

# Introduction

## **What are community, parish and town councils?**

There are around 10,000 community, parish and town councils in England and Wales; they are corporate bodies and local authorities. They have a powerful voice to represent local people.

## **What do these councils do?**

Community, parish and town councils are the part of local government closest to the people. They serve the smallest area and are responsible for the most local of matters. Very importantly, these councils can "precept" - raising a sum collected with the council tax each year to improve facilities and services for local people.

In England they are called parish councils or town councils, if they cover a largely urban area. In Wales they are known as community councils. In both England and Wales they are elected units of local government whose activities are controlled by Acts of Parliament. There are 10,000 community, parish and town councils in England and Wales.

Parish, town and community councils in England and Wales have a number of basic responsibilities in making the lives of local communities more comfortable, many of which are often taken for granted. Essentially these powers fall within three main categories: representing the whole electorate within the parish; delivering services to meet local needs; and striving to improve quality of life in the parish.

Individual powers include the provision and maintenance of community transport schemes, traffic calming measures, local youth projects, tourism activities, leisure facilities, car parks, village greens, public lavatories, litter bins, street lighting, street cleaning, burial grounds, allotments, bus shelters, commons, open spaces, footpaths, bridleways, and crime reduction measures.

For a full list of powers and duties visit:

[http://www.nalc.gov.uk/About\\_NALC/What\\_is\\_a\\_parish\\_or\\_town\\_council](http://www.nalc.gov.uk/About_NALC/What_is_a_parish_or_town_council)

Community, parish and town councils can also comment on planning applications - they are statutory consultees (they have to be consulted if they so wish) and can be represented at public inquiries.

**What do elected representatives do for me?**

Community, parish and town councillors represent the people living in their local area at the closest level to the community. When decisions are being made they are there to put your views across.

**Where can you find parish councils?**

Parish councils are not only found in rural areas. Many metropolitan areas of England have created councils where there were none. Areas of Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham, among others, have created parish councils to deliver the type of local representation residents felt they otherwise lacked. London is the only city in England not legally able to create parish councils - and the government has indicated they may change the legislation that prohibits parishes for London.

# Being a councilor

## What is a councillor?

Councillors are elected to represent an individual geographical unit on the council, known as a ward or - mainly in smaller parishes - the entire parish or town council area. They are generally elected by the public every four years.

## What do councillors do?

Councillors have three main components to their work.

1. *Decision making* - Through meetings and attending 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. These responsibilities and duties often depend on what the councillor wants to achieve and how much time is available, and may include:

- Going to meetings of local organisations such as tenants' associations.
- Going to meetings of bodies affecting the wider community.
- Taking up issues on behalf of members of the public.
- Running a surgery for residents to bring up issues.
- Meeting with individual residents in their own homes.

Visiting your council is the best way to find out what happens there. Give the council a call and find out when its next public meeting happens. By law, ordinary people are allowed to be present at most council business.

## 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 community, parish and 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

Yes - most people are. However there are a few rules.

You have to be:

- a British subject, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union; and
- on the “relevant date” (i.e. the day on which you are nominated or if there is a poll the day of the election) 18 years of age or over; and additionally:
  - on the “relevant day” a local government elector for the council area for which you want to stand; or
  - have during the whole of the 12 months preceding that day occupied as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the council area; or
  - have during that same period had your principal or only place of work in the council area; or
  - during that 12 month period resided in the council area.
- In the case of a sitting member of a parish or community council you can also satisfy the criteria to be elected if you have lived in the council area or within 3 miles of it for the whole of the 12 months preceding the “relevant day”.
- You cannot stand for election if you
  - are 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 sentence of imprisonment (whether suspended or not) for a period of over three months without the option of a fine.
- you work for the council you want to become a councillor for (but you can work for other local authorities, including the principal authorities that represent the same area).

### **But I'm too young...**

Some parish councils also run youth councils, which are comprised of a number of young people representing their local schools and colleges. They are granted their own political forum by having a space and a time to meet and discuss matters that affect them. These youth councils are in direct communication with their parish councils so they can also be involved in decision-making. Contact your parish council or speak to your school to find out if either is involved in such a scheme and you are interested in getting involved. If there is not a scheme, or a parish youth forum, get together with friends and put a proposal to your local community, parish or town council.

**I am not a member of a political party and do not want to be**

Most community, parish and town councillors are not party political - and many who are tied to want party as a councillor for another sector, do not stand as a political candidate for their parish council

If you wish to stand as a party political candidate, you are also welcome to do so. Contact your party's local office for more information.

Conservative Party [www.conservatives.com](http://www.conservatives.com)

Green Party [www.greenparty.org.uk](http://www.greenparty.org.uk)

Labour Party [www.labour.org.uk](http://www.labour.org.uk)

Liberal Democrats [www.libdems.org.uk](http://www.libdems.org.uk)

Plaid Cymru [www.plaidcymru.org](http://www.plaidcymru.org)

The Electoral Commission has a guide on candidates at local elections in England and Wales.

<http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/elections/Candidates.cfm>

## **How to become a councillor**

Parish councillors are elected by the public and serve four-year terms. Following elections, councils appoint a chair, or town mayor in town councils. Parish councillors were unpaid positions until 2004 when allowance schemes were introduced to encourage more people to stand. Allowances, which tend not to be very large are at the discretion of the individual councils and they often choose to maintain a strictly unpaid status.

### **The Election Procedure**

Ordinary elections of local councillors take place on the first Thursday in May every four years. For most local councils election year is 2003, 2007 etc. but where the principal authority (county, district and unitary authority) councillor is elected in some other year that is also the year of the local council election.

Reorganisation of local government may cause alteration of the election day and election year in some cases.

### **The election timetable is as follows:**

- Publication of notice of election: Not later than the twenty-fifth day before the day of election.
- Delivery of Nomination papers: Not later than noon on the nineteenth day before the day of election.
- Publication of list of candidates: Not later than noon on the seventeenth day before the day of election.
- Delivery of notices of withdrawals of candidature: Not later than noon on the sixteenth day before the day of election.
- Notice of Poll: Not later than the sixth day before the day of election.
- Polling: Between 07:00 and 22:00 on the day of election.
- In calculating the timetable the Bank holidays and weekends are disregarded.

### **Nomination process**

A prospective candidate must deliver or send by post to the Returning Officer a valid nomination paper. This form is obtained from the Returning Officer. The candidate's surname, forenames, residence and description (if required) must be entered and his or her number and prefix letter from the current register of electors. The Returning Officer has a copy of this register, and the clerk of the local council normally has one.

The nomination paper must also contain similar particulars of a proposer and

a seconder. They must be electors for the area for which the candidate seeks election (i.e. the parish, community or town or the ward if it is divided into wards): they must sign it.

### **What Next?**

The returning officer appointed by a principal authority (district, borough, county or unitary authority) is the person responsible for the conduct and arrangement for community, parish and town council elections. If you are considering becoming a candidate for election it could be wise to contact the Returning Officer to obtain any more detailed information. Also for more information about what life is like as councillor contact your local County Association of Local Councils or alternatively your local community, parish or town council.

### **But the election is not for a few years**

If a seat becomes vacant mid-term (or if there are not enough candidates to fill all council seats at election time) the council will hold a by-election. In certain circumstances the council may then co-opt members to the council.

### **Further Information**

If you need any further information please contact your local community, parish or town council. Alternatively you can contact your [local county association](#) of local councils or you can contact the National Association.

Additional information on becoming a councillor can be found at <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Toolkits/Democracy/Elections.aspx>

The National Association would like to extend its thanks to all the county associations of local councils, principal authorities, the Electoral Commission and the BBC's I-can web site in providing information relevant to these publications.

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