

Councillor Duties and the Democratic Process

What is a Town Council?

A town council is a local authority that makes decisions on behalf of the people in the town. It is the level of government closest to the community. Kent County Council are the main authority with Sevenoaks District Council, then Swanley Town Council following in the hierarchy.

Swanley Town Council is the first place that most residents will go regarding any issues or questions they may have about the town. Swanley Town Council play a vital role in the community, and we encourage residents and visitors to engage with us.

What is a Town Councillor?

Town Councillors are champions of the community and give residents a voice on the decisions a Town Council makes. You can make a real difference in your community by becoming a Town Councillor.

A Town Councillor's Role and Responsibilities include:

- Pro-actively developing strategies and plans for the area.
- Serving the community – helping to resolve problems.
- Representing the community by raising concerns.
- Collaboratively working with others.
- Decision making and reviewing decisions on which services and projects the Town Council should take forward.
- Engaging with residents, local groups and businesses about their needs.

Being a Town Councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community and helping to make it a better place to live, work and visit.

Who can be a Town Councillor?

Any person over 18 who is a British citizen, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or European Union can be a Councillor if they are registered to vote in the area or have lived, worked or owned property there for at 12 months before an election.

You cannot stand for election if you work for the Council you want to be a Councillor for, or for another local authority in a political restricted post; are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order; have been sentenced to prison for 3 months or more (including suspended sentences) during the 5 years before the day of an election or have been convicted of a corrupt or illegal practice by an election court.

There are no special qualifications to being a Councillor, other than having a keen interest in your community and the Town and being available for Council meetings (which take place on Wednesday evenings). Skills gained through work, raising a family, caring for relatives, volunteering or being active in community or faith groups, etc are highly valuable.

Councils are particularly keen to encourage people from under-represented groups to get involved, such as younger people, people from England's many ethnic communities and disabled people.

What Makes a Good Town Councillor?

- Sound interest, knowledge and understanding of local matters.
- Enthusiasm, ability and willingness to represent the Council and their community.

- Excellent communication – including listening and interpersonal skills, facilitation, public speaking and the ability to consider alternative points of view and to negotiate, mediate and resolve conflict.
- Problem solving – ability to get to the bottom of an issue, analyse data and research to identify ways to resolve an issue.
- Team working – ability and willingness to work closely with other Councillors and Council Officers in meetings and on committees to maintain good working relationships.
- Organisational skills – ability to plan and manage own time, keep appointments and meet deadlines.
- Engagement – available to provide information and advice to local people and Council partners, such as voluntary groups and to attend Council run events.

The National Association of Local Councils publishes 'The Good Councillor's Guide', here is a link to their website: www.nalc.gov.uk/publications#the-good-councillors-guide

Why become a Town Councillor?

Are you ready to help change the face of local government? No other role gives you a chance to make such a huge difference to quality of life for people in your local area.

The job of Swanley Town Council is to represent the interests of the whole community; understanding the needs of different groups in the community (such as young and elderly people).

As a councillor, you have a responsibility to be well-informed, especially about diverse local views. You cannot assume that you represent the interests of all your electors without consulting or communicating with them.

In recognition of the need for a vibrant local democracy, the Localism Act 2011 sought to decentralise administrative power from the state towards localities, empowering communities to enable them to make better responses to community problems, and over the course of the past few years Town and Parish Councils have found themselves taking on many more responsibilities.

Swanley Town Council has taken on formal floral bedding, elements of grass-cutting, play areas, litter bins and bus shelters and continually seek to be actively involved in the delivery of many other local services. As we move forward, the public and the Councillors who represent them have an opportunity to engage with key stakeholders in a bottom-up approach to devolution with local solutions to local problems, civic participation and an increased legitimacy of the Town Council and its role.

What matters to you in your local area? Is it the state of the local park or town, improving services for older people, making the roads safer, the need for more activities for young people or ensuring that local business can thrive?

You may already be involved in local affairs - i.e. neighbourhood watch or as a flood warden, or volunteer for local charities, and want to take the next step or you may be looking for a worthwhile and rewarding way to help your local community. Whatever needs changing in your neighbourhood, you could be just the person to change it by becoming a Town Councillor.

The best way to find out what it's like to be a Town Council is to talk to someone who's doing it now; come along to a town council meeting, speak to one of our Councillors or contact the Town Clerk.

Other ways to get involved

All our council meetings are open to the public and there is an opportunity at each for members of the public to raise concerns and ask questions. There is also an annual town meeting which all residents are invited to attend; this is an open forum meeting and much less formal than the usual committee meetings.

Residents can contact the Council via the telephone, email or via social media and can also call into the Council office within the Civic Centre. Residents can bring to the attention of the council anything that concerns them, either directly or through the Town Clerk. If matters raised are not the responsibility of the council, the Town Clerk can bring them to the attention of the proper authority.

The contact details of all Town Councillors are available on the council website and by contacting the office, as well as being published in the Annual Report; residents can raise issues with Town Councillors which will then be brought before the Council.

We actively seek the views of members of the public via survey, surgery and via our events; we encourage you to engage and to tell us how we can improve local participation.

All meetings are advertised on the council noticeboards around the town and via our website so residents will always know what your Town Council is considering by way of the agenda and associated papers. Residents will also always know what your Town council agrees as minutes of the meetings are published online and available for public inspection.

Town Council Powers

Swanley Town Council has a wide range of powers which are essentially related to local matters, such as looking after community buildings, open spaces, allotments, play areas and much more. The council also has the power to raise money through taxation – the precept. The precept is the Town Council's share of the Council Tax, which is collected via the billing authority – Sevenoaks District Council.

Swanley Town Council agrees its budget in January for the following financial year and based on the money that is required to carry out the plans for the coming year, the precept demand is made; the total amount required is divided by the council tax base; i.e. the number of tax payers in Swanley.

Swanley Town Council aims to engage with residents on all matters, but it is especially important that we engage with residents on financial matters, especially if there are plans to increase the precept.

The Democratic Process

Elections to Swanley Town Council are run by Sevenoaks District Council (the elections authority).

Swanley Town Council has 16 democratically elected representatives who serve as Town Councillors. They have a unique and privileged position and the potential to make a real difference to people's lives. Candidates compete to gain the most votes from electorate.

Once elected, Town Councillors sit on the council for a maximum of four years (our last election was in May 2023). If Councillors wish to stay in post they can stand for re-election. Our next local election will be in May 2027.

There are four wards within Swanley; the number of Councillors on each is determined by the size of the electorate;

- St Mary's Ward – Four Councillors
- White Oak Ward – Six Councillors
- Christchurch Ward – Five Councillors
- Swanley Village Ward – One Councillor

If a vacancy arises between ordinary elections, (for example due to a Councillor's death or resignation), the vacancy is not automatically put up for election – 10 or more electors from the Town must request a by-election in a specified period for there to be one. If the vacancy occurs within the 6 months before an ordinary election no by-election is held.

If a by-election is not called, residents of the Town can ask to be considered for co-option onto the Council. The Full Council then meets to consider their requests and votes on who fills the vacant seat. The elected Councillor serves the remainder of the term and retires with the other Councillors at the next ordinary election.

Candidates don't have to belong to or represent a political party. Councillors can be independent of political parties. To stand for a party, a candidate must have permission from the party to be put forward as their candidate.

Detailed information on how to stand for election is available from the Electoral Commission, here's a link to their website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

How to Register to Vote

Voting is a crucial part of democracy. You need to be registered to vote in elections. If you are not registered you can't have your say. You can vote when you're 18 or over. You only need to register once – i.e. not for each election, but you will need to re-register if you change your name or address. You need to register to vote every time you move home. It's easiest to register online, via the Government's website (it only takes about 5 minutes), here's a link to their website: <https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>

The Electoral Register

The electoral register is the name and address of everyone registered to vote in public elections. It's used by elections staff, political parties, etc. There are 2 versions – the full register, which includes all eligible electors who are registered to vote and the open (edited) register, which is an extract of the electoral register which can be bought by any person, company or organisation. You can ask for your name and address to be removed from the open register.

An annual canvass begins in July each year, when each household receives an enquiry form asking them to update the details on the form, to ensure the details on the electoral register are accurate. A revised register is published every December.

Voting by Post or Proxy

If you're unable to get to your polling station on the day of voting, you have the option to vote by post, or by proxy (getting someone you know and trust to vote on your behalf). You need to

download an application form from Sevenoaks District Council, fill it in and return it to Electoral Services (as shown above).

Your Polling Station

You'll receive your poll card, through the post, a few weeks before polling day. Your poll card will tell you the address of your polling station – where you can vote in person. Polling stations are open from 7am to 10pm. You have to go to your allocated polling station, you can't go to a different one, for example, close to where you work.

Tell the polling clerk your name and address and they'll give you the ballot paper(s). Vote for your chosen candidate by putting an 'x' next to the name of the person you want to represent you. If you're unsure what to do, ask the staff at the polling station, they are there to help you. Put your ballot paper in the ballot box – to keep all the votes safe until they're ready to be counted.

Election Results

After the election, the votes are counted for each candidate and the candidate with the most votes wins the seat.

The results of any election are posted to Sevenoaks District Council's website and Swanley Town Council's website and social media.