

Becoming a Councillor in Basildon



Could I be a Basildon Councillor?

Maybe you are already involved in your local community in some way or simply have firm views on what your local area needs.

But is this enough?

Do you want to help improve the quality of life and well-being of Basildon residents by helping to shape local services?

Could you speak on behalf of your local community, and help local people?

Are you prepared to spend some of your spare time serving your community in this way?

If you have answered “yes” to these questions, then you may wish to consider standing for election as a Basildon Councillor for a four year term of office. This guide will help you make that decision.

Can anyone become a Councillor?

To become a Councillor you must be:

- aged 18 or over
- a British, Commonwealth or European citizen
- registered to vote in Basildon or have lived, worked or owned a property in the Basildon borough for at least 12 months prior to the election

You cannot stand for election if you:

- work for Basildon Council
- hold a politically restricted post for another Council
- are bankrupt or have been surcharged in excess of £2,000
- have served a prison sentence of 3 months or more in the 5 years prior to the election
- have been disqualified under any legislation relating to corrupt or illegal practices

Don't I need to belong to a political party?

The short answer is no...but it helps. Traditionally, a significant proportion of the electorate in Basildon have tended to vote along party lines and most candidates who have successfully stood for election have been members of one of the three main political parties, Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat. Other political parties also select candidates for local elections.

If you are thinking of standing as a candidate for a particular political party then you will need to be a member of that party's local organisation and should register your interest with them. Ultimately, it is up to the party to decide whether to select you as a local candidate so the sooner you get

involved in its local activities the better your chances of being selected. Further information can be found on the web site of the particular party you are interested in joining.

Although the political route is the most likely way of becoming a Councillor, this should not deter you from standing as an independent candidate, for example to pursue a particular local issue. By building your profile so that local people know who you are and what you stand for, it is possible to generate a lot of public support from like minded residents who may share your views. The Local Government Association's web site for politically independent Councillors is www.independent.lga.gov.uk

What's involved in being a Councillor?

As a Councillor you could be involved in a range of activities and the Council's staff, called 'officers', will be available to provide support, information and professional advice.

Helping constituents

Residents will contact you, as their community leader, for support and advice on a wide range of issues. They may be objecting to a contentious planning application in their road or need advice about the Council's recycling schemes. Local voluntary groups may also ask for your help, for example in applying for funding. Sometimes you may be expected to assist with issues that are not related to the Council's work. Your contact details will be publicly available and you will inevitably have to spend time at home dealing with letters, e-mails and phone calls. Not every call will be at a convenient time!

Many Councillors hold monthly drop-in surgeries so they can meet with residents to discuss queries and complaints face to face.

Attending meetings

Being a Councillor is not just about sitting in committee rooms discussing and voting on officers' reports. However, serving as a member of one or more Council committees will be one of your most important duties. This may be the Cabinet where most of the Council's decisions are taken. Alternatively, many Councillors are appointed to one or more scrutiny committees which monitor Council performance and policies and examine draft new policies before they are agreed. If you join one of the Council's regulatory committees you may be determining planning applications, staffing appeals or licensing matters, or monitoring the Council's audit and risk management arrangements.

Formal committee meetings are usually held in the evenings starting at 7.30pm, allowing people with jobs or family commitments to attend more easily.

You may also be asked to represent the Council on one of the many local advisory groups and partnerships of which the Council is a member.

Undertaking a scrutiny review

Over half the number of Councillors are members of a scrutiny committee and this is likely to involve joining a small informal working group (called a 'task and finish group') to conduct a review of a Council service, policy or a broader issue affecting the lives of residents. Typically, a task and finish group will spend between 3 and 6 months gathering evidence through a variety of methods before producing a report, supported by a Scrutiny Officer, recommending changes to the Cabinet. Recent reviews have considered commuter parking, the provision of health services in Billericay and the barriers preventing young people from being in employment, education or training.

To get a clearer idea about the central role that Councillors play in improving community well-being, go to www.basildon.gov.uk and click on 'Council and Democracy' then 'Political Structure and Decision Making'.

Have I got the time?

This will depend on the extent of your involvement, your political activities and what role you take in the Council. The time commitment can vary from a few hours each week as a backbencher to several hours each day as a Cabinet Member with specific responsibilities.

Before deciding to stand for election, you should consider how the role of Councillor will impact on your personal life:

- Political groups usually hold weekly meetings on a Monday evening and require their members to attend to discuss group policy and future council meetings. There are around 8 meetings of the Council each year which all 42 Councillors attend to take decisions on budget and policy matters and debate matters of interest raised by Councillors or members of the public. Councillors are usually members of at least 2 Council committees and these each meet around 4 to 5 times a year with the exception of the committee responsible for considering planning applications which meets twice a month. Attending these evening meetings and preparing for them by reading the officer reports will, together with your constituency work, certainly impact on your home life.
- If you have a job, you will need the support and understanding of your employer who by law must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off work during working hours to perform your duties as a Councillor. The amount of time will depend on your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer's business. You should always discuss the implications of becoming a Councillor with your employer before making a commitment.

Will I be given any formal training?

The Council offers on-going training for Councillors in a wide range of areas such as the following:

- induction sessions on the Council's functions and decision-making system, giving the opportunity to meet with Council staff and other Councillors
- local government finance.
- ethical conduct for members.
- inclusion and diversity.
- data protection and freedom of information.
- taking decisions on planning applications and licensing matters.
- training for scrutiny committee members on topics such as challenging performance, scrutinising the budget, conducting a review and partnership working.

Will I be paid?

There is no salary but you will be entitled to claim allowances and expenses to ensure that you are not out of pocket. These include:

- basic allowance paid to all Councillors
- special responsibility allowance for Cabinet Members and committee Chairmen/Vice-Chairman
- carer's allowance should you need to make special arrangements to carry these special responsibilities
- IT allowance to help towards home computer costs
- travelling and subsistence allowances
- conference allowance.

Anything else I should know?

An integral part of becoming a Councillor is a commitment to high ethical standards to maintain public trust in the Council. All new Councillors must sign to say they will observe the Code of Conduct. This sets out the rules that Councillors should work to and alleged breaches of the code are investigated by the of Council's Standards Committee. The Code of Conduct can be found on the Council's website.

New Councillors must also complete a form setting out their financial and personal interests and this will be included in a register that is open to public inspection. It is the responsibility of all Councillors to keep their entry on the register up-to-date and to declare any interests at meetings where relevant.

I'm still interested, what do I do next?

Once you have decided to stand for election for a four year term as a Councillor, your nomination will need to be supported by 10 registered electors from the ward you wish to represent.

You may find it helpful to have an electoral agent who is responsible for checking that all forms and technicalities are in order. Political parties may use one agent for several candidates.

The election process begins in spring each year when the Notice of Election is published. After this you can submit your nomination papers. These papers and further advice regarding elections are available from:

Electoral Services
Basildon Council
The Basildon Centre
St Martin's Square
Basildon SS14 1DL

Phone: (01268) 294380

E-mail: elections@basildon.gov.uk

For further information about becoming a Basildon Councillor, contact Paul Burkinshaw, Manager of Democratic Services, on (01268) 294422, e-mail paul.burkinshaw@basildon.gov.uk.