

# Interested in becoming a councillor?



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## Introduction

Are you interested in becoming a councillor? If so, read on and find out what it's all about and how you can stand for election.

All Luton Council's 48 seats are up for election on 4 May 2023. This offers you the perfect opportunity to stand as a representative of your local community and become a councillor (also known as an elected member). We hope that this document will be helpful for anyone who is thinking of standing for election and is interested in finding out about the role of the councillor.

Our council benefits from a wide range of community representation, but we are under-represented in the Polish/Romanian/Eastern European communities. Please come along and find out more.

The local election process for Luton Council begins in March 2023 when a Notice of Election will be published on the Town Hall noticeboard and council website. If you are thinking about standing as a candidate you will have to formally submit your nomination papers. Information about the nomination process and what candidates need to do is available from the Electoral Services Section contact Sam Freer 01582 546088.

## Why are councillors important?

Councillors play a key role in the town. They:

- are a voice of the community, representing local people and communities
- are champions of the users of local services
- help shape future services for the benefit of local people
- work in partnership with other organisations such as:
  - police
  - voluntary community sector
  - other public bodies and the private sector
- play a major role in making local government work by improving people's lives

## What do councillors do?

Councillors are elected to represent all residents of Luton. They are elected by 'Ward' which is an area of the town used for election purposes. There will be 20 Wards in May 2023. The role of a councillor can be very varied, also demanding, but very rewarding. It is up to each individual councillor how they work, but there are expectations about behaviour and standards. Councillors have responsibilities to their Ward, to the council and to the community.

## Why become a councillor?

There are many reasons why people decide to become a local councillor. They may:

- want to make a difference and be involved in shaping the future of the local community
- be concerned about the local area in which they live and want to ensure that their local community gets the services needed
- want to represent the views of local people and ensure that local community interests are taken into account
- want to pursue their political beliefs
- be concerned about one particular issue, for example care for older people, the lack of facilities in an area, or traffic congestion

For some, it is an extension of what they're already doing, as they could be active in the community working hard to help others every day, or a member of a political party, trade union, or school governing body wanting to make a difference to improve citizens lives. They might see the next step as becoming a councillor.

## Who can become a councillor?

To stand for election, on the day of nomination, you must be:

- 18 or over
- UK, EU or commonwealth citizen
- registered to vote in the town of Luton

Or, for the whole twelve months preceding, you must have:

- occupied, as owner or tenant, any land or premises in the town
- worked (as principal employment) in the town
- lived in the town

### You cannot stand if you

- work for Luton Council
- hold a politically restricted post for another authority
- are bankrupt
- have served a prison sentence (including suspended sentences) of three months or more within five years prior to the election
- have been disqualified under any legislation relating to corrupt or illegal practices



"I became a councillor to assist people and act as an advocate on their behalf."

"I also wanted to ensure that vulnerable people received the services they needed and believed that as a councillor I could be influential in making sure this was the case."

"Being a councillor is an honour because it means people have put their faith in you to deliver services for them and represent them in the best possible way."

**Councillor Hazel Simmons MBE, Leader of Luton Council**

## **Do councillors need any educational/formal qualifications?**

No, you do not need any specific qualifications to become a councillor. Life experience is probably the best thing you can bring to the role and wanting to make a difference for local people.

## **Do I have to belong to a political party or group?**

No. Whilst many people become councillors as a result of joining a political party, some people stand for election as an independent candidate (candidates who do not belong to any political party).

If you are thinking of standing as a candidate for a particular political party then you will need to be a member of that organisations local and national party.

Contact details are at the end of this book under useful contacts.

The Labour Group is currently in control of the council. The Leader of the Labour Group is the Executive Leader of the council. The Liberal Democratic Group is the main opposition party.

## Ward responsibilities

As a councillor you should:

- listen to and represent the views of the residents
- make sure services are delivered effectively in their ward
- help out individual ward members on specific issues, known as casework

You'll find that much of your time is taken up by contact with local people. This could be in the form of dealing with complaints or enquiries. Your role will be to listen, explain council policy and make sure that the policy has been carried out fairly according to official procedures.

You'll get help and support to deal with constituents' enquiries and complaints from officers in the council. As a ward representative you can represent views and issues associated with the council on constituents' behalf. You could also be representing an individual or family at special appeals.

## Member-led Engagement

Members have a pivotal role as community leaders in their wards and communities of interests. Members are the citizen's voice within the council and the council's voice within communities. Members can make a real difference to citizen's lives by leading community development and changes within their wards. This could be anything from organising with residents to litter pick, supporting voluntary and charitable groups to apply for the Luton Citizen's Fund in their wards, leading citizen engagement around 2040 to feed into the Fairness Taskforce and raising citizen's ideas and suggestions on how Luton can be a better place for everyone.

The Social Justice Unit within the council will support member-led engagement in a number of ways:

- Support with a quarterly Let's Talk event in an area or ward
- Engagement with the Citizen's Fund and public decision days
- Linking with Voluntary sector organisations in their ward.

Member-led engagement needs to be member led and only development that is driven forward by members will take place, as such it is your chance to make lasting change to your neighbourhood.

## Council responsibilities

You will also help to:

- form policy
- develop the council's budget and agree the level of council tax
- make or scrutinise decisions

Your role on the council as a whole is to plan, run, monitor and develop council business. Councillors are essential to deciding what is in the public interest amidst a range of conflicting issues and views.

As a councillor you'll be a member of the council, and could also be on the Executive, a scrutiny committee or a regulatory committee.

You'll meet with other councillors from all political groups, to debate and approve council business in a formal setting. Most meetings are open to the press and public.

There are written rules, which govern behaviour and procedures at these meetings included in the 'Council Constitution' and these enable councillors to take part effectively.

## What makes a 'Good' Councillor?

Councillors have a number of broad leadership responsibilities. These can embrace:

- leading the development of strategies and plans for the area, balancing different needs, identifying priorities and targeting resources in a time of fiscal constraint
- providing democratic accountability for public services and ensuring that service providers are accountable to service users in delivering
- quality and value for money
- operating as 'social entrepreneurs', bringing together individuals and agencies in the area – and across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors – to tackle social, economic and environmental challenges
- carrying out specific regulatory duties and ensuring sufficient scrutiny of council plans, policies, and decisions and spending plans
- acting as community leaders in facilitating resident, community and business participation in all aspects of decision making and the shaping of services
- making your local area a 'better place to live and work'.

A significant part of these responsibilities is the work that you do at a neighbourhood level – what is often referred to as the 'ward councillor role'. You represent the ward or division and the people who live in it and have a responsibility to communicate council policies and decisions to them.

## What roles might be open to me as a Councillor?

Once you have been elected, if you are a member of a political party, the party will decide which meetings you will sit on. These might be one or more of:

- the executive committee
- a scrutiny committee
- an outside organisation
- a non executive director on an organisation eg London Luton Airport Ltd
- a charity
- a school governor

If you are not a member of a political party you will be advised which positions may be open to you.

## How decisions are made

All councillors meet together as the council. These meetings are normally open to the public. Here, councillors decide the council's overall policies and set the budget each year. The council appoints the Executive leader for four years who in turn appoints the Executive, which has, as a main role, the task of developing and implementing policy on behalf of the council.

The Executive has to make decisions, which are in line with the council's overall policies and budget. If it wishes to make a decision, which is outside the budget or policy framework, this must be referred to the full council to decide. Key decisions, which are to be made, are published in the Executive's Forward Plan. Meetings of the Executive are open to the public, except where personal or confidential matters are being discussed.

A number of scrutiny committees monitor the decisions of the Executive and the implementation of policy. They can also recommend policies to the Executive and council. Sometimes as a result of time limited 'Task and Finish' reviews of a specific topic. They allow citizens to have a greater say in council matters and are consulted by the Executive on developing policies.

Scrutiny committees can call-in a decision that has been made by the Executive but not yet implemented. This enables them to consider whether the decision is appropriate. They may recommend that the Executive reconsiders the decision.

The council also appoints regulatory committees to perform the council's regulatory functions such as Development Control (planning issues) and Licensing. The council appoints other specialist committees from time to time.

The council also has a standards committee to advise on the adoption and implementation of a Code of Conduct for elected and co-opted members.

All members have agreed to follow these so as to ensure high standards in the way they undertake their duties. The standards committee ensures there is appropriate training and advice on the code of conduct for members.

## How much time is involved in being a councillor?

It is for you to decide the level of commitment you are able to give to being a councillor. It also depends on your role within the council and the number of duties you decide to take on. It could range from a few hours each week to a few hours each day at busier times but you should attend every committee to which you have been appointed.

How your role as a councillor will impact on any family and personal relationships – you will need their support and understanding as you may be spending a lot of your spare time on council business.

The people you represent will look to you for help in dealing with their problems. You are likely to receive a lot of post, emails and a great many telephone calls, and not every caller will telephone at what you might think is a reasonable hour!

Most councillors hold at least one drop in surgery each month, some hold two or even three surgeries each month. You may spend some of your time visiting constituents at their homes, or at the council offices, and you may also have to meet with officers of the council to help you with any issues.

There are usually seven full council meetings each year, which you will be expected to attend. These are formal meetings with other council colleagues from all political groups and meetings start at 6pm and could last up to three hours, sometimes longer.

You will be a member of at least one committee or be on Executive. Nearly all committee meetings are held in the evenings from 6pm. Your meetings / commitments may not be evenly spread out over the cycle so some weeks you may be out more evenings than others.

The average length of a committee meeting is approximately two hours but this could vary.

Many councillors represent the council on one or more outside bodies. Background reading and attendance at meetings of these bodies would increase your time commitment.

If you would like more information on the current year's cycle of council meetings please contact The Democracy team on 01582 546041.

For most of the meetings you attend there will be agendas that you will need to read beforehand. These can be quite detailed and take time to read and understand, but help is always available.

If you are a member of a political party there will be additional calls on your time to attend political group meetings. Political groups require their members to attend group meetings in advance of council meetings and possibly training events/seminars organised by the political party.

If you are elected as a chair of a committee, a spokesperson or member of the Executive, the role can be very demanding as you will take responsibility for making decisions that affect the lives of the people of Luton.

## **Will I get paid for duties as a councillor?**

There is no salary for being a councillor. However, you will be paid an allowance to reimburse you for time and expenses incurred whilst on council business.

Every councillor is entitled to a basic allowance, currently £7,500 a year, paid into a bank account in 12 monthly instalments along with additional re-imbusement to cover all council related travelling and subsistence when carrying out 'approved duties'.

Some councillors are given an additional allowance to cover any special responsibilities such as Executive member, scrutiny chair/spokesperson etc. Childcare costs are also addressed.

For more information about the members' allowance scheme please see the council constitution on the website.

## **Will I get time off work?**

If you're working, by law your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to perform your duties as councillor. The amount of time off will depend upon your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer's business.

You should discuss this with your employer before making the commitment.

## What support will I receive if I am elected?

- Information to help you deal with ward matters and all other work you do as a councillor will be provided from officers of the council but it is more likely that the senior officers including the chief executive, corporate directors and service directors will be helping you and providing guidance.
- Business and Member Services, situated in the Chief Executives department, provides full-time dedicated support to meet the needs of councillors.
- You will be offered a phone and laptop for use at home for council business with email and Internet access.
- You will have access to fully equipped members' rooms and meeting rooms based at the council offices. The members' rooms have facilities for both formal and informal use, telephones, computers and printers.
- If you need any other help or assistance after you have been elected do not be afraid to ask.

## A councillor's role can sometimes be stressful, which is why you will also be able to have the following:

- A programme of training and development including training on stress management
- Access to the Employee Assistance Programme

The EAP is a free, confidential counselling and wellbeing support service available to all employees, their partner/spouse and dependent children over 16 still living at home.

The service is available 24/7, 365 days a year offering support with:

- counselling
- legal information
- financial information
- consumer information
- career guidance and life coaching
- health information
- cancer support
- autism support
- infertility and pregnancy loss
- elder care support
- parent coaching

## Will I be given any training to help me perform my duties as a councillor?

When you are newly elected there will be an induction training period when you can attend several induction courses. If you are a member of a political or other group there could be training and support from your political group.

The training and development programme provided by the council is developed in consultation with the Member Development Strategic Steering Group and will include an opportunity to meet Corporate Directors and officers from key services.

A series of courses on topics such as:

- Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts
- social media
- speaking in public
- ethical conduct for members
- IT training
- local leadership skills
- training for scrutiny committee members
- corporate parenting
- safeguarding

There will also be optional training, workshops and seminars and an opportunity to attend seminars organised by other public bodies, local government organisations and other local authorities

Councillors will also be offered personal development plans to identify individual training needs. This will be a confidential statement of your skills and training.

The plan will help you to recognise and value the skills, knowledge and experience you already have, and will help you make informed decisions about your future training and information needs.

## **Probity and integrity**

The conduct of councillors is formally governed by the Code of Conduct, which every council has adopted. The code sets out the rules that members should work to.

All councillors are required to sign the declaration of acceptance of office, which includes an undertaking to observe the code. Breaches of the rules may be considered by the Standards Committee.

The general principles for England which all councillors must follow are:

### **Selflessness**

Members should serve only the public interest and should never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person.

### **Honesty and integrity**

Members should not place themselves in situations where their honesty and integrity may be questioned; should not behave improperly; and should, on all occasions, avoid the appearance of such behaviour.

### **Objectivity**

Members should make decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits.

### **Openness**

Members should be as open as possible about their actions and those of their authority, and should be prepared to give reasons for those actions.

### **Accountability**

Members should be accountable to the public for their actions and the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities, and should co-operate fully and honestly with any scrutiny appropriate to their particular office

### **Personal judgment**

Members may take account of the views of others, including their political groups, but should reach their own conclusion on the issues before them and act in accordance with those conclusions.

## **Respect for others**

Members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers, and its other employees.

## **Duty to uphold the law**

Members should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place in them.

## **Stewardship**

Members should do whatever they are able to do to ensure that their authority uses its resources prudently and in accordance with the law.

## **Leadership**

Members should promote and support these principles by leadership, and by example, and should always act in a way that secures or preserves public interest. There are also two very important provisions by which members are bound at all times. These are:

- you should not do anything which brings their council or office into disrepute
- you should not misuse their official position to their own advantage or to the disadvantage of others

## **How to get elected**

To become a councillor, you will need to stand as a candidate in a local election. This involves:

- completing nomination forms to have your name included on the ballot paper
- appointing an Election Agent to report your campaign finances after the election
- running your campaign
- canvassing electors for votes
- producing election material in accordance with the election rules
- conducting interviews with the press and media
- attending key events
- making an acceptance speech at the election count (hopefully)

Before every election we hold 'Candidate and Agent Briefing Sessions' to provide you with the key information that you will need and give you a step by step guide to the nominations process. The dates for the briefing sessions are published on our website [www.luton.gov.uk/election](http://www.luton.gov.uk/election). On the website you can also sign up for information on any forthcoming elections.

## Nominations

The nomination process involves completing a number of different forms. Copies and guidance for completing these forms can be downloaded from the Electoral Commission website [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk):

- nomination form
- candidate's consent to nomination
- certificate of authorisation (candidates standing for a political party only)
- request for a party emblem (candidates standing for a political party only)
- notification of election agent

The nomination form must be endorsed by the signatures of ten registered electors (known as subscribers) from the ward in which you are standing.

If you attend the 'candidate and agent briefing sessions' you'll be provided with a printed copy of the nomination pack. The nomination pack will include nomination forms, timetables and guidance notes.

## Electoral register

In the run up to the election candidates can request a copy of the electoral register for the ward in which they are standing. The register lists residents who can vote at the election and also sign your nomination form.

## Election agents

The election agent is the person responsible for the proper management of your election campaign and, in particular, for its financial management. You must have an election agent. If you do not appoint an agent, you will become your own agent by default.

Your agent must have an office address to which any legal notices can be delivered. Within 35 calendar days of the election result being declared the election agent will need to prepare and submit to the Returning Officer an election spending return

## Postal vote, polling and counting agents

You may appoint agents to attend postal vote openings, polling stations and the count on your behalf. The Candidate and Election Agent may also attend any of these events.

## Standing for a political party

If you are interested in standing for a political party in an election, you must be officially endorsed by that party. You will also need to complete the 'Certificate of authorisation' and 'Request for a party emblem' forms as part of your nominations.

## The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission do not run elections but have responsibility for providing advice and assistance on electoral matters to political parties and candidates. You can find their contact details in the Useful Contacts section of this booklet.

## Useful contacts

Service Director, Citizen Engagement & Legal Services	Adam Divney	Adam.divney@luton.gov.uk	01582 546073
Democracy Manager	Debbie Janes	debbie.janes@luton.gov.uk	01582 546038
Electoral Services Manager	Sam Freer	sam.freer@Luton.gov.uk	01582 546088
Business & Member Support Manager	Ann Loeffler	ann.loeffler@Luton.gov.uk	01582 546033

[The Electoral Commission](#)

## Local government useful contacts

### Local Government Association (LGA)

LGconnect Local Government Association

Local Government House, Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ

T: 020 7664 3131

W: <https://www.lga.gov.uk/>

### Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)

22 Upper Woburn Place, London, WC1H 0TB

T: 020 7554 2800

W: [www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk)

### Audit Commission

1st Floor Millbank Tower, Millbank, London, SW1P 4HQ

T: 020 7828 1212

W: [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

### Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA)

Layden House, 76-86 Turnmill Street, London, EC17 5QU

T: 020 7296 6600

W: [www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge](http://www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge)