



The role of a council member

Generally, local government council members, who include the mayor or 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.

The role of a council member

Providing leadership and guidance to the community

People look to their elected representatives for leadership and guidance. Councillors can provide this by putting forward options and presenting arguments or possible solutions to problems at council meetings.

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.

The most fundamental task for councillors is 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 needs to flow both ways to be effective. 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, such as:

- 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 regarding council matters via a newsletter, email or website
- reading the local newspaper.

Determining policy

The policy-making role of a councillor includes:

- assessing and evaluating community needs
- establishing priorities for the identified needs
- considering the allocation of local government resources
- understanding the local government's legislative framework
- gaining the support of fellow councillors of these needs.

To initiate new policies and activities successfully, a councillor will often need to gather information and obtain advice. This may be achieved through the local government staff, under the direction and guidance of the CEO.

While a policy may begin with an individual idea, decisions are not made by an individual councillor alone. They are made by the whole council. This democratic process means that a councillor must accept the majority decision when the council votes upon a motion. If a council member feels strongly about an issue and does not have a conflict of interest in the matter, they 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, they 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 must **plan for the future of its district** ([/local-government/strengthening-local-government/integrated-planning-and-reporting](#)). This process starts with a Strategic Community Plan and a Corporate Business Plan.

The Strategic Community Plan is a 10-year plan that states the aspirations, vision, and objectives of the community, is developed with input from the community, and is adopted by council.

The local government's administration then develops a four-year Corporate Business Plan that prioritises all the projects, services and activities needed to implement the Strategic Community Plan. It should state how much each will cost, what assets will be involved, and who will implement them.

The Corporate Business Plan should be developed using informing strategies, particularly asset management, long term financial planning, and workforce planning. These inform how capable the local government is of delivering the services requested 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.

Council does not need to approve the operational plan or business unit plans referenced in the Corporate Business Plan, but it should consider the community's long-term objectives and the local government's capacity to deliver when deciding its priorities.

Council reviews the Strategic Community Plan every two years through a desktop review, to make sure it is meeting the changing needs of the community. Council is required to conduct a major review of the plan every four years. 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 department's **Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and Guidelines** ([/local-government/strengthening-local-government/integrated-planning-and-reporting](#)).

Managing assets

Local government assets include everything from roads, bridges, buildings and parks, to computers and telephones, software, and intellectual property (IP).

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, with appropriate resources for that process.

More information is available in the DLGSC's [Asset Management Framework and Guidelines \(/local-government/strengthening-local-government/integrated-planning-and-reporting\)](#).

Governing finances

The local government's Corporate Business Plan and Long Term Financial Plan 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 budget or make appropriate modifications. As with all local government business, finance is a matter for discussion and resolution by the full council. Councillors should maintain an active interest in budgeting since the council is responsible to the community for the results achieved.

More information is available in the LGIRS's [Long Term Financial Planning Framework and Guidelines \(/local-government/strengthening-local-government/integrated-planning-and-reporting\)](#).

Reviewing policy

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

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

Being informed

Attending meetings

Council members have a duty to attend all council meetings to ensure that electors are adequately represented. Under the Local Government Act 1995 (the Act), a councillor who is absent from three consecutive ordinary council meetings without leave being granted by the council is automatically disqualified (unless all the meetings are held within a two-month period). If a member needs to be absent for more than six consecutive ordinary meetings, Ministerial approval is necessary.

Council members may request to attend a meeting electronically. The Local Government (Administration) Regulations 1996 provide requirements around electronic attendance at meetings. It is important to note that there is a 50% attendance cap, which ensures council members must attend at least half of all meetings conducted over a 12-month period in person. Applications for leave of absence must be approved by council before (or at the start of) the meeting(s) the council member is to be absent from. Leave of absence cannot be approved 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. Committees then make recommendations to the full council. Each committee usually includes a small number of councillors. Some committees include non-elected members such as employees, consultants or community members.

Each council must have an audit, risk and improvement committee and may create other committees as appropriate.

The number of meetings a councillor must attend each month will vary according to the frequency of council meetings and the number of committees on which the elected member sits. Most local governments have monthly or fortnightly council meetings. Committee meetings may be held several days prior to the council meeting or on the same day and are commonly held on a monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly basis.

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

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 in the matter. The lodging of proxy votes is not permitted at meetings of council or its committees.

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 effectively assess issues and provide constructive input to council debate and decision making. Further information should be requested if there is insufficient material 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.

Being aware of local issues

Because councillors are required by law to vote on all issues that require a decision at a council meeting, ward councillors (if the district has wards) should obtain information on, and remain informed about, issues occurring outside their ward but within other areas of the local government district.

Councillors should 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 important that a councillor ensures that all electors' enquiries and complaints receive appropriate responses, either by telephone, email, or letter. Electors are then reassured that their local government takes notice of them.

Gaining and maintaining support

Maintaining contact with electors, attending meetings of council, performing other civic duties, and remaining informed about all relevant local issues is time consuming. This is particularly so for newly elected councillors who are unlikely to have background knowledge of many of the issues being considered.

Newly elected councillors need to examine their present commitments and establish priorities to manage their time effectively. It is important for to have the support of family and/or friends. This support should be gained before standing for election. Additionally, you will often need assistants, especially for running an election campaign.

Accountability to the community

Local government councillors are accountable to the council and to the electors of the local government district.

Public access to information

Members of the public can attend all local government ordinary council meetings and certain committee meetings. They also have the right to access certain local government records and information, including:

- the registers
- minutes of council and committee meetings
- agenda, notice papers, reports, and other documents that will be tabled at a meeting
- maps showing the district and ward boundaries
- local laws.

Members of the public do not have a right to inspect agenda, minutes or notice papers for closed meetings or parts of meetings. Meetings can only be closed in a limited number of circumstances as prescribed by legislation.

Disclosure of financial interests

Councillors must disclose certain financial interests at council and committee meetings and in their primary and annual returns. Councillors need to inform themselves about these matters as failure to disclose interests where required can incur fines of up to \$24,000 or imprisonment of up to 24 months.

Disclosures at meetings and in primary and annual returns are recorded in a register to which the public has access. This enhances the accountability of councillors to the public. At the same time, protection is given to councillors because it is an offence for a person to publish information from the register unless under specified circumstances.

Note: A councillor's right to privacy is balanced by the public's right to be aware of the benefits a council member could gain from a decision.

The department has prepared a guideline on **disclosures of interest** in both meetings and annual returns.

Disclosure of interests affecting impartiality

In addition to financial interests, councillors must declare interests that the community may perceive would affect their ability to act with impartiality. An interest which commonly falls within this definition occurs when a councillor is a member of a group, club or association that brings a matter before the council for a decision. Additionally, if a councillor's parents, siblings or children (not living at home) have an item before council, the councillor is required to disclose an interest affecting impartiality.

The department has produced a guideline in relation to **disclosure of interests** affecting impartiality.

Freedom of information

Local governments are subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1992*, which gives the public a legally enforceable right to access any document held by a local government, unless it has been exempted for a limited number of reasons. For example, personal information can be exempted from release. This extends to records created by a councillor in the course of their duties.

Both FOI legislation and the access provisions in the Act are aimed at encouraging public participation in government and maximising the accountability of local governments to their community.

Financial protection and liability

A councillor is not personally liable for the actions of a local government where that person has acted in good faith and is properly exercising his or her powers and functions under the Act. However, councillors are effectively the trustees of local government funds and property. Any unauthorised act may result in councillors being personally liable for any loss or damage.

If a councillor is convicted of misapplying money and ordered to repay it, the person may be disqualified from acting as a councillor for up to five years, even if the money has been voluntarily repaid.

Defamation

Council members are not protected from defamation in the same manner as Members of Parliament for statements they make in the council chamber. Defamation is the aspect of law that protects people's reputations. It may be divided into libel, which relates to written or pictorial material, and slander, which relates to oral comments. Defamation can be defined as anything that tends to lower a person in the estimation of members of society.

In a council meeting, the council member fulfils a public duty and is therefore given limited protection from legal actions of defamation. Unlike a Member of Parliament, a councillor's privilege is qualified. This means that protection is only provided if the statements are made in good faith. Statements made with malice or made recklessly are not protected.

Statements made outside council meetings are unlikely to attract qualified privilege. This is particularly pertinent in relation to social media. While it can be a powerful tool for communicating ideas and policy platforms directly with the community, care should be used. The Act, its associated Regulations and the Defamation Act 2005 apply in the virtual world, just as they do in real life. The test is whether a councillor would feel comfortable saying something on social media that could still be said in a public forum like a council meeting or on the front page of a newspaper.

Declarations of office

A person elected as a councillor, mayor or president must make a declaration to observe the code of conduct of the local government before acting in the office. The declaration must be made within two months of election and will be organised by the local government's CEO.

Governance and ethical standards

A local government councillor is expected to:

- promote and support good governance
- promote and support open and transparent government
- support and adhere to respectful, appropriate, and effective relationships
- adhere to the Code of Conduct.

Council members' rights

Right to be on at least one committee

A council member is entitled to be on at least one committee. The council determines the committee(s) on which the councillor sits.

Right to request further information when making decisions

Council and committee members have the right to access information beyond what is provided to members of the public. This ensures members are properly informed on matters that are relevant to their functions. The functions of council members in this context include:

- any function that a member is appointed or authorised to carry out by the council
- preparations for an upcoming meeting agenda item decision
- anything the member is doing in carrying out his or her role.

The access provisions do not give members unlimited access to information held by the local government. Members may only seek access to information that is relevant to the performance of a specific function. Access arrangements should be made through the CEO.

Note: Council members, committee members or employees who make improper use of information acquired in the performance of their functions to:

- gain an advantage for themselves or any other person either directly or indirectly
- cause detriment to the local government or any other person

may be liable for a penalty of up to \$24,000 or 24-months imprisonment. The Act does not define the term 'improper use', but it is likely to include wilfully taking advantage of confidential or restricted information held by a local government.

Meeting attendance fees

Each council member has a right to be paid meeting attendance fees. The fee for attending a meeting is not a salary. It is a recognition of the time and effort involved in preparing for and attending council and committee meetings. Council members should seek independent taxation advice as to meeting attendance fees. Budgets and annual financial reports are required to disclose the fees, expenses, and allowances paid to council members.

Council decides the amount of the fee within the minimum and maximum amounts determined by the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal (SAT) under the Salaries and Allowances Act 1975. Fees for individual meetings apply unless council decides to pay an annual fee in lieu of fees for each individual meeting attended. If the council does not set the amount of the individual meeting fee payable, members are entitled to claim the minimum amount.

Council members are not entitled to claim fees for attending committee meetings, however members of the public appointed to committees are determined to a meeting attendance fee if council has decided to pay the fee.

Right to reimbursement of expenses

Expenses that must be reimbursed

Each council member is entitled to be reimbursed for information and communications technology expenses, childcare expenses, and travel costs.

The extent to which these expenses are reimbursed is established by the SAT. Where the SAT determines that annual allowances may be paid toward these expenses, councils can decide to pay their members those allowances at the amount or within the range set by the SAT.

While there is capacity for councils to reimburse their members for expenses incurred beyond these allowances, the SAT does impose limits on the level of some of these reimbursements.

Expenses that may be reimbursed

Expenses incurred in performing a function under the express authority of the local government and expenses incurred by a person who accompanies a council member while performing a function of the local government may be reimbursed. A local government may also decide upon further types of expenses to be reimbursed. Sufficient information, such as a receipt, must be provided to verify reimbursement.

Additional allowance for mayors and presidents

Mayors and presidents are entitled to an annual allowance in addition to their meeting attendance fee. This allowance can be used for any local government related purpose. The right to claim this allowance cannot be refused by the council. Council may decide the amount to be paid, provided it is within the minimum and maximum limits set by the SAT.

Additional allowance for deputy mayors and deputy presidents

Councils also have the discretion to provide an annual allowance for the deputy mayor or deputy president up to a percentage of the annual allowance to which the mayor or president is entitled, as determined by the SAT.

Note: The SAT reviews the appropriate amounts for meeting fees, allowances, and reimbursements on an annual basis. For up to date information, visit the Local Government Elected Members section of the [SAT website](#).

Superannuation payments to council members

From 19 October 2025, it will be compulsory for all class 1 and 2 local governments to pay superannuation to council members. Class 3 and 4 local governments may resolve to pay superannuation to council members.

Individual council members may choose to ‘opt out’ of receiving superannuation, even where a local government resolves to pay superannuation. The department has prepared a [fact sheet for further information](#).

Required skills, abilities, and knowledge

Local government councillors should develop the following skills, abilities, and knowledge:

- Understanding of the role and structure of local government as prescribed by the Act and associated Regulations.
- Understanding of the town planning role of local government as prescribed by the Planning and Development Act 2005.
- Understanding of Integrated Planning and Reporting, including strategic plans for the future of the local government, the processes involved, and the strategic role of a councillor.
- Understanding of CEO performance management processes.
- Ability to read and understand financial statements and reports.
- Basic understanding of legal processes.
- Understanding of the separation of powers between council and administration (the difference between governing and managing).
- Understanding of meeting processes, including Standing Orders (the local law containing rules used to manage a meeting).
- Awareness of risk management strategies.
- Understanding of the accountability framework prescribed by the Act, the Corruption, Crime and Misconduct Act 2003, and other legislation.
- Ability to communicate, debate, and actively participate in meetings.
- Ability to develop and maintain effective working relationships and to manage interpersonal conflicts.
- Ability to exercise independent judgement.

All candidates must complete an online induction prior to nominating for election, and every council member is required to complete the Council Member Essentials training within 12 months of their inaugural election.

 [The role of a council member \(pdf\) 150 KB](#)

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Related information

[An introduction to local government >](#)

[Nominating to be a council member >](#)

[Election campaigning >](#)

[Conduct of local government elections >](#)

[What happens when you become a council member >](#) [Electoral gifts and crowdfunding >](#)

[Put yourself forward: nominate for council >](#)
