

What makes a good councillor?

During the campaign period, a lot of people will be telling you that they're the right person to represent your community. They'll be telling you through billboards, flyers, debates, newspaper articles, and more. As community members, we are tasked with sifting through all the information to find the right people to represent us at the council table.

"No two days are ever the same, and I think that you could be in this space for 30 years, and still not experience two days the same. If you are willing to show up with a collaborative attitude, this role is potentially one of the most exciting you could find!"

- Rachel Smith, first term councillor, Far North District Council

"I think being a parent helps, because everything I do I think, how is this helping to create a better future for our children?"

- Carmen Houlahan, first term councillor, Dunedin City Council

There are as many ways to go about making this decision as there are voters, and everyone has different views that they want councillors to align with. But beyond their views and values, there are some skills and attributes that are helpful for effective contribution around the council table.

"An ability to listen, find consensus, speak up and keep an open mind on all issues are important skills to have as a councillor."

- Annette Brosnan, deputy mayor, Napier City Council

Some skills and attributes to look out for during the campaign might include:

- Ability to read and understand large amounts of information
- Commitment to working with their community
- Prior volunteer experience
- Curiosity and an open-mind
- Good listening and questioning skills
- Willingness to speak up for their views

The role of a councillor is to represent and lead communities by making big community decisions and allocating community funds. From the local government website:

"There is no specific job description for councillors. However, as representatives and leaders of their communities, their role involves setting policies, making regulatory decisions and reviewing council performance (through its annual report and the performance review of the chief executive)."¹

¹ Local Government in NZ

https://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lqip.nsf/wpg_url/About-Local-Government-Local-Government-In-New-Zealand-Councillors-and-Mayors

On the ground, the day to day work of a councillor includes meeting with and listening to community members, attending events, reading reports and agendas, and attending council meetings.

"I think the most important attributes and skills you could look for in a Councillor are a solid work ethic, a good moral compass, a good set of ears, and an open mind."

- Rachel Smith, first term councillor, Far North District Council

"The breadth and depth of material is significant. There's a lot to do and a lot of areas to cover. It's just not possible to do everything and you have to prioritise. Building trust with the staff and your fellow councillors is hugely important. You can't do anything on your own, you have to have the support of a wider group. It's really a team effort."

- Thomas Nash, first term councillor, Greater Wellington Regional Council

There is often a lot of reading before each meeting, and the meetings can involve long debates with strong opinions represented. It's important that councillors can take in information, think critically about it, and use it wisely to guide their decisions.

"The amount of reading is massive! If you think a lot, double or triple it!"

- Carmen Houlahan, first term councillor, Dunedin City Council

"You need to be willing to listen to all voices. You also need to be up to speed with all the new information put forward by the Government. That is a lot of reading!"

- Rehette Stoltz, Mayor, Gisborne District Council

Being a councillor is also about being a local leader. This part of the role involves listening to local conversations, inspiring people, and rallying the community around the decisions for change.

Councillors need "the ability to consider the impact of decisions on children and those not yet born. In local government, short-term decision-making has cost New Zealand."

- Fleur Fitzsimons, second term councillor, Wellington City Council

This involves talking to and meeting with a lot of different people and keeping an open mind to their perspectives. Councillors also need to evaluate large amounts of information and stay true to their values. Many of the decisions are contentious, and councillors need the integrity to stand up for what's important in the face of criticism, which can come from many directions.

"One of the things that caught me by surprise in my first term was how quickly you have to grow 'thick skin', to learn to focus on the issues and not the uninformed criticism which is hard to avoid and you can't correct."

- Annette Brosnan, deputy mayor, Napier City Council

But how can you find out who has these attributes during the campaign? You've got a few options:

- The candidate lists for all councils are released from 17 August, and every enrolled voter receives an information booklet with information on candidates with their voting papers from 16 September. The information sheets can give you a basic idea of what people stand for.
- To get a more realistic impression of how candidates work and interact, you can also head to a local event (public meetings, debates etc.)
- If you have a particular issue that worries you, send candidates an email or a social media message asking about their views on a topic that concerns you
- You can also follow them on social media to see what conversations they're having and you can use the comments sections on their posts to find out more about their views.
- If you're not sure what the "big issues" are in your local area, this is a good time to have a read of your local paper, and community Facebook groups. There's usually plenty of discussion and information about councils during the campaign!

Voting is an important way to show your care for the future of your area. It's worth spending some time finding out who you're voting for before you tick the box (or give them a ranking if your council uses Single Transferable Vote).

"Is it satisfying? Yes. Is it frustrating? Yes. Would you do it again? Yes. Are you glad you're not standing this time? Yes. It's critical to increase diversity and representation but it's not always an easy place to be. Vote and vote carefully."

- *Nicola Patrick, former councillor, Horizons Regional Council*

It's also worth remembering that voting is only one way that we can be involved in local decision making. Next week, we'll be talking about other ways to engage with your local government organisations. Keep an eye out on our Facebook page for updates. Let's get local!