

Becoming a Councillor

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%20NALC/What%20is%20a%20parish%20or%20town%20council)

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.

Parish, town and community councils may soon be granted more powers, especially as part of Quality Status. When councils are awarded this status they are allowed to negotiate with the local principal authorities (the district or county council or unitary authority) that certain responsibilities get devolved to the parish. This is part of the government's initiative to revitalise local democracy.

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.

Scotland also has community councils, but they have fewer powers. Visit www.ascc.org.uk for more information.

Being a councillor

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

Green Party www.greenparty.org.uk

Labour Party www.labour.org.uk

Liberal Democrats www.libdems.org.uk

Plaid Cymru 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 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.

Case Studies

Ken Cleary - Seneley Green Parish Councillor and Chairman of NALC

David Drew MP - The member of parliament for Stroud explains why he is still a councillor on Stonehouse Town Council.

Making a difference

Cllr Ken Cleary, Seneley Green Parish Council and chairman of National Association of Local Councils

I have been asked on many occasions by members of the public why and how I became a district and parish councillor, I explained the following.

From the day I first started learning my trade as an electrician I realised that I needed some outside activity to keep my mind occupied. Whilst at school, like all young boys, I had tried all kinds of sports and had found there was only one sport that not only gave me satisfaction, but that I was good at. The only trouble with the works angling section was that it was not run very well; after many arguments I was asked to take over as secretary of the angling section this I did and held the role for a great many years.

At the age of thirty, my wife and I moved house and as well as angling I became the secretary of my local darts league, my local party branch and my local labour club, and I also became involved with the local voluntary sector. I have only mentioned all of the above to show that from the day I started work all of my leisure time was taken up working in one way or another to ensure that the groups and the community I served and lived in had the best opportunities I could give them.

When I was forty I became ill and was admitted to hospital, when I was better I was unable to continue with my sporting activities. I was then asked if I would stand for election to the district council, and it so happened that the parish elections took place on the same day. I was successful in winning both elections. It did not take me long to attain senior role on the district council and I held this for a number of years. The one thing that I could not come to terms with was the conflict of interest I often felt about my dual role as a district and parish councillor and the fact that I seemed too far removed from the people who had elected me. This often brought me into conflict with my fellow parish councillors. I, therefore, stood down from the parish council for one term.

I then realised that the power I had at district was not enabling me to make a difference to the community I lived in. The answer to this came when I was not selected to stand for the district, but regained my parish seat. I have held this to date. I cannot relate the feeling of elation in being able in any small way to bring about changes for the better to the lives of residents in my community and the feeling that I am helping to be seen working with people instead of doing things to them, with the help of others and may I say with a superb parish clerk I am sure that the parish council will continue to go from strength to strength.

When I look back one of the changes I feel very strongly is that in other activities when all is running well it is very easy to hand over to others, but when you become involved in the every day lives and activities of the community you serve the need is so great and the will to help becomes stronger.

Life as a councillor

David Drew, MP for Stroud Town Council

I was first elected as a Parish Councillor in 1987. I still remain a town councillor (my community became a Town in 1990) 18 years later. During that time I have been also a district and county councillor and latterly the MP for Stroud.

Why did I become a councillor and why do I remain one? The simple fact is that I want to continue my local community in Stonehouse, a small town three miles from Stroud. When I stood for election I had already had some experience of being a Councillor but it was with a sense of excitement and anticipation that I became a Parish Councillor for the first time. All this time later I still believe that to be true, but more than anything I enjoy my role as a Local Councillor - meetings remain lively but focused and unlike other areas of government you can see, feel and touch the changes that you are part of.

Naturally there are frustrations; the way larger authorities treat you on occasions; insufficient powers which can prevent progress on some issues; the time it takes to see change through because of the inadequacy of our planning laws. Nevertheless I am firmly of the opinion that if the will exists then it is possible to radically improve your community - and the sense of fulfilment through that achievement cannot be bettered.

More than anything it is the sense of being able to work as part of a genuine team as councillors put aside their political differences for the betterment of their community. This does not mean that there is any less passion at this level of government, as I have always found people to be robust in their defence of their position on particular issues. However pleasingly I have found that people will work together more often than not, such is their desire to make things happen.

What I am most proud of is the tangible changes I have seen my community undergo. A major site redevelopment, taking down slum housing and replacing it with low cost but well designed accommodation. Bringing jobs into the town. Achieving our long last ambition of buying our own offices and civic centre by sharing property with the sub Post Office next door, securing its future, and putting the Council at the centre of the town's activities. And much, much more. Why did I stay a councillor even though I am the area's MP? Of course I now miss more meetings than I would like, but my colleagues have been remarkably tolerant of my absences. The only thing they do say is that the meetings do seem to last much longer when I do attend! The reason I remain is that I believe in this level of Government, the first layer of our democracy, but it keeps my feet on the ground, and as I said earlier I enjoy it.

For these reasons and many more I would strongly advise anyone who is interested in their community to summon up the courage to put themselves forward for election. Yes it does involve standing up and taking responsibility and you will have to justify what you say and do, but if you really want to improve people's lives you are in the best place to do this. I believe this to be true, and 18 years on I am more convinced than ever of the importance of staying involved.