

# **How to influence your Local Authority - England edition**

## **Content**

1. Introduction
2. Contact your local Councillor(s)
3. Make a 'Freedom of Information' (FOI) request
4. Ask a question or read a statement at a Full Council meeting, Cabinet Meeting and Scrutiny Panel
5. Trigger a Full Council debate and get a 'Motion' passed with your petition
6. Influence planning decisions
7. Get a decision reversed

## **1. Introduction**

Even though the structure of Local Authorities (LAs) can be complex and differ from one another, a small amount of knowledge can make a huge difference so it's worth learning the basics.

Your LA will have decision-making power in relation to your local roads, parks and open green spaces, schools, housing, transport, markets and fairs, libraries, social services, police and fire services, planning and alcohol licensing.

There are 414 LAs in England. County and District Councils work together to control most areas of England but in some areas, such as London, there is a 'single tier system' such as London Boroughs, Metropolitan Authorities or Unitary or Shire Authorities. To find out which LAs control your community, click **here** and type in your postcode.

## **2. Contact your local Councillor(s)**

You have the right to raise issues with your local Councillor; they've been elected to represent your community in decision-making processes. It's best to keep communications with your Councillor(s) friendly and positive because developing a strong relationship with them could really boost your campaign.

First, you will need to find your Councillor's name and contact details by going to your LA website. LA websites contain huge amounts of useful information and will generally be in the form of [www.authorityname.gov.uk](http://www.authorityname.gov.uk) (example: [www.reading.gov.uk](http://www.reading.gov.uk)). Go to the '**Find a Councillor**' webpage and type in your postcode.

Start by writing them an email or letter as letters are harder to ignore. You could also try speaking to them on the phone - all of their contact details should be on your LA website - or sending them a friendly message via social media, if they are online. Outline your issue in clear language, explain how your issue is impacting on people's lives, give them specific ideas about how they could take action and share your petition with them.

Try to arrange a face-to-face meeting with your Councillor. It can help them to connect to your issue and help them to see that you really care about the campaign.

*Tips:*

- Don't be afraid of contacting them a few times! Lots of Councillors hold the position in a voluntary capacity and have a full time job as well, so it might take them longer to get back to you.
- Unless they are the Cabinet member responsible for your issue, Councillors are only allowed to deal with issues within their ward so make sure you start with "I live in ... street, in your ward" as they're much more likely to listen.
- Different Councillors act in different ways, be flexible and responsive. Ask them about their background and priorities and see if you can fit your campaign into their work. For example, some might see themselves more as community councillors, they love going to events and working with constituents. Some might prefer to work within the council committee structure.

### **3. Make a 'Freedom of Information' (FOI) request**

Information gathered using The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) can really boost a campaign as it can reveal newsworthy information about your issue, like dodgy decision making, environmental problems or cuts to essential services that local politicians would rather keep quiet. Anyone can request recorded information from LAs.

However, it's important not to waste time by requesting information that's already available. Before you put in a request, call your LA to see if they can give the information straight away. You can also check [published responses to FOI requests](#) and you could also speak to a journalist to ask if they have the information.

Once you've confirmed that the information isn't already available, making a FOI request is relatively easy and free. Send your LA an email, fax or letter with the following information:

- your name (not needed if requesting environmental information)
- a contact address
- a detailed description of the information you want - e.g you might want all the information held on a subject, or just a summary

Your LA will respond within 20 working days or they will let you know if they need more time. Your request may be refused if it's too costly to gather the requested information or the information is deemed too sensitive. They might ask you to be more specific so they can provide just the information you need. If your LA doesn't provide you with the information you requested, you could first ask them to review their decision.

### **4. Ask a question at Full Council meetings, including Cabinet Meetings and Scrutiny Committees**

All of your elected representatives (Councillors and Mayors) regularly meet together as the 'Full Council' in your LA's main debating chamber. These meetings are open to the public and the press, and sometimes the meeting is broadcast live to the Council's website.

The LA's budget and major policies are debated and decided at Full Council. There is always an opportunity for members of the public to ask questions. We suggest asking a direct question of a councillor during Full Council meeting, probably to the cabinet member, as it can make a good press story and holds one person responsible. You may also be able to make a statement or submit and read a petition at Full Council depending on your LA's rules. It's worth phoning or emailing your LA's Democratic Services department to ask how you can participate in your Full Council.

People focus on Full Council Meetings but it can be more effective to turn up to Cabinet Meetings and Scrutiny Panels. There are far fewer members of the public but all the most important people in your LA are likely to be present. There's normally an opportunity to make statements or ask questions.

*Tips:*

- Demonstrations and rallies that coincide with the start of a Full Council meeting can have an impact!
- Questions to Full Council have to be relevant and your LA might ask you to submit those questions before the meeting.

### **5. Trigger a Full Council debate and get a 'Motion' passed with your petition**

A Motion can be requested by a Councillor – it means that an issue will be discussed and a decision will be made during a Full Council meeting. Generally, two Motions are discussed at monthly Full Council Meetings. When a motion is discussed Councillors and members of the public can make speeches, and then the Councillors vote. If the vote is passed, the motion is likely to be adopted by the Mayor and become council policy.

Members of the public can trigger a debate and Motion by collecting a set number of signatures on a petition. For example, Bristol's Full Council will debate an issue if a petition on that issue is presented and contains more than 2000 signatures. This debate can then lead to a Councillor proposing a Motion (vote), which, if passed, can lead to policy changes.

You could also directly ask your Councillor if they can propose a Motion on your issue. This is best to do after you've built a relationship with your Councillor through meetings or emails.

*Tips*

- Mayors can have executive power and can ignore Motions. Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol and a few others cities have elected Mayors, although the number is likely to increase. Central Government have said they will only deal with local areas if they have an elected Mayor.

### **6. Influence planning decisions**

Planning decisions are made by a number of Councillors who regularly sit on a Planning Committee to decide if planning applications will be allowed to go ahead. Advice is usually

given to the committee by Planning Officers who provide a recommendation for approval or refusal.

All Planning Committee meetings are open to the public and press. Concerned members of the public can speak in the meeting for one minute each. Speaking can have a real impact.

It's worth remembering that planning rules come from central Government. For example; a council can have a policy that all new developments must have 40% affordable units but it's central Government rules that actually count.

#### *Tips*

- You are allowed to contact member of a Planning Committee to explain your concerns but they are not allowed to 'predetermine' themselves by publicly commenting on a planning decision before the committee discusses the planning proposal.
- Mayors have no influence or power over planning.

### **7. Get a decision by your LA reversed**

If you have found a flaw in the legal aspect of the decision-making process, you may consider instigating a 'Judicial Review' (JR). This is the only way for an LA's decision to be reversed. JRs are a procedure that happen in Court and need to be declared within three months of the original decision. JD can be an expensive process involving lawyers and a hefty amount of paperwork.

#### *Tips*

- You don't necessarily need to actually go to court; sometimes mentioning to your LA that you're considering JR, or asking a volunteer lawyer to discuss the idea of JD is enough to influence your LA.