

Information on Becoming a County Councillor

**Election date:
2 May 2013**

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Cover photo: The opening of the new 'Third Way' bridge over the river Tone in Taunton.

Making a Difference as a Somerset County Councillor

Councillors come from all walks of life and it is important that our councillors represent Somerset's population as a whole. Different backgrounds and experiences add value to the work of the Council.

Local government is changing as is the role of a councillor. The Council is constantly having to adapt and evolve to respond to central government policy and changing local circumstances. Councillors are at the forefront of giving Somerset residents a greater say and becoming involved in the services they use, and in decisions that affect them. Increasingly the Council is looking to support communities in taking on responsibility for local services, as everyone wants to live in places with good services, a safe environment, accessible transport links, a strong sense of community and opportunities for all. Our communities have a key role in delivering these aspirations and the Council and its councillors will help ensure that communities are equipped to meet these challenges.

This booklet gives an insight into the role and responsibilities of councillors, and some information about the Council itself. It also provides information on how to stand for election, with key dates leading to the election on 2 May 2013. We hope you find it useful if you are thinking of standing for election to the Council.

A Brief Introduction to Somerset County Council

The Council is responsible for a range of services. We will spend £737 million (gross) this year on providing services to the 525,200 residents of Somerset.

We receive various government grants totalling £410 million, including the Dedicated Schools Grant which funds schools directly. Your Council Tax makes up 28% of our total funding, with income from charging for some services making up the difference.



In April the Council will take over the running of Public Health Services across Somerset from the NHS in line with Government changes. This is a significant addition to the range of services provided by the Council.

Our challenges

Across the country, the role of Local Authorities is changing as they react to the continuing financial impacts of the banking crisis, reductions in resources to local government and changes in policy and legislation. The changes that particularly affect us include the Health and Social Care Bill, Academies Act, the Localism Bill, and the Open Public Services White paper.

Locally, we have a growing and an ageing population which places ever greater demands on our services. Fundamental changes to the Council are being made to address these issues. We are committed to continuing to do the best we can for our customers in the long-term, and achieving our vision for the future, which is that the Council will:

- be a smaller, more flexible and more ambitious organisation;
- take a different, customer-focused approach to commissioning services;
- provide a better customer experience and improve customer satisfaction;
- have a productive, focused, flexible and motivated workforce with reduced management costs.

The Council's priorities

The Council's priorities as set out in our County Plan are focused on:

- Prosperity - investing in our future: bringing more jobs to Somerset, and building a thriving economy.

- Caring and protecting - people and place: caring for vulnerable people and the environment of Somerset; and
- Keeping costs down: managing the Council within the available resources and ensuring it is fit for purpose.

To achieve our aims we are:

Prosperity

- Bringing high speed broadband to homes and businesses across Somerset from 2015.
- Promoting economic growth through encouraging an enterprise culture within Somerset, and supporting existing successful companies to stay and expand, creating local jobs.
- Investing in and improving our infrastructure, such as roads, and protecting our unique environment to create new employment opportunities and to make Somerset a more attractive and competitive place to do business.
- Supporting inward investment opportunities to attract new businesses into the county.
- Ensuring that Somerset benefits from the Government's proposed power station development at Hinkley Point.
- Making it easier for people to visit and enjoy Somerset as a tourist destination.
- Stimulating investment in new schools and continuing to improve the condition of school facilities.

Caring and Protecting

- Working in partnership with schools to actively support increased educational attainment and improved outcomes for children and young people.
- Improving young people's prospects and skills through the promotion of a range of learning opportunities and apprenticeships and seeking to reduce unemployment.

Keeping Costs Down

- Continuing to reduce our costs by reducing the number of buildings we use and by changing the way the Council is run.
- Not borrowing to finance capital expenditure and continuing to pay off the Council's debt.
- Looking to move away from delivering services ourselves, and use our reduced resources to help communities, organisations and businesses take over and deliver quality services themselves.
- Continuing to make the Council far more agile and flexible in the way that it manages and deploys its employees.
- Helping our councillors to adapt or change the Council's services to suit local needs.
- Working with our partners to simplify access to our services.
- Being open and transparent and going beyond statutory requirements to provide information on costs and decision-making to our residents.
- Forging ever closer links with Town and Parish Councils, community groups and residents.

What Does Being a County Councillor Involve?

Whatever your personal circumstances, if you would like to do something worthwhile and rewarding to help your local community, then the May 2013 County Council election provides an opportunity for you to take part in public life as a member of Somerset County Council.

The day-to-day work of a councillor includes:

- Representing all of the residents in your Electoral Division - talking to constituents and dealing with their concerns.
- Attending events and meetings as a County Council representative. These include local community engagement meetings, Parish and Town Council meetings and meetings with other partners such as Health, Fire and Rescue and Police.
- Being the voice of the local community by bringing their views into the Council's policies and decision-making process.
- Decision-making – by attending Council, committee and political group meetings as appropriate.
- Scrutinising decision-making and challenging the Council's performance.
- Representing a political party (if a member of a political group).

What is Expected of a County Councillor?

The Council expects its councillors to be:

- Innovative and committed to improving the lives of those who live in and visit Somerset.
- Knowledgeable about the Electoral Division that they represent and be committed to helping / supporting the area.

You don't need special qualifications to become a councillor. It is more important that you:

- Have the energy and time to devote to this challenging role;
- Can understand and act on local issues and needs;
- Can communicate with people from different backgrounds, cultures and values;
- Can work in partnership with Council staff (officers) and other organisations on resolving problems at a local level;
- Are confident at public speaking; and
- Are aware of issues of diversity and equality.

By putting yourself forward to be a councillor you will be agreeing to demonstrate the highest standards of conduct when on Council business. You will:

- Sign a Declaration of Acceptance of Office in which you agree to abide by the Council's Code of Conduct, Constitution and other relevant governance documents.
- Make use of any County Council resources made available to you to support you in your role as a councillor.
- Spend a number of hours a week on Council business such as attending meetings, reading documents and dealing with issues raised by your local community or individual constituents. The time spent will vary depending on the size of your Division and any special duties you have taken on.
- Declare and have published Disclosable Pecuniary Interests, as required by the relevant legislation, together with various personal interests as required by the Council. These will be published in summary form on the Council's website.
- Provide your contact details - these will be made publicly available.

What Support can a County Councillor Expect?

In return, as a councillor you can expect:

- A Welcome Day and Induction Programme following the election.
- A range of training and personal development opportunities to meet your needs, of which you are expected to take advantage.
- Support to enable you to use your own IT equipment or IT equipment provided by the Council to help you in your role as a councillor.
- Dedicated assistance from the Community Governance Team with additional (more specialised) help, advice and support from a network of County Council officers.
- A range of allowances to recompense you for your work as a Councillor, including a Basic Allowance currently set at £9880 per annum.
- To be kept informed on local issues concerning your Electoral Division.
- To have your access needs recognised and to be treated fairly and with respect, dignity and understanding.

Changes to the Council's Electoral Arrangements

The Council currently has 58 councillors representing 58 electoral divisions. An electoral review of the County has recently been undertaken aimed primarily at addressing imbalances between the number of electors across the 58 divisions.

The outcome of this review has been to reduce the number of councillors to 55 with effect from the 2013 County Council elections. The 55 councillors will represent 53 single councillor electoral divisions and a single two-councillor electoral division covering Street and Glastonbury.

These changes have balanced electorate numbers between electoral divisions and revised boundaries to take account of population movements and housing developments.

Maps of the new electoral divisions clearly showing the new boundaries are available to view on the Council's website: <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/irj/public/council/initiatives/initiative?rid=/guid/70aea05e-8a6a-2e10-4096-8dbd0a63b3d7>

How to Stand for Election

The Election Officers at each of the five District Councils in Somerset will put up Notices of Elections across Somerset around two months before the election date of 2 May 2013. These will tell you where and when to apply to be a candidate. Further information on the process can be obtained from the relevant Election Officer and their contact details can be found on page 19.

When you apply to be a candidate, you will be sent a Nomination Pack. This will contain all the forms and information you need for the election, including a nomination paper.

You will need ten signatures on your nomination paper. These must be from people who are registered to vote, and who live in the Electoral Division you wish to represent.

The following link takes you to a map showing all 54 Somerset Electoral Divisions:

<http://www.somerset.gov.uk/irj/public/council/initiatives/initiative?rid=/guid/70aea05e-8a6a-2e10-4096-8dbd0a63b3d7>

Please note that there are 53 single member Electoral Divisions and one two-Member Electoral Division covering Glastonbury and Street.

If you wish to stand as a candidate for a recognised political party then you must have that party's support. They will provide you with a certificate that confirms you will be representing that party. This needs to be submitted with the other paperwork from your Nomination Pack.

Election expenses

Please note that there are restrictions on the amount a candidate can spend on their campaign and a legal requirement for candidates to submit a declaration of election expenses. Council staff are not allowed to help candidates make this declaration so you need to be aware of this if you wish to stand. Your Nomination Pack will have more information about this.

You can stand either on behalf of a political party or as an independent candidate. If you are thinking of standing as a candidate for a particular political party then you should first get in touch with that party's local organisation.

County Councillors are elected for a four-year term. There is no limit to the number of times you can stand for election, and you can also be a Parish, Town or District Councillor as well as a County Councillor.

If you are in full-time employment, the Employment Rights Act 1996 requires employers to allow staff a reasonable amount of time off for their work as a councillor. You will need to check with your employer to agree on the amount of time they are willing to let you take.

Eligibility

To become a councillor you must be:

- Aged 18 or over on the day of nomination.
- A British citizen, an eligible Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of any other member state of the E.U.

You must also meet at least one of the four criteria listed below:

- You are registered to vote in the elections for Somerset County Council on the day you are nominated and on the day of the election.
- You have occupied, either as an owner or a tenant, any land or premises in the local authority area during the whole of the 12 months before the day you are nominated and election day.

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- Your main or only place of work during the 12 months before the day you are nominated and election day has been in the local authority area.
 - You have lived in the local authority area during the whole of the 12 months before the day you are nominated and election day.

Restrictions

You cannot become a councillor if:

- You work for Somerset County Council or hold a paid office under the authority;
- In the last five years you have been in prison or have received a suspended sentence for three months or more;
- You are the subject of a bankruptcy restriction order or interim order;
- You hold a politically restricted post for another authority; or
- You have been disqualified from standing as a councillor under any legislation relating to any corrupt or illegal practices.

Making Decisions at Somerset County Council

Councillors are responsible for the major decisions such as setting budgets, approving key policies and deciding how services will be delivered. Council officers are responsible for the day-to-day decisions to run the Council's services, consulting and informing councillors as necessary. Listed below are the current main decision-making meetings that, as a councillor, you might find yourself involved in.

Full Council

All 55 councillors of Somerset County Council serve on Full Council, which:

- appoints the Leader of the Council;
- decides the democratic arrangements for the Council, including the committee structure;
- agrees the main policies of the Council;
- agrees the Council's annual revenue and capital budgets; and
- considers any matter affecting Somerset or its inhabitants.

Leader and Cabinet

The Cabinet is the main decision-making body of the Council and is appointed by the Leader of the Council. It is currently made up of seven councillors from the largest political group on the Council.

The Leader decides the decision making responsibilities of the Cabinet, including delegated powers to individual Cabinet Members and officers.

All decisions taken under the authority of the Leader for the day-to-day running of the Council must be within the policy and budget frameworks set by Full Council.

The Cabinet is currently supported by a cross-party Cabinet Policy Advisory Committee, whose main purpose is to advise the Cabinet on policy issues and key decisions before they are taken.

Somerset Waste Board

The Somerset Waste Board is made up of 12 councillors (two from each District Council and two from the County Council). It is an excellent example of joint working between the County Council and the five District Councils. The Board is responsible for managing the delivery of an integrated waste management service across Somerset.

Regulation Committee

The Regulation Committee is currently made up of nine councillors. All of the political groups are represented on the Committee. It is responsible for dealing with the Council's regulatory functions, mainly in the areas of planning control and rights of way.

Scrutiny at Somerset County Council

The principles of public scrutiny are to:

- provide a 'critical friend' challenge to the Cabinet policy-makers and decision-makers;
- support and ensure the voice and concerns of local people and the wider community are heard within the Council; and
- drive improvement in public services.

The scrutiny function at Somerset County Council allows councillors not involved in Cabinet decision-making to influence and develop County Council service delivery. The Council currently has a single cross-party Scrutiny Committee of eleven members and its responsibilities include specific statutory responsibilities in respect of community safety, flood defence and health services. The Committee members also include three Diocese representatives and two parent governor representatives who have full voting rights on educational matters.

Other Committees at Somerset County Council

The Council has a Standards Committee of three councillors and three co-opted non-voting members with responsibility for:

- ensuring councillors maintain the highest standards of conduct;
- the Council's Code of Conduct and other key documents governing the conduct of councillors and officers; and
- considering complaints made against councillors.

In addition the Council has the following Committees:

- Audit Committee - responsible for reviewing risk management, governance, and the internal audit arrangements of the Council; reports from external audit and inspection agencies, and the annual accounts of the Council.
- Human Resources Policy Committee - responsible for determining, monitoring, reviewing and amending staffing policies and practices.
- Pensions Committee - responsible for carrying out the Council's functions as the monitoring authority of the Council's Pension Fund.
- Officer Appeals Committee - responsible for determining appeals by members of staff against dismissal or against rejection of a complaint under the grievance procedure.

Please remember that the current decision-making and committee arrangements of the Council may change. The new Council will decide what arrangements will be put in place after the election in May 2013.

Like to Know More?

If you would like to know more about Somerset County Council and being a County Councillor, please contact Michael Bryant or Vicki May who are the officers responsible for councillor support in the Community Governance Team.

They are there to answer any questions you may have and are happy to arrange a one-to-one discussion if you have further questions that you would like answered.

Their contact details can be found on page 19.

Contacts

For any queries regarding Somerset County Council please contact:

Michael Bryant

Senior Community Governance Officer

01823 357162

mbryant@somerset.gov.uk

Vicki May

Senior Community Governance Officer

01823 357148

vmay@somerset.gov.uk

For a Nomination Pack and queries regarding the election process, please contact the officer in the relevant District as follows:

Mendip

Steven Lake

01749 341236

Steven.lake@mendip.gov.uk

Sedgemoor

Christine Facey

01278 435334

Chris.facey@sedgemoor.gov.uk

South Somerset

Roger Quantock

01935 462111

Roger.quantock@southsomerset.gov.uk

Taunton Deane

Craig Morse

01823 356316

C.morse@tauntondeane.gov.uk

West Somerset

Elisa Day

01984 635272

Eday@westsomerset.gov.uk

Further information on Somerset County Council can be found on our website - www.somerset.gov.uk

Key Dates

Publication of Notice of Election	26 March 2013
Receipt of Nominations	5 April 2013 (noon)
Withdrawal of Candidate	10 April 2013 (noon)
Appointment of Election Agents	10 April 2013 (noon)
Publication of Notice of Election Agents	10 April 2013
Last Date for Registration	17 April 2013
Receipt of Postal Vote Application	17 April 2013 (5.00 pm)
Publication of Notice of Poll	24 April 2013
Receipt of Proxy Vote Applications	24 April 2013 (5.00pm)
Appointment of Poll and Count Agents	25 April 2013
First day to issue lost Postal Ballot Papers	26 April 2013
Receipt of Emergency Proxy Vote Applications	2 May 2013 (5.00pm)
Last Day to Issue Replacement Spoilt or Lost Ballot Papers	2 May 2013 (5.00pm)
Day of Poll	2 May 2013
Declaration of Candidate Expenses (last date)	7 June 2013

Useful Websites

You may also find the following websites useful:

Be A Councillor

www.beacouncillor.org.uk

Councillors uk

www.councillorsuk.co.uk

Department of Communities and local
Government

www.communities.gov.uk

Directgov

www.direct.gov.uk

Electoral Commission

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

N.B. This is full of useful advice for candidates,
election agents and political parties.

Improvement and Development Agency

www.idea.gov.uk/makeadifference

Local Government Association

www.lga.gov.uk

National Association of Local Councils

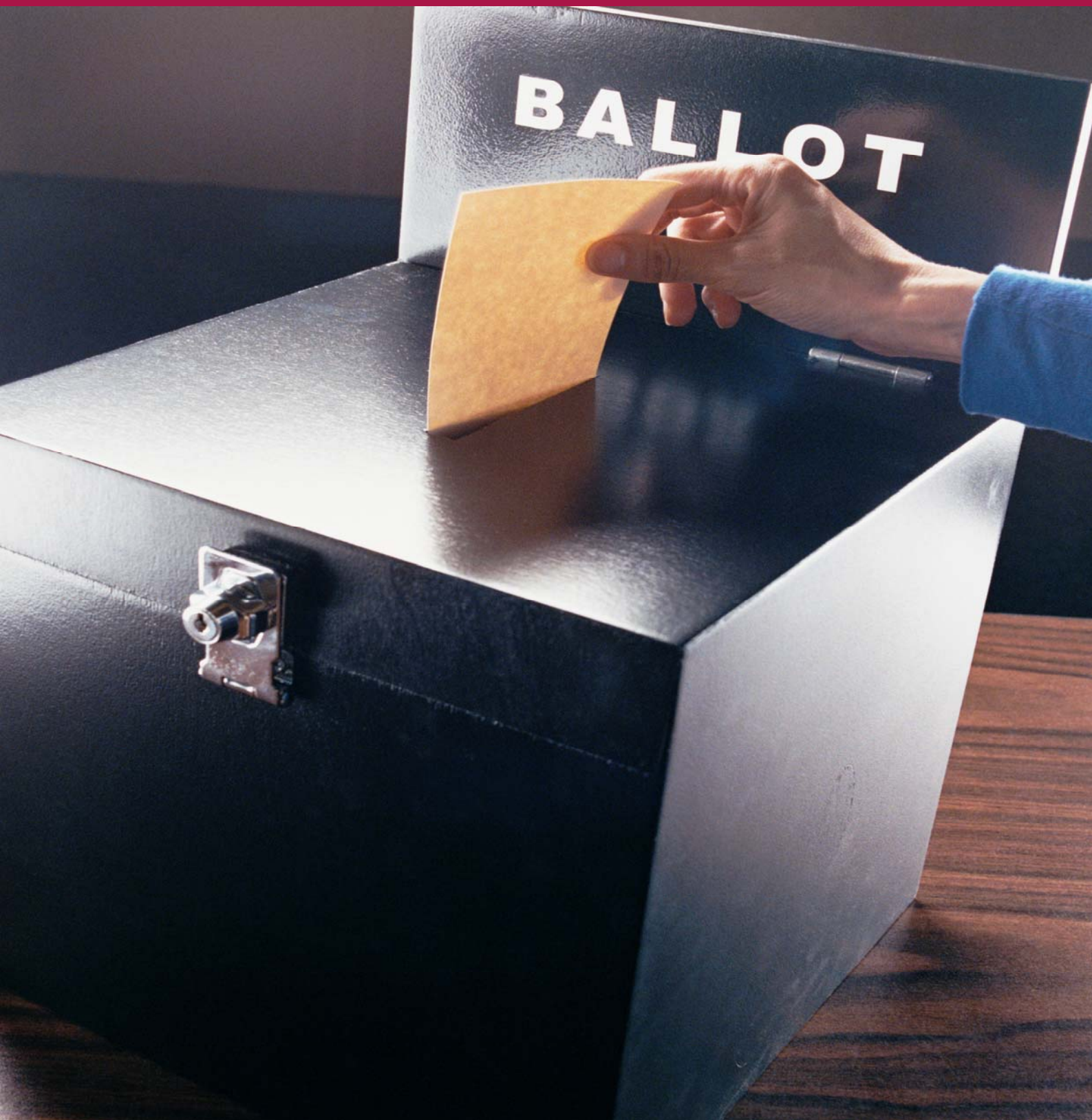
www.nalc.gov.uk

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Somerset County Council - Community Governance Team
January 2013