

All about local councils

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



The
Electoral
Commission

About this booklet

Throughout England parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils (local councils)* work towards improving community well-being and providing better services at a local level. They are the tier of local government below the level of district, borough or unitary council and are the tier of local government closest to the people.

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

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

What are local councils?

There are over 8,700 parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils (local 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 includes many of our larger cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Newcastle. Recent changes to the law mean that it is now possible to create a local council in London, last seen in the capital in the 1960s. To find out if there is a parish, town, community or neighbourhood 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 parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils?

Not a great deal. They all 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, community or neighbourhood council, and has a mayor.

* Parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils are collectively known as local councils. Any reference to local councils in this booklet refers to parish, town and community councils and not to the district or borough council tier of local government.

What services do they provide?

Your local council has an overall responsibility for the well-being of your local neighbourhood.

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, maintain or contribute to the following services:

- allotments
- bus shelters
- car parks
- community centres
- community safety schemes
- community transport schemes
- crime reduction measures
- cycle paths
- festivals and celebrations
- leisure facilities
- litter bins
- local illuminations
- local youth projects
- parks and open spaces
- planning
- public lavatories
- street cleaning
- street lighting
- tourism activities
- traffic calming measures.

They will often work with larger councils in your area called 'principal authorities' and cooperate to ensure the effective delivery of services to the local community.



How do they make decisions?

Your local 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 local 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 invested back into your local neighbourhood by your local council to improve facilities and services for you and your neighbours. Local councils can also apply for grants and loans and, if they own property, can receive money from rents or leases.

Case study:

Improving performance, Offerton Park Parish Council

Number of councillors: 10

Size of electorate: 2,700

Offerton Park Parish Council in Stockport is largely made up of the Offerton Estate built in the 1960s and 1970s. Local residents drove a campaign for a parish in the area which was created in 2002. The Council have worked hard to ensure excellent standards of delivery and the NALC/AON Website of the Year award in 2007 followed the award of Quality parish status and Charter Mark. A key focus for the Council is examining how they can provide better and better services for the community and this has led to the sharing of ideas and learning from other councils including establishing links in the USA.



Case study:

Delegated control, Aylesbury Town Council

Number of councillors: 24
Size of electorate: 40,000

As a consequence of obtaining Quality Status, the Town Council has entered into an agreement with the County Council to deliver minor highways maintenance in Aylesbury. This means it can respond instantly to problems with footpaths and minor road surfaces. It is also now empowered to clear rights of way, to control roadside vegetation and to maintain street furniture and signs. The council now tackles all the 'grot spots', on which it had previously been powerless to act. The Council agreed a match funding package where the County pays £2 to every £1 the Council spends, making a total of £30,000 per annum. This gives the Town Council the resource to invest men and equipment for outdoor maintenance and it now has much more control over the appearance of the Town.



How are local councillors elected?

Local council councillors are elected to represent a geographical area known as a ward or – mainly in smaller local councils – the parish, town, community or neighbourhood council area as a whole. They are elected by people who live in the area.

If the local council is divided into wards an election is held in each ward, the same way elections are held in district or borough wards. If the local council doesn't have wards there is just a single local council election.

Most local council elections are on the same cycle, with elections in 2011, 2015, 2019 and so on. However, local council elections may instead be held together with associated principal council elections.

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

Local councils can now be established anywhere in England, whether small rural communities or within urban city conurbations. Recent legislation removed the ban on local councils being established in London ensuring that Londoners would have the option of establishing local councils for their local neighbourhood.

For more information see www.communities.gov.uk

Who can vote in local 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 local 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 local 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

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

- 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.

How do I contact my local councillor?

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



Case study:

Under the spotlight, Campbell Park Parish Council

Number of councillors: 20
Size of electorate: 10,900

Campbell Park Parish Council in Milton Keynes has undertaken a number of spotlight events to help highlight and explore, understand and celebrate a variety of different aspects of the local community. They have directed the spotlight on the Punjab, age and ageism, Ghana, the Celtic fringe, Nigeria, Islam, multiple occupation housing, Hinduism, health and diversity. The brainchild of Councillor Tom Fraser, Cllr the late Richard Osbourne and the Milton Keynes Racial Equalities Council, the latest manifestation of Spotlight was a highly successful Diversity Ball which saw 600 people enjoy the spectacle of fantastic costumes, dancing and food, all helping to reflect the broad spectrum of different cultures in the local area.

Could I become a local 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, town, community and neighbourhood councillors are the most local part of our democratic system and are closest to the public. Why don't you stand for your local council and see what difference you can make to your local neighbourhood.

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 local 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 local 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.

In 2007, the age you can run as a candidate in an election was lowered from 21 to 18.

These youth councils are in direct communication with their parish, town, community or neighbourhood council so they can also be involved in decision-making. Contact your local 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.

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.

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

A local council can empower your community. District and borough councils now have responsibility for the creation of new local councils. You can petition your district or borough council and request that a local council be set up in your community. It will be able to raise its own funds locally all of which will be invested in the local community for the well-being of its residents. If you would like more information on setting up a local council the National Association of Local Councils can provide advice (contact details 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 set up by the UK Parliament. Our aim is integrity and public confidence 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.