



Elections Toolkit - Article 1

What is a Town or Parish Council?

Town and Parish Councils are the tier of local government closest to the people and provide communities with a democratic voice and structure to take community action. Town and Parish Councils are one and the same. They have the same powers and act within the same legislation. A Town Council is a large Parish Council that has a Mayor instead of a Chairman.

Parish Councils represent the concerns and aspirations of a local community. They often do not have a permanent office or any full-time staff and may meet in the local hall or school. The part-time nature should not be taken as any indication of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Council, as many Parish Councils work very hard for their electors and can run a wide range of services. A larger Parish or Town Council can represent large populations and will often fulfil many functions from providing leisure facilities, to supporting museums and Tourist Information Centres. They can provide Town centre closed-circuit television systems and maintain closed Church of England churchyards, halls and allotments.

Parish Councils are the most non bureaucratic and the cheapest kind of local authority in existence although they are strictly audited each year. As Parish Councils are created in law, they can only act within the law by exercising their powers and functions which have been conferred on them by Statutes (Acts of Parliament). Anything a Parish Council tries to do outside these powers is Ultra Vires, in other words, outside the law.

The range of powers Parish Councils have, continue to change and grow and are many and varied from purchasing land and buildings to providing and maintaining village greens, they provide recreational facilities and can spearhead crime prevention measures and traffic calming. What is important to acknowledge is that Parish Councils have few duties but many powers if they choose to use them. It is how and which of these powers that Councillors decide to use that make a vibrant, forward-thinking Parish Council to bring positive benefits to communities.

The basic responsibilities of Town and Parish Councils are to make the lives of their local communities more comfortable by representing the whole electorate within the Parish, delivering or co-ordinating services to meet local needs and striving to improve quality of life in the Parish. Councils can also comment on planning applications and be represented at public enquiries.

Parish Councils range in size from a large Town Council representing 70,000 people to the smaller Parish that may only have 200 residents. Funded solely through the Council Tax, their annual budgets can be anything from £1,000 to £5,000,000, with some even raising further income from services. Town and Parish Council budgets are a tiny part of the whole Council tax; they do not receive any Government funding or business rates.

Whatever the makeup of your Council, it is the representation of people's hopes and concerns, and ensuring that local services provided are efficient and effective, that is most important to community wellbeing. A well-informed Council is aware of what its community needs and strives to provide this through teamwork and accessing grant funding, representation at other meetings or lobbying appropriate bodies.

Town and Parish Councils have a duty to appoint/employ a Clerk to carry out the Council's business. Depending on its size and the services provided other members of staff may also be employed. All Councils must meet at least four times a year (although most meet more frequently) and their meetings must be open to the public. On occasion, for certain restricted items of confidentiality, members of the public may be excluded.