

■ Any other questions?

If you would like to find out more about Reigate & Banstead Borough Council, please visit our website at www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk or telephone Democratic Services on 01737 276024/25/27 or 276114.

The following websites also provide general information about local government and the role of Councillors.

www.electoralcommission.org.uk
www.direct.gov.uk
www.idea.gov.uk

■ Would you like to become a Councillor?

The Council proposes to hold an event for prospective Councillors in November 2010. It will be an opportunity to talk to elected Councillors, as well as to Officers, and to find out more about being a Councillor.

Please email democratic.services@reigate-banstead.gov.uk or telephone 01737 276024/25/27 or 276114 if you would like to attend. We will then send details to you nearer the time.



A Guide to ...

Being a Councillor

■ Introduction

Reigate and Banstead Borough covers an area of 12,900 hectares, with a population of around 135,000 people who are represented by 51 Councillors on the Borough Council.

The vision of the Council is to ***"achieve sustainable, thriving and self-reliant communities within an attractive, accessible and well-maintained Borough"***.

This booklet is aimed at answering some of the more common questions about what the Council does and the role of Councillors.

■ What does being a Councillor mean?

Being a Councillor means engaging with and representing your local residents, speaking on their behalf and taking a role in deciding the future of the Borough and the services provided by the Council.

Councillors are involved in anything and everything that affects the quality of life of local residents.

Not only...

- helping resolve individual problems such as dealing with a contentious planning application or noisy neighbours
- lobbying for better play facilities in the local park or more activities for the elderly in your community

but also ...

- deciding licensing or planning applications as the member of a Committee

a Mayor from amongst the Councillors. The Mayor is appointed for a year and fulfils a ceremonial role, representing the Borough at official functions and local events. The Mayor also chairs full Council meetings. Otherwise Boroughs are essentially the same as Districts.

When an area - such as Surrey - has both Borough and District Councils and a County Council, it is known as a two-tier authority with each level being responsible for specific services.

The County Council is responsible for services including social care, education, libraries, roads and highway maintenance.

The District and Borough Councils are responsible for services such as waste collection and recycling arrangements, housing benefits, planning and licensing, environmental health and leisure.

The District/Borough Council is also responsible for collecting Council Tax in its area, although most of the income goes to the County Council and the local Police Authority.

For 2010-11 Reigate and Banstead only gets 13p in every pound it collects for Borough services.

■ What is the difference between a Councillor and an Officer?

Councillors are elected to take decisions on shaping the future of the Borough.

Officers are paid to provide professional advice on the options available, according to the law and Council policy. Officers are also responsible for putting decisions into practice and maintaining the services provided.

Some training is obligatory, for example on the Councillor's Code of Conduct, as well as in specialist areas like planning and licensing for Councillors sitting on these Committees.

The more support and development a Councillor gets, the better the Councillor will be and Reigate & Banstead Borough Council is proactive in promoting Councillor development opportunities.

■ **How long do Councillors serve for?**

Four years, unless they are elected in a by-election in which case it would be for the remainder of the term of office. A by-election is held if a seat becomes vacant in mid-term.

■ **When are elections held?**

Local elections are held each year, usually on the first Thursday in May. Reigate and Banstead Borough Council hold elections in three years out of every four. Each time one third of the 51 seats on the Council become vacant.

On the fourth year, County Council elections are held.

Some Councils elect all Councillors once every four years, but Reigate & Banstead Borough Council has decided that it is better to elect by thirds so that there are always some experienced Councillors to ensure continuity and support for new Councillors.

■ **What is the difference between a Borough Council, a District Council and a County Council?**

The main difference between a Borough Council and a District Council is that a Borough Council has been granted a Royal Charter to appoint

- being involved in setting future policy
- having a role in deciding how to use the limited funds and resources available to the Council
- scrutinising decisions
- representing the Council on outside bodies

Councillors also act as community leaders and advocates for their residents, engaging with other public services like the police and health services so that everyone works together to best serve the local community.

Difficult choices often have to be made, because of limited resources and competing priorities, and Councillors help to shape these decisions.

Every Councillor will have a different story to tell about what they do and how they work for their local community.

If you want to know more, why not contact one of your local Councillors. A list of all Councillors and their contact details can be found on the Council's website www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk or you can telephone the Council's Help Line on 01737 276000.

■ **Who can become a Councillor for Reigate and Banstead?**

In short, anyone over 18 who is a British, Commonwealth, Irish or European Union citizen and registered to vote. Councillors also need to have a local connection, such as living or working in the Borough for the past twelve months.

There are some disqualifications. The rules are quite complex and it is best to call the Council's Help Line on 01737 276000 or to visit the Electoral Commission website www.electoralcommission.org.uk if you want to know more.

Do you need any qualifications?

No. Every Councillor brings different experiences and knowledge with them, all of which are invaluable. A variety of backgrounds, skills and interests are key to representing and supporting every section of the community.

Do you need to belong to a political party or group?

You don't need to, but the reality is that most Councillors do belong to and represent a political party. Here at Reigate & Banstead we currently have two independent Councillors as well as six Councillors representing Residents' Associations. All the other Councillors stand as a member of a national political party.

The Electoral Commission website www.electoralcommission.org.uk provides links to all the main political parties and on how to stand as an independent.

Do you get paid as a Councillor?

All Councillors receive a basic allowance (currently £5,072 per annum) to cover their time and expenses, including IT support and equipment. Some receive a Special Responsibility Allowance if they have additional duties and there are also allowances available for travel, childcare costs and other similar expenses incurred.

How many hours do Councillors give to their role?

This will vary from Councillor to Councillor, their other commitments and what they want to achieve. It might be just a few hours each week but it could be a few hours each day. The amount of time will also vary throughout the year. In a 2008 survey, the average estimate was 22 hours a week but there is no set minimum just as there is no set maximum.

There will be residents' individual issues to resolve, reports to be read in preparation for meetings, meetings to attend in the day and/or evening, telephone calls and emails to respond to.

Councillors who have extra responsibilities, for example Executive Members or Chairmen of Committees, will need to give more of their time to Council duties.

Are Councillors entitled to any time off from work?

By law, employers have to allow Councillors some time off to fulfil their duties, but the exact amount will depend upon what their job is and the effect of their absence. Most prospective Councillors will discuss this with their employer and come to an agreement before deciding whether or not to stand as a candidate.

What support or training do Councillors get?

Here at Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Councillors have a dedicated Members' Room equipped with computers, a photocopier and telephone facilities.

Officers are also there to support Councillors, from giving advice to taking an active role in solving issues when they can.

All new Councillors go through an induction process to introduce them to the Council, its services and their role. Ongoing training and development opportunities are then offered to keep them up to date with the law and to build up their knowledge of Council services.

New Councillors are also assigned a personal mentor, from the Democratic Services team, whose role it is to guide them through all the initial formalities and procedures that they will need to understand.