

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.

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 can it provide?

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

- Representing the local community
- Delivering services to meet local needs
- Striving to improve quality of life in the parish

A Parish Council might provide and/or maintain some of the following services:

- Allotments, burial grounds, car parks, community transport schemes, footpaths
- Bridleways, bus shelters, commons, crime reduction measures, leisure facilities

It can also work with South Northamptonshire Council and Northampton County Council for other services, for example:

- Litter bins, youth projects, open spaces, public toilets, planning
- Street cleaning, street lighting, tourism, traffic calming, village greens

How does it make decisions?

The Parish Council is made up of a number of councillors who meet regularly to make decisions on the work and direction of the council. As an elected body, the Parish Council is an "it" and, through its councillors, is responsible to the people it represents – that's the local community.

Attending a council meeting is the best way to find out what it does. Have a look at the other pages on this website to see what the Parish Council has been dealing with recently.

Where does it get its money from?

Each year a sum of money called a 'precept' is collected through your council tax. Parish councils can also apply for grants and loans.

How are parish or town councillors elected?

Parish or town councillors are elected to represent a geographical area known as a ward. They are elected by people who live in the area. If the parish is divided into wards then an election is held in each ward, in 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.

What do parish or town councillors do?

Councillors have three main areas of work:

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;

Monitoring: councillors make sure that their decisions lead to efficient and effective services by keeping an eye on how well things are working;

Getting involved: local representatives, councillors have responsibilities towards their parishioners 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

going to meetings of bodies that affect the wider community, such as the police, the Highways Authority, schools and colleges

bringing parishioners concerns to the attention of the council

Could I be a parish councillor?

As a councillor you can become a voice for your community and affect real change. It helps if you're a "people person" who enjoys talking to other residents but, more importantly, you need to have the concerns and best interests of the parish as a whole at heart. Councillors are community leaders and should represent the aspirations of the public that they serve.

Parish 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 council and see what difference you can make to your local community?

How much time does it take up & when?

On average less than a couple of hours a week. Obviously there are some councillors who spend more time than this – and some less, but in the main, being a parish councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community and helping to make it a better place to live and work. Meetings of the full Council are always held in the evening – as are most meetings of the other groups which councillors attend on the Council's behalf.

Talking and listening to your fellow parishioners can be done at any time but you must be able to spend a couple of hours once a month on a Monday evening attending the Council meeting.

Am I qualified?

Most people are. However there are a few basic 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, and
- live or work in or near the parish.

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.