

The roles of elected members



What does a councillor do?

The role of councillor can, at times, be very demanding. You will have to balance a number of competing interests and wear a number of hats, as councillors can be required to act simultaneously as community leaders, representatives and board members.

For the three year term councillors need to juggle work, the community's demands, your own priorities, the policies of your political party (if you have one) and the challenges facing your council.

Being a councillor is a very public role. Whenever councillors appear in public – even though it may not be in an official capacity – they are usually seen by the public as a 'councillor' and judged accordingly. This role is not a 9am–5pm job.

The role and responsibilities of a councillor can be divided into two main categories:

- Being a member of the governing body of the council; and an
- Elected representative of the community.

Community board members

Most, but not all, councils have community boards, which are elected in tandem with the election of councils. The role of community board members will vary depending on the level of responsibility delegated to them by their parent council.

The primary role of community board members is to represent and advocate for the interests of their communities, liaise with community organisations and maintain an overview of the services provided by the council.

As a member of the governing body...

As a member of the governing body, councillors are required to participate in the decision-making processes that guide and govern the affairs of the council. This includes:

- Establishing a policy framework
- Deciding on financial resources to be raised for delivery of determined programmes
- Ensuring council is fulfilling its regulatory functions in an appropriate manner





- Developing a management plan for conduct of the council's activities; and
- Regularly reviewing the council's performance.

As an elected representative of the community...

Councillors are elected to represent the interests of their community. A councillor is required to:

- Represent the interests of the residents and ratepayers
- Provide leadership and guidance to the community
- Facilitate communication between the council and the community
- Promote the overall interests of the council to other government sectors and relevant bodies.

An elected member may be concerned with a wide range of important issues, such as the level of investment in community infrastructure, provision of community services, direction of social change and support for particular political values.

Within this aspect of your role you will be expected to speak on behalf of individuals and organisations in your community and this may include people who didn't vote for you. You won't be able to please all the people all of the time, because you will often need to make decisions taking into account a wider context (and this may not please everyone in your community).

What is important is that councillors attempt to understand the needs and demands of people in the community and explain to them the reasons for a decision.

Political accountability

Councillors are accountable to their communities for the decisions they make and the way in which they make them. Communities exercise rights through the triennial election as well as by participating in consultation opportunities as required by law. Parliamentary officers, such as the Ombudsman, ensure that councils operate in an open and transparent manner.



Leadership

Councillors are expected to show a level of leadership if their communities are to be successful and meet and survive challenges. The Local Government Act 2002 requires that councils identify community outcomes. Elected members will need to exercise leadership to work with other agencies in order to achieve their community's outcomes.

Being an effective leader requires effective communication skills. Councillors need to communicate their vision to fellow councillors and gain their support.

Councillors will also show leadership through the adoption and implementation of the council's annual plan which identifies the council's proposed activities for the year, the annual report which provides accountability to the community, and by ensuring the council's chief executive implements the council's policies and strategies.

Finding a balance

Generally elected members hold particular views on certain issues and often campaign on them. It is these views that are endorsed by the community at election time. However, after the election, elected members are required to recognise and consider the views of all residents and ratepayers when they make decisions. In making decisions they must have an open mind.

Elected members must find a balance between the mandate provided by their electors and the need to make decisions on behalf of the whole community and future generations.

Day-to-day life

Life as an elected member is largely dictated by the frequency of, and preparation for, council meetings. At times the sheer volume of business papers can seem daunting.

Although the time required to attend meetings may only occupy a few hours there are always informal duties such as interviewing constituents, talking to the media, attending functions and speaking engagements as well as managing the rest of your life.





It is essential that people in the community have an opportunity to contribute their views and ideas. Elected members are expected to be accessible and will spend a lot of time meeting with representatives of the community. Even more time will be spent reading and responding to correspondence from community representatives. Some of the work may impact on an elected member's personal or family life, such as phone calls at all hours, meetings after hours and if a member has children, they could be teased at school etc.

How much does an elected member get paid?

Elected members are paid in two ways. Depending on the council, payment will be by a salary or a part salary plus meeting allowances. Salaries and allowances vary depending on the size of each council. The Remuneration Authority determines remuneration levels for each council and approves each councils' approach to reimbursing elected members. Some expenses such as mileage, are also paid.

Community board members receive an honorarium and generally do not receive meeting allowances.

How much time is involved in being a councillor?

The time commitments vary markedly depending on the position you are elected to. Many mayors find that the commitment is a fulltime one. Most councils have monthly meeting cycles, but elected members are usually placed on one or more council committees. A first term councillor with few responsibilities will probably need to put in at least ten hours per week. The amount of time is also influenced by the size of the council.

Community board members would normally spend up to ten hours a week. This will also vary according to the size of the board and the number of delegated responsibilities.

