

Despite the name, Parish Councils have nothing to do with the church. Parish and Town Councils represent the first tier of local government and there are approximately 70,000 Parish and Town councillors in England.

It is the most local level of government - local people elected by local residents to tackle purely local issues. While they may be responsible for smaller areas and fewer people than District and County Councils, they are recognised as the grassroots layer of democracy and are, for around 14 million people, the most 'local' level of local government. Many Parishes are 'unwarded' (not divided into wards), so Parish councillors represent the whole Parish. Where Parishes are warded, these wards do not necessarily have the same boundaries as the District wards. In warded Parishes, the councillors represent the electors of their ward.

#### WHAT DO PARISH COUNCILS DO?

As well as their basic responsibilities to represent the whole electorate within the Parish, deliver services to meet local needs and strive to improve quality of life in the Parish, Parish councils can also be responsible for providing a range of community services such as: street lighting; allotments; local transport and traffic services; and tourist information centres.

#### ELIGIBILITY

To become a Parish councillor you must be:

A British citizen, or other Commonwealth citizen, or a citizen of the Irish Republic or the European Union, and resident in the United Kingdom.

18 or over on the day of nomination.

On the electoral register for the area in which you are seeking election; or living within three miles of it, or working, owning/ leasing

land or property in that parish for at least the last twelve months.  
You will not be able to stand for election if: You hold a paid office or employment made or confirmed by the council.

You are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order.

You have been convicted of a criminal offence and sentenced to not less than three months imprisonment (including a suspended sentence) in the last five years. You can also be disqualified from holding office, by order of the court, if you have incurred illegal expenditure (when acting as a councillor) of over £2,000 and if you have been found guilty of corrupt or illegal practices under the Representation of the People Act (1983) or the Audit Commission Act (1998).

A guide to becoming a Parish councillor

They can make a particularly important contribution to tourism; planning; legal proceedings; licensing; community halls; representation; transport; management of town and village centres and providing community centres.

Parish Councils have few restrictions on the use of their powers but expenditure does have to be paid by the parish. As Parish Councils do not face 'capping' or receive any government grants they have much more freedom than principal councils from government interference on their spending.

The Parish also has a reasonable amount of power. A prime example of this is in planning applications. The planning authority is the District or Borough Council, but they often give details of every planning application within the parish to the Parish Council and will take into account the councillors' comments when coming to a decision. Similarly the County Council is often the highway authority, but it often consults the Parish when it is considering any road scheme, for example the placing of double yellow lines, or implementation of a

cycle path.

Parish Councils are also consulted by both Central Government and the higher tier council(s) through consultative documents and draft policy documents. Their powers to work with other councils have been increased under the Local Governments Acts of 1997 and 2000.

## YOUR ROLE AS A PARISH COUNCILLOR

To represent the ward and your electorate's views at grassroots level.  
To ensure that council business is planned, run, improved and monitored correctly. To work in areas of community leadership.

## WHAT TO EXPECT ONCE YOU HAVE BEEN ELECTED

Term of office.

The term of office is four years unless you were elected at a by-election where you serve until the next scheduled election. Code of Conduct. Prior to, or at the first meeting of the council after election or cooption, councillors are requested to sign a Declaration that they will undertake their duties in accordance with the law. They are also required to complete forms relating to the Code of Conduct which requires a declaration of interests.

When completed and countersigned these documents are open for inspection by any member of the public and must be available at every meeting of the Parish Council.

The time commitment.

There are regular meetings, usually at least once a month and you will be expected to work in and for your local community. Parish and Town Councils usually meet in the evenings and each council will have its own meeting pattern and venues. It is worth checking this with your local council to ensure you will be able to attend these meetings. The

Parish Council has a number of committees which you can join if you wish. You may also be approached by villagers asking you to help them with their problems, especially in things like planning matters. This role can be extremely rewarding and there is great satisfaction to be gained in serving your community at grassroots level.

## CONCLUSION

Being a Parish councillor brings no special privileges other than the satisfaction of working for the Parish in which you live. Becoming a local councillor is career enhancing - it shows you can make decisions, work in a team, are community minded and pro-active.