



The role of a council member

2015 Local Government Elections - Fact Sheet 2

Generally, local government council members, who include the mayor, president and councillors, do not have any authority to act or make decisions as individuals. They are members of an elected body that makes decisions on behalf of a local government through a formal meeting process.

Included with this fact sheet is a “Snapshot of the role”, produced by the Department of Local Government and Communities to provide some context to the attributes most useful for a local government councillor. The role of each councillor is to:

- represent the interests of electors, ratepayers and residents;
- provide leadership and guidance to the community;
- facilitate communication between the community and the council and vice versa; and
- participate in decision making processes at meetings.

Key Concept: A councillor is a member of a team, shaping the district’s future in consultation with the community.

Councillors represent the interests of all electors and residents. The representational role of a councillor does not mean that he or she has a duty to support all suggestions made. A councillor should consider the varying views of the community and then make decisions in the best interests of the district.

What it means to be a councillor

Councillors represent the community’s interests in many ways. They can pass on electors’ views, support initiatives, and report complaints and problems they perceive, by informing the CEO or raising such matters in council meetings. The representation of electors’ views is complicated in councils that operate under a ward system. Here, the councillor has both a duty to present the views of electors in his or her ward and also to consider the good of the district as a whole when making a decision.

Explanation: A ward system in a district occurs when the district is divided into sections for electoral purposes. These wards often reflect communities of interest within a district. For example, in the district of Ashburton there are six wards: Ashburton, Onslow, Pannawonica, Paraburdoo, Tableland and Tom Price.

Providing leadership and guidance to the community

People often look to their elected representatives to provide leadership and guidance. This can be done by highlighting possible courses of action or directions which could be followed, putting forward options or ideas, and presenting arguments or possible solutions to a problem at community forums and meetings of council.

Developing a vision for the community and deciding what needs to be done to achieve that vision is an important role for council members. Convincing the community to endorse and follow that vision and associated plans requires leadership.

It is important to recognise that the most fundamental task is to try to achieve a strong sense of shared purpose and commitment. The needs and desires of the community are constantly changing and evolving. Councillors must be prepared to initiate new policies and activities in response to these changes.

Facilitating communication between the community and the council

To be effective, council members need to understand the views of the people they represent. Communication is a two-way process. Councillors provide information to the community about the policies and decisions of council, and the community relays its desires, concerns and opinions to the council through the councillors.

To represent both electors and the council effectively, a councillor needs to be a good communicator and keep in touch with the local community.

Councillors can keep in touch with electors in a variety of ways including:

- attending meetings of local organisations;
- being available and responding to residents who wish to raise issues or concerns;
- attending events arranged by the local government;
- participating in functions held in the local area;
- communicating with the community via a newsletter, email or website; and
- reading the local newspaper.

Key concept: If you explain to electors why and how decisions were made in council, they are less likely to be critical when decisions do not go their way.

Decision making

Determining policy

The policy making role of a councillor requires:

- the assessment and evaluation of community needs;
- establishing priorities for the various needs identified;
- considering the allocation of local government resources; and
- convincing fellow councillors of these needs and obtaining their support.

To initiate new policies and activities successfully, a councillor will often need to gather information and obtain advice. This may be achieved through the council staff, following an approach to the CEO.

However, it should be remembered that while a policy may begin with an individual idea, decisions are not made by the individual councillor alone. They are made by the council as a whole.

This democratic process means that a councillor must accept the majority decision when the council votes upon a motion. Consequently, if a council member feels strongly about an issue, he or she should present a well constructed and researched argument during the debate on the motion. If the result of the vote is against the wishes of an individual councillor, he or she should accept that result graciously. Each council member has the right to have their dissent recorded in the minutes.

Planning for the future

All local governments have to plan for the future, and this process starts with a Strategic Community Plan and a Corporate Business Plan.

The Strategic Community Plan is a ten year plan which states the aspirations, vision and objectives of the community, and it needs to be developed with input from the community and adopted by council.

The local government's administration then needs to develop a 4 year Corporate Business Plan which prioritises all of the important projects, services and activities needed to implement the Strategic Community Plan, stating how much each will cost, what assets will be involved, and who will implement them.

It is recommended that the Corporate Business Plan be developed using "Informing strategies", particularly asset management, long term financial planning and workforce planning. These tell the local government how capable it is of delivering the services required by the community.

Informing strategies about specific issues, such as community safety or major infrastructure works, also assist the local government to deliver these services.

It is not necessary for council to consider and approve the operational plan or business unit plans referenced in the Corporate Business Plan, but council does need to have regard for the community's long term objectives and the local government's capacity to deliver on them when deciding its priorities.

Council has the opportunity to review the Strategic Community Plan every two years through a "desktop review", to make sure it is meeting the changing needs of the community, and is required to conduct a major review of the plan every four years.

The council will also review the Corporate Business Plan annually, to respond to changes inside and outside the local government. This process also helps council in setting the annual budget.

More information is available in the DLGC's Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and Guidelines publication.

Managing assets

All local government services and projects are delivered through the use of assets. Local government assets include everything from roads, bridges, buildings and parks, to computers and telephones.

Although assets are managed by the local government's administration, council has responsibility for making sure that the community gets the best possible value from its assets. It does this by setting affordable and achievable priorities in the Corporate Business Plan, and by making sure that the local government's Asset Management Strategy is developed and implemented, and appropriate resources are made available for that process.

More information is available in the DLGC's Asset Management Framework and Guidelines publication.

Governing finances

The local government's Corporate Business Plan and Long Term Financial Plan will set out the projects, services and activities that the local government will deliver and how much these will cost. This information is used by council in the setting and adoption of the annual budget.

Throughout the year, reports are prepared to enable councillors to review council finances, ensure that the council is adhering to its budgets or make appropriate

modifications. As with all local government business, finance is a matter for discussion and resolution by the full council. Nevertheless, the individual councillor should maintain an active interest in budgeting since the council is responsible to the community for the results achieved. A councillor may also be called upon to explain the results to the community.

More information is available in the DLGC's Long Term Financial Planning Framework and Guidelines publication.

Reviewing policy

Another aspect of the councillor's role is to review policy from time to time. This involves assessing whether a policy is actually fulfilling the community's needs at any given time and examining the costs associated with the policy's implementation.

To review activities effectively, councillors will need to obtain relevant information from both members of the community and local government staff through appropriate channels.

Important to note: People who are prompted to stand because of one particular local issue need to appreciate that they will be responsible for a much wider range of issues if elected.

Attending meetings

Council members have a duty to attend all council meetings to ensure that the electors are adequately represented. In recognition of this need for representation, the *Local Government Act 1995* provides that a councillor who is absent from three consecutive ordinary council meetings without having been granted leave by the council, is automatically disqualified. If a member wishes to be absent for more than six consecutive ordinary meetings, Ministerial approval is necessary, as well as the approval of the council.

It should be noted that applications for leave of absence are usually supported but must be approved by council before or at the meeting(s) the council member is to be absent from, not retrospectively.

Many local governments operate using a system of committees to reduce the work at council meetings. These committees are established to consider specific aspects of a local government's operation, such as finance, works, community services or planning. Each committee usually includes a small number of councillors who generally make recommendations to full council. Many councils also operate using committees which

include non-elected members, such as employees, consultants or members of the community.

The number of meetings a councillor is required to attend each month will vary according to the frequency of the local government's council meetings and the number of committees on which the elected member sits.

(Most local governments have monthly or fortnightly council meetings and committee meetings may be held several days prior to the full council meeting or on the same day.)

Some local governments have other types of meetings outside the formal council meeting framework which allow councillors and officers to meet and discuss matters.

Being informed

Voting at meetings

If a council member is present at a council meeting he or she has a duty to vote on all matters before that meeting unless he or she has a financial interest. Therefore, it is important for councillors to read the agenda items and officers' reports before the council meeting.

Without this background reading, it is extremely difficult for councillors to make effective assessments of issues and provide constructive input to council debate and decision making. It is also recommended that further information be requested if there is insufficient information available to make an informed decision.

Background reports and papers can often be lengthy. Consequently, councillors must set aside adequate time for preparation prior to each council meeting. The lodging of proxy votes is not permitted at meetings of council or its committees.

Being aware of local issues

Because councillors are required by law to vote on all issues before the meeting, it is important that a ward councillor obtains information on, and remains informed about, issues occurring outside their ward but within other areas of the local government district.

Councillors must also endeavour to remain informed about current affairs at a state and national level. This will give an elected member a broader perspective on issues affecting council.

Following up problems

It is very important that a councillor ensures that electors' enquiries and complaints receive an appropriate response, either by telephone, email, or letter. Electors are then reassured that their local government takes notice of them.

Setting aside time and gaining the support needed

To maintain contact with electors, attend meetings of council, perform other civic duties and remain informed about all relevant local issues is time consuming. This is particularly so for newly elected councillors who are unlikely to have a background knowledge of many of the issues being considered.

Newly elected councillors will need to examine their present commitments and establish priorities to manage their time effectively.

If it is important for you to have the support of your family or friends, this support should be gained before standing for election. Additionally, you will often need assistants, especially for running an election campaign.

Where can I get more information?

For more information visit the Department of Local Government and Communities website at: www.dlgc.wa.gov.au or contact your local government.

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Local government councillor - Snapshot of the role

Context – the general function of local government

Why local governments exist.

- The *Local Government Act 1995* (section 3.1) establishes that:
 - the general function of a local government is to provide for the good government of persons in its district;
 - the scope of what a local government can do is broadly what its community requires and can reasonably be provided with available resources and within the constraints of the Act or any other written law; and
 - a liberal approach is to be taken to the construction of the scope of the general function of a local government.
- The notion of “good government” is illustrated by the provisions of section 1.3(2) which summarises the outcomes intended:
 - “This Act is intended to result in –
 - a) better decision making by local governments;
 - b) greater community participation in the decisions and affairs of local governments;
 - c) greater accountability of local governments to their communities; and
 - d) more efficient and effective local government.”
- Section 1.3(3) establishes that “in carrying out its functions a local government is to use its best endeavours to meet the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity”.

1. Role (and responsibilities), as prescribed by the *Local Government Act 1995*

A local government councillor is required to:

- represent the interests of electors, ratepayers and residents of the district;
- provide leadership and guidance to the community in the district;
- facilitate communication between the community and the council;
- participate in the local government’s decision making processes at council and committee meetings; and
- perform such other functions as are given to a councillor by the Local Government Act or any other written law.

2. Accountabilities, as prescribed by the *Local Government Act 1995*

The accountabilities of the position of local government councillor are:

- to the council, which:
 - governs the local government's affairs;
 - is responsible for the performance of the local government's functions; and
 - is to oversee the allocation of resources and determine the local government's policies.
- to the electors of the local government district.

Essential / desired skills, abilities and knowledge

- An understanding of the role and structure of local government as prescribed by the *Local Government Act 1995* and Regulations;
- An understanding of the quasi-judicial town planning role of local government, as prescribed by the *Planning and Development Act 2005*;
- An understanding of Integrated Strategic Planning - the strategic plans for the future of the local government, the processes involved and the strategic role of a councillor;
- An understanding of the process of managing the CEO's performance;
- Ability to read and understand financial statements and reports; and
- A basic understanding of legal processes.

3. Governance and ethical standards

A local government councillor is expected to:

- promote and support good governance of the council and its affairs;
- promote and support open and transparent government;
- support, and adhere to respectful, appropriate and effective relationships with employees of the local government; and
- adhere to the *Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations 2007* and the local government's Code of Conduct.

Essential / desired skills, abilities and knowledge

- An understanding of the 'separation of powers' between councillors and the administration (the difference between governing and managing);
- An understanding of meeting process, including Standing Orders;
- An appreciation of policy development processes;
- An awareness of risk management strategies; and
- An understanding of the accountability framework prescribed by the *Local Government Act 1995* and the *Corruption and Crime Commission Act 2003*, and other legislation.

4. Values, characteristics and commitment to the role

These are the values, characteristics and commitments that are expected of a councillor:

- Openness and transparency with making decisions;
- Honesty and integrity in dealing with issues being considered;
- Tolerance and respect in relationships at all levels;
- Equality and fairness in promoting community issues;
- A commitment to attend meetings and be fully prepared to participate in the decision-making process;
- A collegiate approach to serving the community;
- A commitment to networking and community consultation;
- Willingness to listen to and consider other peoples' views and accept challenge from others;
- Awareness of and management of conflicts of interest; and
- Preparedness to share the workload with other councillors.

Essential / desired skills, abilities and knowledge

- The ability to communicate, debate and actively participate in meetings; ability to enhance discussion and assist discussions to reach closure; ability to disagree, without being disagreeable;
- The ability to develop and maintain effective working relationships and to manage interpersonal conflicts; and
- Ability to exercise independent judgement.

Personal and role development

Participate in opportunities for local government training and development provided for elected members.