

All about parish and town councils

A booklet for anyone wanting to know more
about parish and town councils and the role
of local councillors



The
Electoral
Commission

About this booklet

Throughout England parish and town councils work towards improving community well-being and providing better services at a local level.

This booklet is for anyone wanting to know more about parish and town councils, the role of local councillors and what you need to do if you would like to stand as a candidate in local parish or town council elections.

We have also provided a range of case studies which highlight the different kinds of work that parish and town councils do, showing that size is no bar to making a real difference in the local community.

What is a parish or town council?

There are over 8,700 parish and town councils representing around 16 million people across England. They form the most local level of government and cover many rural and urban areas. The latter include many of our larger cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Liverpool. To find out if there is a parish or town council in your area contact the National Association of Local Councils (contact details are on the back page of this booklet).

What's the difference between a parish council and a town council?

Not a great deal. They both have the same powers and can provide the same services. The only difference is that a town council has decided that it should be known as a town council instead of a parish council, and has a mayor.

What services do they provide?

Your parish or town council has an overall responsibility for the well-being of your local community. Their work falls into three main categories:

- representing your local community
- delivering services to meet local needs
- striving to improve quality of life in the parish

Your council might provide and maintain the following services:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • allotments | • litter bins |
| • bridleways | • local youth projects |
| • burial grounds | • open spaces |
| • bus shelters | • public lavatories |
| • car parks | • planning |
| • commons | • street cleaning |
| • community transport schemes | • street lighting |
| • crime reduction measures | • tourism activities |
| • footpaths | • traffic calming measures |
| • leisure facilities | • village greens |

They will work with larger councils in your area called 'principal councils'¹ to agree which of these services the parish or town council should be in charge of.



¹ Principal councils are larger councils such as a district or county council, metropolitan borough council or a unitary authority.



Case study: Garden service, Eastwood Town Council

Number of councillors: 15
Size of electorate: 7,800

Eastwood Town Council has, for many years, run a free garden maintenance service for disabled and elderly residents. The council started the service when councillors realised that many of its disabled and elderly residents were unable to maintain their gardens. This meant that some residents were less able to enjoy the open air, their personal safety was at risk and difficulties often arose with adjoining properties. The council responded by paying for a local contract gardener to visit residents two or three times a year to tidy and maintain their gardens. Importantly, the service is not just about gardening, but also provides a social benefit by ensuring that personal contact is maintained with people in need of support.

How do they make decisions?

Your parish or town council is made up of a number of councillors who meet regularly to make decisions on the work and direction of the council. As elected bodies parish and town councils are responsible to the people they represent – that's your local community.

Attending a council meeting is the best way to find out what they do. Give the council a call and find out when its next public meeting is scheduled to take place.

Where do they get their money from?

Each year a sum of money called a 'precept' is collected through your council tax. This money is used by your parish or town council to improve facilities and services for local people. Parish or town councils can also apply for grants and loans and, if they own property, can receive money from rents or leases.



Case study: Parish plan, Hutton-le-Hole Parish Council

Number of councillors: 5

Size of electorate: 150

Hutton-le-Hole Parish Council embarked on a project aimed at supporting a local parish plan to develop the local community. Firstly, the council obtained a grant to carry out the project and formed a steering group to take it forward. The council then sent out questionnaires to all households, including a separate questionnaire specifically aimed at young people. The majority of the questionnaires were returned and showed differing perspectives on village life. Young people in the village were also given disposable cameras to record their every day lives. All the photographs and comments were displayed at a launch evening on the parish plan at the village hall.

An action plan was developed and as a direct result a youth shelter has been built. Additionally, the Village Hall Committee has received £32,000 in grants which have helped pay for an upgrade to the building. It now hosts a monthly meeting for young people and their families and an annual barbecue.

These initiatives have increased the sense of community and given residents of all ages a voice and a stake in the future of the parish.



How are parish or town councillors elected?

Parish or town councillors are elected to represent a geographical area known as a ward or – mainly in smaller parishes – the parish or town council area as a whole. They are elected by people who live in the area.

If the parish is divided into wards an election is held in each ward, the same way elections are held in district wards and in county electoral divisions. If the parish doesn't have wards there is just a single parish election.

Most parish elections are on the same cycle, with elections in 2007, 2011, 2015, and so on. However, parish elections may instead be held together with associated principal council elections.

To find out when your parish or town council has elections contact your local electoral office at your district or borough council. For details visit www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

Under current law parish and town councils can only be established in certain areas of England. The government has recently published a white paper called *Strong and prosperous communities* which proposes that parish councils should be able to be established anywhere in England if the local community wants one.

For more information see www.communities.gov.uk

Who can vote in parish or town council elections?

To vote in any election you need to be registered to vote. To get on the electoral register contact the electoral services at your local district or borough council or visit www.aboutmyvote.co.uk to download a registration form. You can register to vote when you are aged 16 years or over but you need to be 18 or over to vote.

To vote in a parish or town council election you need to be a British citizen, Irish citizen, European Union citizen or citizen of a Commonwealth country (including Cyprus and Malta).

What do parish or town councillors do?

Councillors have three main areas of work:

- 1. Decision-making:** through attending meetings and committees with other elected members, councillors decide which activities to support, where money should be spent, what services should be delivered and what policies should be implemented.
- 2. Monitoring:** councillors make sure that their decisions lead to efficient and effective services by keeping an eye on how well things are working.
- 3. Getting involved locally:** as local representatives, councillors have responsibilities towards their constituents and local organisations. This often depends on what the councillor wants to achieve and how much time is available.

The day-to-day work of a councillor may include:

- going to meetings of local organisations such as tenants' associations
- going to meetings of bodies that affect the wider community, such as the police, the Highways Authority, schools and colleges
- taking up issues on behalf of members of the public, such as making representations to the district or borough council
- running a surgery for residents to bring up issues
- meeting with individual residents in their own homes

Case study: Community arts centre, East Grinstead Town Council

Number of councillors: 18

Size of electorate: 18,000

Between 1995 and 1996, East Grinstead Town Council embarked on a remarkable project to build the Chequer Mead Community Arts Centre. The building cost £2.4million, the bulk of which was financed by the council with the Arts Council Lottery Fund and Mid Sussex District Council contributing additional funding.

The centre itself comprises a magnificent 340-seat theatre with 210 seats in the stalls and 130 seats in the circle. In addition the complex comprises a dedicated art and exhibitions gallery, three meeting rooms, a studio room, a restaurant/cafeteria/bar and the usual backstage accommodation. At the time of its development this was, in funding terms to be the largest capital project developed by any parish or town council in England and Wales. The centre has rapidly built a first-class reputation for itself as a venue with a wide educational remit and hosts high-class community and professional performing and visual art events.

Chequer Mead is run as a charity and East Grinstead Town Council continues its role as trustee.



“Chequer Mead is a fantastic facility for the whole community providing opportunities for young and old in performing and visual arts”

Councillor Ian Dixon

How do I contact my local councillor?

To find out who your parish or town councillors are contact your local authority. They will provide you with contact details of the clerk for your parish or town council. The clerks will have the contact information you need to locate your parish or town councillors. If you have access to the internet, most councils provide an online search facility for your clerk's contact details.



Case study: Rural affordable housing project, Cawthorne Parish Council

Number of councillors: 9
Size of electorate: 1,000

Cawthorne Parish Council wanted to secure affordable housing for the parish as property prices had risen rapidly and priced many local people out of the market. It undertook two full housing surveys which identified a clear need for affordable social housing for the young, the less well-off and the elderly. In light of the survey the council extensively lobbied Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council on the need for affordable housing resulting in Cawthorne becoming the location of the first rural affordable housing project in South Yorkshire.

Could I be a parish or town councillor?

As a councillor you can become a voice for your community and affect real change. Councillors are community leaders and represent the aspirations of the public that they serve. Parish and town councils are the most local part of our democratic system and are closest to the public. Why don't you stand for your local parish or town council and see what difference you can make to your local community?

How much time does it take up?

Quite often councillors say that their duties occupy them for about three hours a week. Obviously there are some councillors who spend more time than this – and some less, but in the main, being a parish or town councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community and helping to make it a better place to live and work.

Am I qualified?

Most people are. However there are a few rules. You have to be:

- a British citizen, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union, **and**
- 18 years or older on the day you become nominated for election

You cannot stand for election if you:

- are the subject of a bankruptcy restriction order or interim order
- have, within five years before the day of the election, been convicted in the United Kingdom of any offence and have had a prison sentence (whether suspended or not) for a period of over three months without the option of a fine
- work for the council you want to become a councillor for

There are specific rules around candidacy. The full range of disqualifications for candidates is quite complex and some exceptions may apply. Full details can be found on the website of the National Association of Local Councils (contact details are on the back page of this booklet).



But I'm too young...

Some parish or town councils also run youth councils, which are often made up of young people representing their local schools and colleges. This provides young people with a time and place to meet and discuss matters that affect them.

These youth councils are in direct communication with their parish or town council so they can also be involved in decision-making. Contact your parish or town council, or speak to your school or local youth service to find out more.

If there isn't a local youth council you could get together with friends and put forward a proposal to set one up.

The age you can run as a candidate in an election has been lowered from 21 to 18 years of age. This comes into effect on 3 May 2007.

Case study: Youth engagement, Weston-super-Mare Town Council

Number of councillors: 31

Size of electorate: 58,000

Weston-super-Mare Town Council has set up a youth council to provide a chance for young people to have their say. The youth council is made up of around 30 local young people and aims to make Weston a better place for young people and to build stronger links between all the generations in the town.

The youth council now has a number of achievements of which to be proud. These include organising an extreme sports weekend and a talent contest attended by people from all over the country. The youth council also campaigned for the establishment of a youth cafe called 'Barcode' which has become a hub of activity in the town. Endorsed by the Home Office and the Prince's Trust as an excellent example of a youth facility, Barcode's discos, parties, live music and events attract a weekly attendance of 500-700 people. It makes around £1,000 per week.

There are no parish or town councils in my area. How can I get one set up?

New parish or town council areas can be set up in one of two ways. Your district or borough council can recommend to the Government that a new parish or town council area be established, or the local community can petition for one. A minimum of five parish or town councillors are needed to set one up. The National Association of Local Councils can provide advice on this (contact details are on the back page of this booklet).

Further information

The National Association of Local Councils is the national representative body for parish and town councils in England. Elections advice and resources are available on its website at www.nalc.gov.uk. For additional advice or support please contact 020 7637 1865.

The Electoral Commission (www.electoralcommission.org.uk) is an independent body that was set up by the UK parliament. Its mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

For public awareness materials visit www.dopolitics.org.uk
For more information on registering to vote or elections visit www.aboutmyvote.co.uk.