

Becoming a Parish Councillor

Information for Candidates

Parish Councils are often at the heart of a thriving local community and form a key part of the democratic process. They give people a say at a very local level on proposals which affect them.

Parish Councils are involved in providing local facilities, such as playing fields, open spaces, and village halls and, in conjunction with the County and Borough Councils, they may also be involved in traffic calming schemes and other local initiatives. Increasingly, they represent the views and needs of their communities across a wide range of issues. They have a legal right to be notified of all planning applications within the Parish boundary and they must be consulted fully by the Borough Council. This means that Parish Councils can influence strategic planning issues and a range of other important matters affecting the communities they serve.

These notes have been prepared for prospective candidates to offer an insight into the role and responsibilities of Parish Councillors and to explain some of the things you might encounter if elected.

Parish Councillors

Becoming a Councillor is a rewarding and valued form of public service. Councillors (or Members as they are often known) have to balance the needs and interests of their residents, voters and local council. All of these groups will make legitimate demands on your available time.

All Councillors contribute to the work of the Parish Council by:-

- (i) having a say about the things they care about;
- (ii) putting forward ideas for better services;
- (iii) responding to the needs and views of their constituents;
- (iv) seeking the best outcome to local issues; and
- (v) getting involved in decision-making by voting.

An individual Councillor (including the Chairman) cannot make a decision on behalf of the Council. Therefore, cooperation between Councillors to achieve the best possible outcome for the community is the key to the success of the Council and the basis for a rewarding contribution. Importantly, this involves listening to the views of other Councillors and getting broad agreement on the best way forward.

Parish Councillors do not get paid, but they are able to claim expenses for some duties.

Parish Council Meetings

The amount of time you will spend in meetings depends very much on the size of your local Council area. Some Councils may meet once every month and have Committees to consider particular topics (e.g. Planning Committee or Amenities Committee), whilst others (mainly the small ones) meet only four times per year and have no Committees.

A Parish Council is not properly constituted unless it has appointed a Chairman. Therefore, the Chairman's appointment must be the first item of business at the annual meeting of the Council. The conduct of meetings is governed by rules, known as "Standing Orders", which specify the order of business, rules of debate and other matters of procedure. The interpretation of these rules is the responsibility of the person in the Chair.

Council and Committee meetings are usually held in the evenings to allow good public access and to enable those in full-time employment to become Councillors. An average meeting might take 2 - 3 hours.

Agendas for all meetings are sent to Councillors in advance. This allows Members to check whether there are any items of particular interest to them and prepare what they would like to say at the meeting. These agendas are available to the public. Preparation for meetings is very important and Councillors need to have read the agenda and any attached papers before the meeting. You may wish to consult local groups, constituents or colleagues on certain issues.

Formal minutes recording the decisions made at all meetings are produced and these are also available to the public.

In addition to taking decisions at meetings, Councillors may also be expected to:-

- actively participate in projects being supported or sponsored by the Parish Council;
- represent the Council on other bodies; and
- attend other meetings on particular subjects.

The Parish Clerk

The Parish Council employ a Part Time Clerk to provide advice and assist them in fulfilling their roles. The Clerk receives a salary, although this can vary greatly from Council to Council. The salary, which is a matter of agreement between the Clerk and the Council, reflects the size and population of the Parish and the range of responsibilities of the Clerk.

The Clerk is an independent and objective professional, who protects the Council by ensuring that legal, statutory and other provisions governing or affecting its operation are observed. Although it is not possible to give an exhaustive list of all the functions of Clerks, they will normally include:-

- preparing and circulating agendas and reports for meetings
- attending meetings and preparing the minutes
- implementing and monitoring the Council's decisions
- keeping required records and dealing with correspondence dealing with the Council's finances and accounts
- managing the Council's assets
- maintaining high ethical standards and ensuring good practice within the Council
- keeping up-to-date with Government legislation and taking appropriate action
- Some Parish Councils employ a small number of other staff and the Clerk will also be responsible for their supervision.

Conduct of Councillors

Parish Councillors must at all times observe a local Code of Conduct to ensure high standards in the way they undertake their duties. This duty to observe the Code primarily applies to situations where Members are undertaking official duties. There are two very important provisions by which Members are bound at all times:-

- they should not do anything which brings the Council or their office into disrepute
- they should not misuse their official position to their own advantage or to the advantage or disadvantage of others

Otherwise, the Code only applies when Members are conducting the business of the Council (for example, at Council or Committee meetings).

The Code places a positive duty on Members to:-

- promote equality by not discriminating against others
- treat others with respect
- respect confidential information
- listen to the advice of the Clerk

There are a number of things which Members must not do (in addition to those mentioned above):-

- seek to compromise the impartiality of any person who works for the Council
- misuse Council resources or authorise their misuse, in particular for unauthorised party political purposes

Members are required to register a range of financial and other interests, details of which are contained in the Code of Conduct. The Register of Members' Interests is available for public inspection. These interests will include employment and business activities, property and share ownership and membership of other organisations.

If you are not prepared to reveal such information in a public register, you will not be eligible to serve on the Parish Council.

Alongside the Register, Members are also required to disclose any financial or personal interest they may have in any matter being considered at a Council meeting. This may prevent a Member from speaking on the issue concerned or require them to leave the meeting whilst it is being considered.

Training and advice on compliance with the Code is available and the Parish Clerk will be prepared to offer advice when required. However, ultimate responsibility rests with the individual Member.

Still Interested?

Elections to Parish Councils are held in the first Thursday in May every four years, with the last election being in May 2015. Therefore, those Councillors elected in May 2015 will serve until the following election in May 2019.

In between these main elections casual vacancies sometimes occur, in these circumstances the seat will be advertised, if ten electors petition for a poll the seat will be filled following a Bye-election, if no poll is called the seat will be filled by a process of co-option.

In general terms, subject to a small number of additional qualifications and disqualifications contained in the Local Government Act 1972, electors over 21 years of age may become a member of the Parish Council.

If you are still interested, go along to your local Parish Council meeting -all are in public - to see how things happen. Talk to the Councillors and the Clerk after the meeting to help you decide whether you wish to perform this challenging, but rewarding role, or contact the Clerk for an informal discussion.

Co-Option

If a process of co-option is used - the Parish Council may co-opt whom it wishes to fill a casual vacancy, subject of course to the qualification requirements for being a local councillor.

The person co-opted must receive a majority of votes of those councillors present and voting at the meeting at which the co-option takes place.

Co-option vacancies will be advertised widely in the village, applicants will be asked to complete a short application form, and attend a short interview with the Council in order that Councillors can assess the applicants suitability for and understanding of the role.

Who can be a candidate?

To be qualified to be elected a member of the Parish Council you must be 21 years of age or over at the date of your nomination, and a British or Commonwealth citizen, a citizen of the Republic of Ireland or a citizen of another Member State of the European Community, and either:

1. be a registered local government elector for the Parish both on the day your are nominated and election day. You can check this by contacting the Electoral Services Unit; or
2. you must have occupied as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the Parish during the whole of the twelve months before the day you are nominated and election day; or
3. your principal or only place of work in the twelve months before the day you are nominated and election day has been in the Parish; or
4. you must have lived in the Parish or within 4.8 kilometres (3 miles), during the whole of the twelve months before the day you are nominated and election day.

Who cannot be a candidate?

Certain people are disqualified from being elected. You cannot be a candidate if you:

- hold a paid office under the Parish authority or a politically restricted post (as defined in Part I of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989); or
- have been adjudged bankrupt or made a composition or arrangement with creditors; or
- have been sentenced to a term of imprisonment of three months or more (including a suspended sentence) without the option of a fine, during the five years before election day; or
- have been disqualified under part III of the Representation of the People Act 1983 or under the Audit Commission Act 1998.