establish a Local Loans Fund for small firms in examined collaboration with not-for-profits organisations in the 'Third Sector', and had a detailed look at annual departmental targets, most of which had been achieved, but particularly at those which had not.



# A week in the life...

## **Wednesday**

Morning: Consultation Workshop, led by the Leader and Chief Exec, to assess the risks and prioritise options for improving the Authority

## **Thursday**

Morning: Chaired a meeting of the Principal Scrutiny Committee, in which we took a hard look at the reasons for serious overspend in Social Services and recommended to the executive measures to prevent it recurring and agreed, with difficulty, on reduced allocations to local voluntary groups. On the policy side, we set up six working groups to examine ways of improving specific services to the public. A very leisurely afternoon, followed by party political meeting in the evening.

## **Friday**

After attending an inspiring session with organisers of the Queens Award for Voluntary Service and local groups which had won it, I walked round our ward, checking improvements to one street had been done, arranging by mobile phone to have several cases of flying-tipping cleared. I also spoke to landlords I met about a new system designed to improve the condition of rented properties and help tenants, mostly students, to fit into local society better than many do at present.



### 3. What do councils do?



There are 1264 councillors on the 22 unitary councils and some 8000 councillors also serve on 735 community and town councils.

Wales' 22 local authorities play a central role in the governance of Wales. Welsh local government provides the leadership and services necessary for successful local economies and sustainable local communities. Welsh councils spend over £8 billion and employ over 150,000 people in delivering vital public services that impact on everyone's everyday lives.

**Councils are by far the biggest employer in their area and contribute significantly to the local economy.**

Councils provide a wide range of personal, community and environmental services for individuals and whole communities from 'the cradle to the grave'. Welsh local government is responsible for delivering a wide range of services and functions, including:

- Education
- Housing
- Social Services
- Highways and Transport
- Waste management

- Leisure & Cultural services
- Consumer protection
- Environmental Health
- Planning
- Economic Development
- Environmental Services; and
- Emergency Planning



Councils have to provide certain statutory services as set out in legislation and can provide other services at their discretion. Councils have statutory responsibilities to provide local services such as social care and environmental health inspection and planning development management. Councils provide some services directly, work in partnership with other organisations, and commission others to provide services on their behalf, such as the private and third sectors. Councils are not motivated by profit although they do provide some trading services such as catering, and services for which there are private sector alternatives such as leisure centres.

The funding for much of councils' functions



and service provision is through funding from the Welsh Government, mainly the Revenue Support Grant (RSG), supplemented by specific grants, Business Rates, earned income (such as car parking charges) and, of course, council tax. Councils currently have a significant amount of local flexibility around how they prioritise and spend their resources. The biggest spending services are education, social services and housing.

Despite being one of the most contentious taxes, council tax is probably the most transparent and visible tax in the UK - everyone knows how much council tax they pay, and what it is spent on as councils provide this information with council tax bills. How many people know how much VAT or fuel duties people pay per year, or indeed what services this tax is then spent on? People can also challenge their council tax banding if they believe it to be incorrect and can also apply for a range of discounts and support depending on individuals' personal circumstances. Council tax represents only 4.2% of national taxation in the UK and funds on average only 20% of local council

expenditure in Wales. The council tax helps pay for police officers and fire-fighters, as well as the broad range of council services.

### **More than just a service deliverer...**

Councils are democratically representative of their local communities and promote participation in local democracy by local people. This is of course the central role of elected councillors.

Councils are central to the lives and futures of the communities they serve and have a unique power of community leadership.

Community leadership means defining a vision for the community and working in partnership with a range of public sector, third sector and private sector partners to fulfil that vision. In practice this is achieved through partnerships, mutually agreed strategies, joint working and the pooling of resources.

Councils have a statutory power to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas which is usually expressed through the Community Strategy. The council has a duty to produce a Community Strategy which should bring together all partners and provide the long-term vision and direction for the whole of a local area. Underneath this overarching plan, the council also prepares a number of other key strategies, including a Local Development Plan, Children and Young Peoples' Strategy and a Health and Well-being Strategy. Councils have legal and moral duties to





promote equality of opportunity and should be sensitive to the diverse needs for local services within their communities. The council has responsibilities to promote equalities as a provider of services, as a democratic body which is representative of all interests in the community, as a major employer and as a community leader.

In Wales there is a unique legal duty to promote sustainable development across all statutory bodies including councils. There are environmental limits which must underpin everything that councils and citizens do. A sustainable local government approach

therefore should plan for prosperity not wealth, and offer sufficient local services and resources, whilst also understanding the need to live within environmental limits.

The public service delivery ‘architecture’ is evolving. Whilst councils are responsible for the provision of many services, they are not always delivered by the council and may be delivered by third sector or private sector partners or jointly with other authorities or agencies. The scale of services is also changing, with an increasing emphasis and expectation from the Welsh Government that certain services, such as education, waste and social services, should be delivered jointly or across regions.



“Find out what scrutiny committees exist in the council and the type of work they do (via the council website) so that when you are asked for a preference you will be well informed.”

## 4. What will be expected of me?

The expectations placed on a councillor are considerable. It is a time consuming as well as responsible job but with significant rewards. As an elected member you will need to balance your time between working in your community and working in the council and accommodate your work as a councillor alongside the ‘day job’ if you are working. Before you consider becoming a councillor

you may want to discuss it with your family and friends to ensure that they understand that you will need their support and understanding. You may be spending a lot of your spare time on council business.

It is estimated that on average, **councillors spend the equivalent of three days a week on council business.** Many employers



recognise the value of the work of councillors and the skills that their employees will gain in the role and therefore provide time off or flexibility for you to undertake your council duties.

When you are first elected as a councillor, it has been described as ‘like the first day at a new school, you may not know who anyone is, where you need to go or what you are supposed to do’. There is plenty of help and advice at hand from officers, other experienced elected members, your political party or group and from national organisations.

Once elected, you will become the voice for everyone in your community or electoral division often referred to as a ‘ward’ by many councillors; individuals, groups, businesses and even those who did not vote for you. The aspects of a councillor’s role that residents consider most important are ward-related activities such as holding regular surgeries and helping local people with complaints or problems.

You need to speak to the community and be clear about the needs and feelings of

constituents. You will not be able to help everyone in the way they would want but you need to be honest and open about your decision making and make sure residents’ views are heard - you are their voice in the council.

You will also need to be able to convey the policies and standpoint of the council to the community, making sure that they understand why, for example, decisions have been taken. Being a councillor is a privileged and rewarding role but it requires commitment, patience and resilience and can be demanding and stressful.

In order to help you manage your role as a councillor, you should:

- **Hold surgeries - regularly and often. Make sure they are promoted in advance and are held in accessible locations at convenient times**
- **Send newsletters, and always respond to phone calls, e-mails and letters**







- Consider how you might use social media such as social networking, blogging and Twitter to raise your profile and engage with the community
- Network - get to know your area, the community groups, agencies etc and be visible
- Use local media - think how you can best get your messages across, but your party (if you are a member of a political group) may have guidelines on who talks to the media so check first.

Councillors are also expected to attend council and committee meetings, community meetings, and meetings of any other partnerships or external bodies they are



appointed to. Councillors who are members of a political party or group will be expected to attend political group meetings, party training and events.

All councillors are expected to uphold the highest standards of behaviour. Councillors are bound by a statutory Code of Conduct which outlines what is expected of members. Breaches of the code can be referred to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and sanctions can include suspension from office.

The Code of Conduct is based on the following principles of public life:

1. Selflessness
2. Honesty
3. Integrity and Propriety
4. Duty to Uphold the Law
5. Stewardship
6. Objectivity in Decision-making
7. Equality and Respect
8. Openness
9. Accountability



“Remember what your election manifesto was, your constituents will certainly remember and will remind you when you least need it generally in public when you have failed to deliver! BUT you cannot solve every problem so don't beat yourself up if you have done your best and failed.”

## 5. What support will I receive?

Councils do everything they can to support members, from arranging for flexible meeting times to providing assistance from member support officers.

You will also usually be provided with computer equipment, training in using it and access to the council's intranet. If you are elected you are entitled to have a say on the timings of meetings and help in organising your work.

All councils make arrangements for induction for newly elected members as they do for new members of staff. When you are elected ask for a copy of your council's member induction pack and timetable of introductory events and training sessions. These sessions will include subjects such as roles within the council, local government finance, and working in your ward.



Many councils offer 'mentoring' for newly elected councillors, sometimes this is provided formally through the council or often informally by experienced councillors or through political groups.



Some councils also make arrangements for other support such as a designated officer 'guide' who will help you settle in. Ask about the availability of these and other services. Some services are available from the national organisations if they are not available locally.

Councils will also be required from 2012 to offer councillors the opportunity to develop personal development interviews to assess their development and training needs and help them grow into and develop their roles. Ask for advice and support in this area.



"Yesterday you were a member of the public, today you are a councillor and although you'll have many phone calls congratulating you there will also be the "By the way could you sort ....." and you can bet your bottom dollar it will be about something you know nothing about. Go and see your democratic services officers, they will help you through the members query system, or ask your mentor if you have one."

## 6. Will I get paid as a councillor?



As a councillor you will be entitled to receive an allowance in return for the contribution that you make. There is a allowance for all members and an additional special responsibility allowance for councillors who undertake specific responsibilities such as executive/cabinet members or committee chairs.

The framework for councillors' allowances is set by a body called the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales. The Panel is expected to consult on proposals for new 'salary' levels for members to be in place following the 2012 elections. Different councils currently pay different levels of

allowances, however, the maximum basic allowance payable in 2011/12 is £13,868 - three fifths of the average wage in Wales (as "back bench" councillors are estimated to spend the equivalent of three days on council work). For up-to-date information on members' allowances visit the Independent Remuneration Panel's website at <http://www.wales.gov.uk/irpwsb/home/?lang=eng>

The amount of the special responsibility allowance will depend upon the size of the authority to which you are elected. In addition to your allowance you will also be entitled to claim allowances for travelling and subsistence and a carer's allowance. The Council will publish the details of the allowances you receive.



"If you are employed, make sure that your employer is going to be fully supportive of you if you are elected"

## 7. Who can be a councillor?

The easy answer is almost anyone, as long as you are:

1. British, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union;
2. 18 years of age or over; and
3. registered to vote in the area or if you have lived, worked or owned property in the area for at least 12 months before an election.







However, Some people can't be a councillor because they:

1. work for the council where they want to be a councillor for or work for another council in a politically restricted post;
2. are bankrupt or have been surcharged in excess of £2,000;
3. have served a prison sentence (including suspended sentences) of three months or more in the five years before the election; or
4. have been disqualified under any legislation relating to corrupt or illegal practices.

There are other specific criteria for qualification or disqualification. All electoral candidates are advised to visit the electoral commission website for the latest guidance.

**There are two basic options - you can stand for election as an independent candidate or as a group/party political candidate.**

Either way, you should be clear about your views on local issues and expect to be questioned by the public about what makes you different from other candidates. Make

sure you know about the council's performance and plans for the future because you will be asked about them - and what you would do differently.

The local political parties are already looking for people interested in representing them. Don't worry if you are not already a member of a party as they will be able to go through all the options with you.

**For further information contact:**

**Plaid Cymru**

<http://www.plaidcymru.org>

**Welsh Labour**

<http://www.welshlabour.org.uk>

**Welsh Conservatives**

<http://www.welshconservatives.com>

**Welsh Liberal Democrats**

<http://www.welshlibdems.org.uk>

The **Independent Group** on the Local Government Association can provide information for independent councillors and candidates.

<http://www.independentgroup.lga.gov.uk>

A full list of registered political parties is available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)



“Remember that you are a councillor for all your constituents, including those who voted for your opponents or didn't even vote at all!”

## 8. How do I become a councillor?



### First steps to becoming a councillor

As the May 2012 election date draws nearer and you have been selected by a party as a candidate, or are standing as an independent candidate, you must make sure you are officially 'nominated'. This means completing a nomination paper which must be signed by 10 registered electors of the ward where you wish to stand. These papers are available from your local council's electoral services department. You must also give your consent

in writing to your nomination.

If you are a candidate for a registered political party, you must also submit a certificate from the party's nominating officer, authorising you and your use of the party's description and emblem.

If you are standing independently, you can only describe yourself as "independent" or give no description at all.

*All the necessary documents must be submitted 19 working days before the day of the election.*



## 9. Further information

Code of Conduct Guidance from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

<http://www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/en/publications/?pID=254>

Electoral Commission

*(Electoral regulations and procedures guidance is available from the Electoral Commission )*

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

The Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales

<http://www.wales.gov.uk/irpwsb/home/?lang=eng>

Local Government Improvement and Development

*(English language only - some of the guidance is relevant to England only as it does not reflect devolved policies)*

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/>

Local Government Leadership Centre

<http://www.localleadership.gov.uk>

Welsh Local Government Association

<http://www.wlga.gov.uk/english/>

*Further information available at: [www.wlga.gov.uk/beacouncillor](http://www.wlga.gov.uk/beacouncillor)*

