



What happens when you become a council member

2015 Local Government Elections - Fact Sheet 8

Learning the job

Some new councillors will begin with a knowledge of local government and the relevant legislation under which it works. For others, it will be new and perhaps a little daunting at first.

Some of the principal areas of local government powers are listed below and it would greatly assist your work as a councillor if you could become familiar with these as soon as you are able. You will then feel more comfortable in your role as a councillor.

- *Local Government Act 1995* and the associated regulations.
- Other key legislation such as town planning, health and environmental protection legislation.
- Meeting procedures, including the standing orders of your local government.

Asking for assistance

It is a primary function of the CEO of a local government to provide information and advice to councillors on legislative requirements and related matters. This will be supported by further information, including reports, provided by other members of staff of your local government.

The Department of Local Government and Communities has produced an Elected member induction guideline, which includes a checklist, to assist new councillors with preparing for their role. It is a useful guide to ensure newly elected councillors are briefed on the different aspects of local government. The guideline is available from the DLGC's website.

Additionally, training is available for new councillors soon after they have been elected and a Councillor's guide has been produced by the Western Australian Local Government Association.

Developing skills

If elected as a councillor, you will find yourself in a wide range of situations including:

- taking telephone calls from people in the district, some with ideas to put to you, others irate or wanting you to fix a problem;
- speaking to small groups of people in public places;
- putting forward motions at council or committee meetings;
- participating in debates on complex issues at meetings;
- reading and preparing notes from a large assortment of material in preparation for council meetings;
- dealing with situations involving major change;
- listening to the views of people at community meetings and forums; and
- contributing in planning and review workshops.

The skills required for you to be able to deal with these situations are often skills that you have already acquired in everyday life. They include:

- conflict resolution;
- interpersonal skills;
- team skills;
- active listening skills;
- time management;
- forward planning;
- problem solving and analytical skills;
- understanding of financial (such as budgeting) and legislative processes;
- public speaking;
- negotiating;
- managing change; and
- patience.

If you would like to sharpen your skills in some areas or perhaps learn new ones as part of the challenge and enjoyment of being a councillor, there are many workshops and short courses available. You should discuss your needs with your CEO.

Finding out about your local government

The time between election day and your first council meeting can vary. Your local government's CEO will inform you of the time and date of the first meeting.

During the time between the election and the first meeting, you should acquaint yourself with key aspects of your local government's operations. These include your local government's:

- strategic community plan and corporate business plan;
- long term financial plans;
- latest budget;
- existing policies and activities;
- town planning scheme(s);
- local laws;
- meeting procedures (in many cases these are formalised in standing orders local laws); and
- council code of conduct.

Dealing with meetings

Many books have been written about formal meeting procedures. These should be available through local libraries and they provide a useful introduction to the subject.

However, the best way to learn about the specific meeting procedures adopted by an individual council is to have observed a meeting in action. This is particularly important because the meeting procedures used by councils vary. For instance, as a new councillor you will need to become familiar with your council's rules for debating as well as moving, seconding and voting on a motion.

Additionally, you may be prepared for council meetings due to your involvement in organisations which use formal meeting procedures.

Participating in meetings and moving motions

You need to be well organised to participate effectively at meetings. This requires you to establish a good home filing system and allow ample time for background reading and research.

As a councillor it is important that you are clear about the meaning of all agenda items, reports and recommendations before your meeting begins.

The councillor's role is to present information, suggest new activities or initiatives and make proposals in a logical manner – identifying the benefits to individuals or community groups, the likely cost, and the support required from council. Consequently, when framing formal motions to put before council, new councillors need to ensure that the wording is meaningful, clear, precise and accurate. There is no other means of achieving your goals other than by a motion which receives support from the majority of other council members.

During council debates, it is vital to be assertive without being aggressive, manipulative or resorting to personal attacks. New councillors need to pay particular attention to the manner in which arguments are presented, keeping debate purely to factual matters. It must be remembered that you need to maintain a working relationship with other council members, even when there are differences of opinion. Therefore it is crucial that debate is conducted in a non-personal manner.

Further advice can be found in the Department of Local Government and Communities' Guide to meetings, available from the DLGC's website.

Meeting other councillors and key staff

During the period following your election to office, you should ask the CEO to organise a meeting with your local government's staff to make yourself aware of their duties. In larger councils, it may only be possible to meet the senior staff initially. Councillors have no role in managing or directing staff but need to know how the organisation is structured. Further, it is the council's responsibility to ensure that there is an appropriate structure for administering the local government.

New councillors should also get to know other members and, in particular, other councillors for your ward. As a new councillor you will need to work closely with, and communicate effectively with, other councillors.

Key Concept: Good preparation and good information makes the job easier and gives a better result for all concerned.

Checklist: Preparation for your first meeting

- Have you met the other councillors in your ward or district?
- Have you met key staff?
- Have you read your agenda papers for the first meeting?
- Do you know about your local government's meeting procedures?

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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