

Councillor Profile Working Group - councillor survey responses

What inspired you initially to run for public office?

"A desire to get involved and try to make a difference"

"I was interested in local politics – solving problems for people"

"I've always been interested in local affairs, and in politics generally. I've served as a councillor since [the 1980s]. Firstly as a Town Councillor, then as a District Councillor and for the last 18 years as a County Councillor"

"I wished to make a difference in my community"

"A desire to improve things for the community and my distaste for [party] policies"

"To serve the community in providing good services that has somewhat been put in reverse by current government austerity measures!"

"'Inspired' the wrong word. I was asked by local party members whether I would be interested, and I was. Came at the right moment [due to family circumstances]."

"As a long time [party member] I'd helped at election time, and supporting at fund-raising activities; when approached to consider standing as a local councillor, I thought I might be able to achieve more. At that time I was in full employment, but was advised that my commitment for committee work would be evenings only, topped up with constituents' issues to fit my time available"

"Realising that if 'they' were to do something to sort things out, someone had to stand up and be prepared to be one of 'them'"

"I needed something useful to do in early retirement and I like working with people."

"I fell into it by accident"

"A commitment to improving people's environment"

"I started off on a Town Council - asked to stand by a friend"

Why do you think so few younger people are interested in standing as a county councillor?

"Lack of time due to work commitments"

"Difficulties in balancing family life/work commitments with council duties"

"Allowances"

"Young people are all too aware that to do the job properly involves giving up much time away from their essential bread-winning employment"

“Time commitment and a lack of understanding of local authorities. The town/district and county format is complex - also, if you have a young family, a career that is developing and financial commitments i.e. a large mortgage, it means that young people’s priorities will not be focussed on becoming a councillor. If there were fewer tiers of bureaucracy – unitary authority – Parish and County. After all County provides 80% of services – District provides 20% of services. In my own Division I have 5 District Councillors and there’s just me! This is disproportionate to the workloads in District Councils”.

“I don’t think it occurs to them, and unless they are very politically active/aware indeed they have many more things to think about than local politics. In particular, earning a good living and having a family/social life”.

“Daytime meetings - full County Council meetings wiped out the whole of a working day as I live [over 20 miles] from Oxford”

“I think they are busy with other things”

“Younger people are on the whole not interested in local government. I don’t think that this is anything new or surprising”

“Probably, because they are too busy ‘with day-to-day life’. Particularly for those who have a family”

“Most young people are busy studying, earning a living or bringing up a family. But in [my] party many young people are coming forward to stand for office”

“Very few young role models and the difficulty of combining Council duties with work”

“The time commitment is very big”

What do you feel are the biggest obstacles faced by younger members of the community when considering serving as a County councillor?

“Lack of time due to work commitments – time constraints plus a perception that the council is run by ‘old codgers”

“Time – conflicting calls on their time. Most employers are not ready to support staff to take on Council roles”

“The obstacles are the same for us all – the County Council requires time!”

“Lack of time and day time meetings”

- “1. The effect on work patterns makes it not career-enhancing.*
- 2. The demands of family life”*

“Daytime meetings”

“Apart from earning a living and having a social life, having the networks to provide support both in getting elected and being a councillor. I had lots of people who were

willing to help and support me and who saw being a County Councillor as a good thing to do. I doubt that is available to many younger people”

“The stereotypical face of 'councillors' being 'all out for themselves as 'politicians' (classed in one group together unfortunately)”

“Young people are all too aware that to do the job properly involves giving up much time away from their essential bread-winning employment”

“Employers’ attitudes to public service, job insecurity, commitments to family”

“Impatience with bureaucracy?”

“If they’ve no experience of ‘being a councillor’, i.e. not served at parish or district level, then the step up to county wide issues plus the challenge of the meetings being primarily day-time and in Oxford”

“Getting employers to give time off for meetings especially when meeting dates are changed with little notice”

How have you found time management issues, and balancing other commitments, since being a councillor? Have you found time management issues more difficult than you had expected them to be prior to your election?

“Yes, more difficult – but being self-employed has made it easier”

“I believe very much in single authority councillors – i.e. multi-hatting is bad – if one person occupies parish/district and county positions this blocks the ability of anyone be they young or old to step onto the ladder and become a councillor”

“Far more difficult!”

“Because I started as a Town and District councillor, with evening meetings being held locally, plus an understanding employer I could manage reasonably well. When it came to standing at County level, I’d taken early retirement [and] it became easier. I repeat it is vital that those considering standing must understand what is involved”

“I have always had to balance job, family and politics. Now I am retired it is much easier”

“[In the 1990’s] when I became a District Councillor it was not too difficult. In 2001 when I became a County Councillor and dual hatter I was retired and I managed. Now with advanced IT and constant emails it has become vastly more difficult”

“Manageable working full time before I was invited to join the Cabinet”

“Yes, I used to try and hold down a part-time job at the same time, but this proved impossible as I needed more and more time off and relying on colleagues covering for me was impossible. I also ended up using all my 'holiday' time. Yes, time management issues were more difficult than expected in the end”

“Yes! In recent months I have had to give up a job, having tried working part time but found that incompatible with the job concerned despite the best efforts of my employer to help. Being a councillor takes up at least 1 ½ to 2 days each week”

“No real problem for a retired person”

“I’ve been working for most of my time as a councillor. Flexi-time was the answer, plus permanent juggling and hoping not to drop too many plates.”

“Much more is expected of local councillors than was the case a few years ago. Divisions are much larger; emails proliferate case work; area stewardship work and Big Society grants were a good idea but time-consuming. Slow replies to reported road defects (e.g. via Fix-my-street) makes it difficult to keep track of tiny issues.”

“Not enough hours in the day”

“I could not give it the time I believe it deserves unless I was retired”

Which other issues have you found that hinder your duties as councillor, and what steps (if any) could be taken to lessen the impact of those difficulties? i.e. changing the scheduling of some meetings, encouraging employers to support elected members, highlighting childcare provisions etc.

“Formal meetings need to be set as far ahead as possible, but I recognise fewer formal meetings are necessary to respond to issues. An understanding employer helps, but this should also apply to those that volunteer in a general sense. Not sure that councillors should be treated as a special case. Childcare is a challenge, but like work generally it’s a matter of choice options for any individual. Councillors also need a supportive service from officers to ensure understand the role of a councillor, understand the ‘topic’. Finally it’s essential that councillors ‘respect’ the role of officers. I think all of the above are key issues to help councillors do a good job, and enjoy the experience”

“None of these examples affect me but may well be pertinent to the younger councillors”

“Dealing with the general attitude that politicians are self-seeking and held in low esteem by the media”

“Maybe all of these. I don’t see any of them as deal-breakers. The dual-hatters will know what difference evening meetings makes in attracting younger councillors to the districts. The County Council prob has more representatives from partner agencies who expect to attend meetings during the day. There is too little support for councillors at County Hall (other than Cabinet members). E.g.: the accommodation allotted to opposition groups is inadequate; it’s difficult to make phone calls to officers from outside unless the extension is known; colossal email overload now nothing in hard copy; cancellation and rearranging meetings for a date

when half those who agreed the first date can't attend. All this makes it difficult to keep up, and lowers the spirit."

"Much more support from the Council itself to enable real people to be good councillors – which is needed if we are to have democracy working as it should. Too much email, we do need political assistants to enable us to be effective and have facts and research at our fingertips"

"Evening meetings are obviously much easier for people with jobs"

"Certainly encouraging employers to allow time away from the office. Could we do something with Business Rates for companies who support councillors?"

"The length of our meetings means that they cannot be scheduled in an evening – encouraging employers would be good – I was lucky I had as part of my contract of employment a clause on public service"

"I had to give up my job when I [took on a more prominent role] due to time commitments and conflicts with work and council duties. More could be done to perhaps encourage employers to support elected members, but then one may appear to be 'favoured' over other colleagues which is not helpful either"

"The County should only hold meetings after 5 pm as the City Council does. More financial support should be available for councillors who are carers (of the young & the old). There should be national legislation for time off for all councillors"

"Daytime meetings are less of a problem for me than for many, but that is a quirk of my life. Most employers would struggle to make enough of an allowance for someone to be a successful councillor as well as working significant hours. Mine really tried but it didn't work"

"My employers talked about encouraging my elected role, but in practice it hindered my career. The bugbear was daytime meetings both at County and in my Division, plus the deluge of emails"

"No real problem for a retired person"

Do you feel that the allowances paid to councillors would be a factor in achieving wider representation?

"No"

"YES"

"Yes. I do not do it FOR the money but would be hard-pressed to justify doing it WITHOUT"

"I believe that allowances should be paid. No one would volunteer to become a County Councillor if allowances weren't paid, and paid at a reasonable level"

"The problem with allowances is that you are damned if you do take them and damned if you don't! This is because the allowance is supposed to make up for the

loss in earnings which you may have earned, but it never does. However, if there is any increase in councillors' allowances and you accept them then the public see this as 'snouts in the trough'. In other words you are expected to give all you time for nothing in return. However, you still have a mortgage and bills to pay like everyone else"

"No – I feel that putting them up while making cuts brings us into disrepute"

"Not particularly. Hard to imagine anyone undertaking this job for the money. But I share the view that the role is too large to be considered 'voluntary', and it helps no one if remuneration is derisory. The independent panel is a good idea, and it would help if its recommendations were at set intervals and accepted without debate"

"No. The allowances paid to County councillors are too high. They are twice as high as the allowances for district councillors, who usually work much harder"

"Allowances would have to be significantly higher to attract most working people – in any case allowances shouldn't be a proper reason for becoming a councillor"

"No. The last thing I'd want is for people to 'You're doing it for the money'. If people really want to be a local councillor, they'll do it."

"I believe it would be far more effective if government would make it an obligation on employers to allow employees some paid time off if they are elected as Councillors"

"I think what we are paid needs to reflect the hours we have to work, so that it plugs the gap in paid employment which is a consequence of being a councillor. If that is not the case, only people who have other forms of income (a generous partner, a decent pension, good investments ...) will be able to be a councillor. I think our current age profile, with so many councillors who are retired from other work, demonstrates that"

"I doubt it, people stand because they want to help their community – not for the money. But as the job can easily take 50-100% of your time, adequate remuneration should be considered to attract those wanting to take on big roles such as Leaders, cabinet members, etc."

Do you have any suggestions for raising the profile of the councillor role to a wider cross-section of the community and increasing the diversity of representation on the Council?

"I imagine Facebook and Twitter offer the best access to the younger audience. What about a Youth Cabinet?"

"Hold, non-party promotional events. Stop multi-hatters as these people block the pathway for new applicants. I've often heard "we can't get candidates" – is self-fulfilling, if you've one person doing all 3 levels of local government it leaves no place for a "new recruit""

“Difficult! Engaging with communities would be the way to show them that they too could represent their communities- a proactive approach from the Council, making it clear that their views are wanted”

“All parties should be expected to bring forward more women to stand for Council in seats where they are likely to be elected”

“The biggest challenge, I believe, is to try and explain to the general public how local government actually works, and then the role of councillors. This is a great challenge because most people aren’t really interested. They only worried about why things do not get done, why the council wastes money, why don’t councils understand anything, the list goes on.....

“In the short term I guess political groups could do more to ‘widen their view’ when selecting candidates, e.g. younger, wider ethnic base, etc. candidates”

“I believe it would be far more effective if government would make it an obligation on employers to allow employees some paid time off if they are elected as Councillors. This is a National issue and must be addressed nationally”

“We all need to encourage people to consider standing for the council wherever we go”

“This is a matter for each individual councillor to achieve in his own way”

“It’s a good idea to publicise “a day in the life of a councillor” or more general features on councillor work – could we interest the local press? I would be wary of trying to impose quotas of young people”

“Unfortunately not, because most councillors are retired and over 60 and can afford not to work/paid off their mortgage/have no child care commitments - these are the only people who can commit themselves to public office”

“The role needs to be more highly regarded and seen as a job worth doing. I don’t think this is adversely affected by diversity issues. So long as the popular view of all politicians is so low this won’t change. Giving more councillors more interesting things to do.”

Generally....

“I think the diversity issue is a non-problem unless the ethnic mix is badly askew. I don’t think it matters if there are few younger councillors. Many if not most ‘older’ councillors have families and can speak for all age-groups. Aptitude for the type of work and flexibility to meet the time commitments are the crucial things. Disability support is good I think. I would support a statutory upper age limit, as for magistrates, if the issue were raised, but don’t think it would make much difference re recruiting the -40s.”