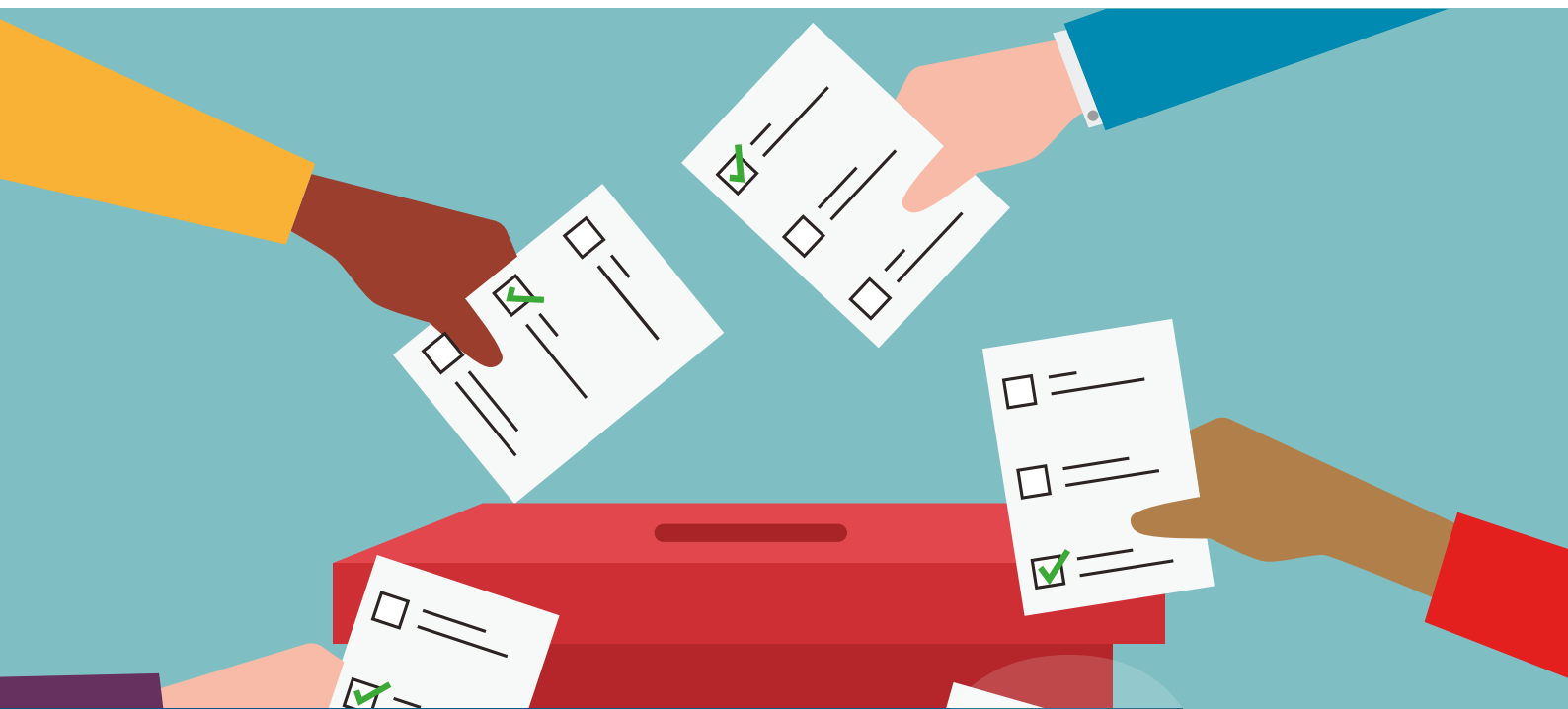


Make a Difference: Stand for Election

A guide to standing as an Independent in
the Scottish Local Government Elections



Did you know...

Did You Know... councillors don't need to belong to one of the big national political parties and can run as Independents, or as members of smaller parties.



COSLA



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This guide has been adapted from the Local Government Association's (LGA) Guidance for Independent Candidates and sponsored by the Independents Group at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)



Make a Difference

Local Government is the natural home of Independent politicians – by Councillor Paul Steele

Most of us become councillors because we want to make things better for the people and places we live in. Being given a mandate by your community to represent their wants and needs, as one of their own, is a humbling experience.

As an Independent councillor, you are elected not to represent party political views, but to represent your community. Decision-making should be as close as possible to the people affected by those decisions, and an Independent councillor is perfectly placed to be one of the best-informed voices helping to shape those outcomes at local government level.

You don't need to be part of a political party to make a real impact. Five of Scotland's local authorities are currently led by Independent councillors, showing that Independents can be among the most influential people within their councils. Working together at COSLA, Independent Leaders form the third largest grouping, and Independent councillors have tangible influence on the work of Scottish local authorities at both national and international level. This includes representatives such as Steven Heddle, COSLA Vice President, and Gary Robinson, COSLA's representative on the Conference of European Municipal Regions—both Independent councillors.

Renowned for our genuine local voices, fresh perspectives, and truly independent thinking, I would encourage anyone considering standing as an Independent councillor to reflect carefully on the challenges involved. You will be tested. It requires commitment, resilience and compassion, but it is also deeply rewarding, and you can make a hugely positive difference in people's lives.

There are few things in life that compare to the privilege of helping shape the place you call home and standing up for the people who live there. So, if you think you have what it takes to be an Independent councillor, don't hesitate. Seize the opportunity and get your name on the ballot paper.



Thinking of standing?

What matters to you in your local area? Is it the state of the local park, the need for more activities for young people, improving services for older people, making the roads safer, or ensuring that local businesses can thrive? Whatever needs changing in your neighbourhood, you could be just the person to change it by becoming a local councillor.

Perhaps you are already involved in your community and local affairs and want to take the next step. Or you may be looking for a worthwhile and rewarding way to help your local community.

There are 1226 councillors in Scotland, each representing their local community and all with their own reason for doing so. To be truly democratic, councils need to be representative of their community. To make the best decisions, they need to draw on a wide range of skills, experience, and knowledge of what the local community wants and needs. Councils need people from all parts of the community who can bring their own perspective on what is needed locally.

Are you ready to help change the face of local government?

No other role gives you the chance to make such a huge difference to the quality of life for people in your local area.

The next Scottish Local Government Elections are being held on 6th May 2027, and this guide will help you decide whether to stand as an Independent along with some tips and advice on how to give yourself the best chance of being elected.

There are things that all prospective candidates should know before they embark on an election campaign. This guide will look at some of these issues and help you decide whether to take the plunge and stand for election to your local council.

Why did you stand?

“I was unhappy with the efficacy of the councillors who represented my ward. I was also not happy that out of four councillors in the ward there hadn’t been a female representative for many years.”



“To represent constituents and to influence the Council’s political and strategic direction via committees.”

“I wanted to make a positive difference in my local community. I understood just how important local councils are in shaping the day-to-day lives of people and that motivated me to step forward and play a more active role.”



“I was originally elected as a member of a political party but got disillusioned with party politics so I resigned and served out the rest of my term as an Independent. When it came to deciding whether to try and get re-elected, I thought why not? I had built up the trust and respect of my community and thankfully they voted me in again. That meant more to me than being elected on a party ticket and I work hard to repay that trust.”

How do councils work?



Tip: Have a look at your council's constitution, which is the rule book of the council. This provides the framework within which the council conducts its business and makes decisions.

There are 32 Councils in Scotland that perform a range of functions. They are best known as service providers, delivering services either directly through their employees or by commissioning services from outside organisations.

Councils also play a regulatory role, protecting consumers and the environment through issuing licences for taxis and pubs for example, and providing regulatory services such as trading standards, environmental health and determining planning applications.

Each council is divided into wards with three or four councillors representing each ward, apart from island councils which can have wards with one to five councillors.

All councils are led by democratically elected councillors who, working together, set the council's vision, direction, and budget. Around two-thirds of councils work with a 'committee system', where decisions are made across a range of committees. The other third of councils have an executive/cabinet system with a small number of councillors taking the key decisions. Whatever the arrangements, all councillors should research the issues that are affecting residents and contribute to decision making and scrutiny of council business.

Councils are large organisations that play a big part in the local economy and influence many aspects of the lives of the people who live and work there.

Councils vary widely in terms of their style, political leadership, and approach to working with communities and public service partner organisations.

The range of services councils can be responsible for include:

- ◆ education
- ◆ social care
- ◆ planning and licensing
- ◆ housing and regeneration

- ◆ community safety and cohesion
- ◆ waste collection and recycling
- ◆ roads and street lighting
- ◆ arts, sports, and culture

Councils now deliver much of what they do in partnership, so as a councillor you may have opportunities to sit on external boards that have responsibility for the strategic planning and delivery of some of the above services.



Tip: The Improvement Service (IS) has developed a short online course with the Open University (OU), 'Preparing for Elected Office in Scottish Local Government', that will support you to learn more about what councils are, what they do, and how they are funded.



What do councillors do?

Councillors have two broad roles:

- ♦ Community Leadership – supporting and advocating for individuals and communities
- ♦ Governing the council – contributing to council policy and decisions

These roles are complementary and they feed into each other. More information is available in the ‘Preparing for Elected Office in Scottish Local Government’ [online course](#).

Becoming a councillor is both a rewarding and privileged form of public service. You will be able to make a difference to the quality of people’s daily lives and to their prospects.

Being an effective councillor requires commitment and hard work. Councillors must listen to the views of residents, other councillors and council officers and work to bring them together to a common aim.

Residents, community groups, local business, outside bodies and the council, will all make legitimate demands on a councillor’s time, on top of the demands and needs of their personal and professional lives. If you are considering becoming a councillor, it’s worth discussing the idea with your family and friends. You will need their support as you will have to spend time attending to council business, and depending on your ambitions this can amount to a substantial amount of time.

Who can be a councillor?

There are certain qualification criteria you must meet if you want to stand for election to a council in Scotland. You must be:

- ◆ at least 18 years old on the day of your nomination, and
- ◆ either a British citizen, an eligible Commonwealth citizen, or a qualifying foreign national, and
- ◆ meet at least one of the following four qualifications:
 - a. you are registered as a local government elector for the local authority area in which you wish to stand on the day of your nomination.
 - b. you have occupied as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the local authority area during the whole of the 12 months before the day of your nomination.
 - c. your main or only place of work during the 12 months prior to the day of your nomination has been in the local authority area.
 - d. you have lived in the local authority area during the whole of the 12 months before the day of your nomination.

If you meet the above criteria, then you should be able to stand, unless you meet any of the disqualification criteria. The Electoral Commission's '[Can you stand for election?](#)' guidance contains all the information you need on the criteria for being disqualified from standing for council elections.

Please note, you **are allowed** to stand for election to a council if you are an employee of that council. However, should you be elected, you **must resign** from your employment the next working day or you will be disqualified as a councillor.

If you are in any doubt about your eligibility to stand, contact the returning officer or the elections team in your council for advice.

You can find out which council you live in by entering your postcode in [Boundary Scotland's website](#).



Tip: If you are in any doubt about your eligibility to stand, contact the returning officer at your local council for advice.



What's expected of a councillor?

The councillor's role and responsibilities include:

- ♦ community leadership, engagement, and support
- ♦ making decisions
- ♦ developing and reviewing council policy
- ♦ scrutiny
- ♦ regulatory, quasi-judicial and statutory duties.
- ♦ partnership working

Being available for people to contact is an important part of a councillor's job. Many councillors enjoy attending local events and meetings. Some produce newsletters or use social media or blogs. Some hold regular drop-in surgeries, which provide a chance for residents to discuss their problems or concerns.

Much of a councillor's work can be done by telephone, letters, or email, though sometimes it is better to arrange meetings with residents or council staff to resolve issues. Sometimes all a resident needs is to be directed to the right information and/ or contacts to enable them to deal with an issue themselves.

All councillors are expected to attend full council meetings, and most are members of committees, panels or boards that have decision making, scrutiny or policy development functions. Membership of committees, panels or boards will come with expectations of participating in meetings, attending informal briefings, and reading papers. Councillors may also choose to sit on quasi-judicial committees, for example planning and licensing committees which take non-political decisions on applications.

Being a councillor is very worthwhile, but it does also require time. You will need to balance your council commitments with your personal and professional life, and this can sometimes cause conflict.

If you have caring responsibilities, you will also need to think about how to manage those. That said, there are many people looking after children or dependent adults who make excellent local councillors, particularly since they often have direct personal knowledge of the services they are responsible for providing or overseeing.



Tip: Make a list of all the things you currently do. Think about how you could manage your activities and commitments with council work on top. Is everything you do essential? Could you combine things? Who might help you with some of them? Who do you need to talk to about it?

The Preparing for Elected Office worksheet has an exercise to help you think about the time you have available to carry out the role.

Councillor Emma MacDonald Shetland Islands Council

I was interested in the council, but I didn't think the council represented me and my friends.

It's one of those things that you might sit down and think 'oh I couldn't do that and it's for a certain type of person', but it's really for anybody.

You have a perception in your head of how it's going to be, but I realised very quickly that what really matters is you get to know people and you build relationships, and I'm quite good with people.

I'd love to sit in a council chamber with an equal number of women to men. It's a great job because it's flexible, it's not like you have to be there 9-5, and it's so varied and you meet so many different people.

Just give it a go!



Do I need any special skills or experience to be a councillor?

It's important that councils have councillors who reflect and represent the communities they serve and have a broad range of skills and life experience. You don't have to be highly educated or have a profession. Skills gained through raising a family, caring for a sick or disabled relative, volunteering or being active in faith or community groups can be just as valuable.

While you don't need any special qualifications to be a councillor, having or being able to develop the following attributes will help you in the role:

- ◆ communication skills
- ◆ problem solving and analytical skills
- ◆ team working and people skills
- ◆ organisational skills
- ◆ the ability to engage with your local community.

Don't worry if you don't yet feel that you have all the skills to be a councillor. All councils provide support, information, and training for new councillors. The [Improvement Service \(IS\)](#) also provide national induction resources to support new councillors.



Will I get paid for being a councillor?

Will I get paid?

If you're thinking about standing as a councillor in Scotland, it's natural to wonder what the role pays and how the system works. Councillor pay is set nationally, not by individual councils, which means everyone starts with the same basic salary no matter to which council they are elected.

From 1 April 2025, the basic annual salary for a councillor was set at £25,982. This is the amount every councillor received that year.

Councillors can also join the Local Government Pension Scheme and claim expenses for travel, subsistence and other costs that arise directly from council duties.

Some councillors take on senior roles, which come with extra pay. The amounts depend on which "band" your council is placed in. This banding system groups councils based on factors such as their size and budget.

Does being a councillor affect my benefits?

Yes, it can do. If you receive benefits, your councillor remuneration can affect your entitlement so get advice before agreeing to stand.



Can I be a councillor and have a job?

Yes, 38% of councillors in Scotland stated they have additional employment (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee Report, 2024).

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.

Employers are required under the [Employment Rights Act 1996](#) to provide reasonable time off work for public duties. These duties include attendance at committee meetings and approved duties. Most employers are happy to do this for formal meetings of the council, which are usually arranged many months in advance and can, therefore be planned.

However, you should note that there is no legal requirement for an employer to pay a councillor for the time they take off to carry out their councillor role.



“Find out from a current Councillor what time requirement is expected of you and the schedule of meetings which they have, which can include sub-Committees, Community Councils and arms-length bodies - it can all add up!”



I have a disability, can I be a councillor?

Yes, the Public Sector Equality Duty, places a specific duty on public bodies, including local authorities, to consider all individuals when carrying out their day-to-day work, from shaping policy to delivery of services and in relation to their own employees.

Councils are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate the needs of disabled councillors who would otherwise be placed at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled councillors. It is an 'anticipatory duty' meaning that councils must think in advance about the needs of disabled people and make reasonable adjustments.

If you believe that the council you wish to be elected to would need to make adjustments to accommodate your needs, you should contact them at any early stage to discuss your requirements.

Once you become a councillor, your council should work with you to overcome any barriers you come across because of your disability and will make sure you can be fully involved. Being a councillor, however, is not a form of employment and therefore you are not counted as an 'employee' of the council.

Access to Work support

As a disabled councillor, you may be entitled to support through Access to Work. This is a UK Government programme that can help cover the extra costs of being a councillor that relate to your disability or health condition.

As councillors in Scotland receive a salary, the role is recognised as paid work for Access to Work purposes, unlike in England and Wales. This means you would be able to apply for support once elected.

More information about Access to Work is [available](#).

Access to Elected Office Fund

The [Access to Elected Office Fund](#) is now open for disabled people standing in the May 2027 Scottish council elections. The Fund offers financial and non-financial support to remove any barriers applicants may face when campaigning. It is funded by the Scottish Government and administered by Inclusion Scotland.



What support is available to councillors to help carry out their role?

Councils have staff, known as Officers, available to provide support and assistance. Exactly what facilities you get will depend on the council and the position you hold. Many will provide you with a computer or tablet and some may pay for internet access and an additional telephone line and/or mobile phone.

Councils provide induction and training for new councillors, as does the [Improvement Service \(IS\)](#).

Once elected, Independent councillors can find it useful to formally link up with other Independent members of the council by forming a group. Joining an Independent Group, even if just for certain council business, will help you to gain the maximum number of seats on council committees and increase your influence.

Next steps

If you are interested in being a councillor here's some next steps to consider:

1. Start building your profile so that voters know who you are!

Now that you've decided to stand it's time to begin gathering local support.

To connect with your electorate, you will need to work out your position on local 'hot' issues such as crime, traffic, the environment, and schools.

You will need to know what the council is doing about these issues and how your opinion differs from other candidates. You will need this information for when you begin canvassing. The aim of canvassing is for people to see you are making a serious effort and for them to know who you are. As you go from door to door persuading people to vote for you, you will be challenged on your opinions, and it is best that you have a planned idea of your dialogue on important issues.

You may also want to begin building a network of supporters who will help with your election campaign. It will be easier to campaign with some helpers who are willing to deliver leaflets, canvas on your behalf, put up posters in their windows, etc. The number of helpers and time they are willing to donate, may impact your canvas and leaflet delivery plans. It's a good idea to think about your support network before ordering canvassing materials. To identify yourself or your volunteers, canvassers can wear black and white rosettes with your name on the stickers centre.



Tip: Keep what is said on the doorstep short and simple, otherwise you will never get around to everyone. You can always call people who would prefer not to engage in a lengthy conversation back at another time.

2. Put yourself forward as a candidate



Tip: Once you've decided to put yourself forward as a candidate you need to be prepared to put in the hours, both during the campaign and after.

Read the [Electoral Commission guidance](#) for the Scottish Local Government Elections as this has all the key dates and information you should need.

You can also contact the Returning Officer at your council for the candidate registration forms and guidance for candidates. Your council's elections team can also point you towards useful sources of information in the council and the steps you need to take to be formally nominated.



Tip: Hand your registration forms in at least seven days ahead of the deadline date to allow for any necessary changes and a resubmission to be made before the deadline.

3. Printing advice

Leaflets and letters are a key part of any campaign and guidance by the Electoral Commission is very clear on what needs to be included. If you have never dealt with commercial printers before, make sure you allow plenty of time to organise what you want.

Prices will vary according to what type of paper you have, how many folds, if any, how many you want printed and the quality of the artwork you supply.

4. Know your deadlines



Tip: Gather a diary of all the important dates leading up to Election Day to ensure you don't miss any key deadlines.

There are a lot of things that you will need to do, if you are to be successful in being elected as an Independent councillor. Leave nothing to chance. Plan ahead in plenty of time. Not having a party machine behind you means you need to be very organised. Do not think that you can leave anything to the last moment.

One way to do this is to have a countdown timetable including the deadline for nominations, printing timescales, postal voting dates, and Election Day. Key dates will be informed by the Electoral Commission along with your own campaign goals.

5. Ensure you are officially nominated as the election date draws nearer

To become nominated as a candidate at a council election in Scotland, you need to submit a completed set of nomination papers to the place fixed by the Returning Officer by 4pm on the 23rd working day before the poll. This deadline is set out in law and cannot be changed for any reason.

The Electoral Commission [guide for Independents](#) contains key information about the nomination process.

6. Your Election Day checklist

By the time Election Day rolls around, you'll have done so much work on your campaign between getting to know your voters, making your positions known, and organising campaign materials, it would be complete shame to forget any Election Day essentials.

- ✓ Maximise your social media channels to remind people to come out and vote for you.
- ✓ Are there any key locations, e.g. the local train station, for last minute leafleting, to remind people to vote?
- ✓ Is someone helping your known supporters who have mobility problems to get to the polling station?

- ✓ Are there posters in the houses on the way to the polling station?
- ✓ Do you have supporters at the polling station wearing rosettes? Are they aware of the rules?
- ✓ Remember that the busiest times at polling stations are before and after office hours.
- ✓ Are you planning to attend the count? Don't forget to find out the details and confirm your attendance.
- ✓ Don't forget to keep your energy up, it's a long day!

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