
Becoming a Parish Councillor

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

This briefing note gives a short introduction to the Parish Council world, and what is involved in becoming a local councillor. It also enables you to check if you are eligible. If you need further information, please get in touch with your local parish clerk.

WHAT IS A PARISH COUNCIL?

To appreciate what is involved in being a local councillor, you need to know what a Parish council is and what it can (and cannot) do.

A Parish Council (or town council, if a parish elects to call itself a town) is first and foremost, an elected local authority. It is the tier of local government which is closest to the people. It is not a voluntary organisation, a charity or anything to do with the Church.

Parish councils were first created under the Local Government Act 1894 and they are still being created. New ones are being formed in urban areas that are currently un-parished, existing parishes are being re-organised/grouped, and additional ones are being created as a result of the growth of population in some areas.

WHAT CAN THEY DO?

As parish councils were created in law, they can only act within the law by exercising those duties and powers which are conferred on them by Statute (i.e. a wide range of Acts of Parliament).

The powers local councils have are many and varied and include purchase of land and buildings, providing and maintaining village greens, provision of recreational and sporting facilities, street furniture, burial grounds and allotments, crime prevention measures, and traffic calming – to name just a few of the activities being carried out locally. The council's clerk will be able to tell you more about the powers and duties of local councils.

Parish Councils have the right to be notified of, and to respond to, all planning applications submitted in their area, and can work in partnership with the District, Borough and County Councils on a whole range of benefits for the local community.

A Parish Council may raise money by various means to do its work, but usually its main source of funding is through a yearly levy (precept) on the council tax payers in the parish.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PARISH COUNCILLOR?

The main thing is that you and your fellow councillors need to have an active interest and concern for your local community. You will represent local people and, if necessary, work in partnership with them and others. Collectively you will want to facilitate the provision of local services and amenities and take decisions which form the policy and governance of the council.

WHY ME?

As a new councillor, you will bring to the council fresh enthusiasm and new ideas, a care for your community and a willingness to learn. Initially you may have little knowledge of council work but this, together with experience and confidence, will follow. Plenty of training and guidance is available once you take a seat on the council.

WILL IT TAKE A LOT OF MY TIME AND MONEY?

It is possible to spend quite a lot of time on council work - but most people have jobs, families and hobbies which also demand a lot of time. However, as with most things, the more you put in, the more you (and your community) will get out.

The times of the meetings vary, as do the venues. Parish Councils normally meet during the evening, although daytime meetings are possible too. It is **IMPORTANT** to find out about the pattern of meetings and venues to make sure they can accommodate your domestic and/or business arrangements. Most councils meet once a month and many also have committees/forums, in which case, you would probably be invited to sit on one too, and it can be a good way of 'specialising' in something in which you have a particular interest.

Unless you take on responsibility as a Chairman or Vice-Chairman of either the council or a committee/forum, your workload as a 'back-bencher' should not involve more than one or two evenings per month. There may also be outside activities in which the council takes an interest, and you could be asked to take a share of the duties in representing the council on these 'outside organisations'.

Parish Councillors must be aware of the requirements of the council's Code of Conduct and the need to declare an interest in a matter if they have a 'disclosable pecuniary interest' in any matters under consideration.

Being a Councillor should cost you little. There is usually reimbursement for subsistence and travel allowances if your duties take you out of your local Council's area.

HOW DO YOU BECOME A PARISH COUNCILLOR

Ordinary elections usually coincide with the election year of the District Council and must be held on the same day. In some years they may also fall on the same day as a general election. The interval between local council elections is 4 years, and therefore, if elected, your term of office will normally be 4 years, unless you stand down

mid-term. If a casual vacancy arises on the council mid-term, and you are elected or co-opted on to the council at that time, your term of office will run until the next ordinary elections are held.

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE TO STAND FOR ELECTION?

A candidate for a Parish Council is qualified if, when nominated:

(a) he or she is a British subject, Commonwealth citizen or Euronational

(b) is 18 years of age or over

and

(c) is either in the list of electors for that Parish or has during the whole of the preceding twelve months (i) occupied land as owner or tenant in it, or (ii) had a principal place of work there, or (iii) resided in or within three miles of it.

So - if you want to do more for your community, want to spend your time productively, can listen and think 'local', you may wish to consider becoming a Parish Councillor.