

SMITH'S WOOD PARISH COUNCIL



BECOMING A PARISH COUNCILLOR

Introduction

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 (principal authorities) and are the tier of local government closest to the people. The term 'local councils' refers to parish, town, community, neighbourhood and village councils and not to the district, borough, unitary or county council tier of local government. Sat on these local councils are some 80,000 elected local councillors, people just like you, who give up a little of their time each week to represent the interests of their local community.

What are local councils?

There are over 9,000 parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils (local councils) representing around 16 million people across England and they form the most local level of government. Each year a sum of money raised locally 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. Many local councils also supplement the money collected locally through applications to grant and fund providers securing further resources to invest in the community. It is your local councillors representing the aspirations of the community who will decide how to spend this money. Local councils can be found in a diverse range of communities, both rural and urban - with many to be found in some of England's biggest cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Newcastle. Recent legislative change also means that people in London can now set up a local council in their own area. Whether urban or rural, local councils all have one thing in common - their purpose is to make the lives of the people in their local community better and to give the local community a voice and the means to achieve this.

So what do local councils do?

Your local council has an overall responsibility for the well-being of your local neighbourhood. Their work falls into three main categories:

- Representing the local community
- Delivering services to meet local needs
- Striving to improve the quality of life
- in the local area

Your council might provide, maintain or contribute to the following services:

Allotments; Leisure facilities; Bus shelters; Litter bins; Car parks; Local Illuminations; Community Centres; Local youth projects; Community safety schemes; Parks and open spaces; Community transport schemes; Planning; Public lavatories; Crime reduction measures; Street Cleaning; Street lighting; Cycle paths; Tourism activities; Festivals and celebrations; Traffic calming measures; and many more!

They will often work with the principal authority in your area and cooperate to ensure the effective delivery of services to the local community. It is your local councillors, helped by your local council clerk, who identify local needs and ensure delivery.

What is a Town or Parish Councillor

Town or Parish Councillors are not employees, they are elected representatives who volunteer their time for free to work on behalf of their community.

What will you do as a Town or Parish Councillor?

- engage with the local community and keep up-to-date with issues of local concern
- provide a voice for all sections of the community
- mediate between individuals and organisations
- campaign on behalf of the Council or individuals
- manage public funds and seek best value

The following are indicative and not requirements. There is a legal requirement to attend Local Council meetings and abide by the Code of Conduct.

Main Duties and Responsibilities

- To participate constructively in the government of the Parish.
- To participate fully in the formation and scrutiny of the Parish Council's policies, budgets, strategies and service delivery including the 'Parish Plan'.
- To ensure, with other Councillors, that the Parish Council is properly managed.
- To keep up to date with significant developments affecting the Parish Council at local, regional and national levels.
- To be accessible and to represent effectively the interests of the ward for which the Councillor is elected and deal with Parishioners enquiries, representations and complaints.
- To represent the whole electorate; listen and then represent the views of the whole community when discussing council business and working with outside bodies.
- To take an active part in the Parish Council's arrangements to build community capacity and promote measures that contribute to the Parish Council's vision.
- To attend Parish Council meetings
- To prepare for meetings and being properly informed about the issues to be discussed.
- To take part in meetings and form sound judgements based on what is best for the community and then abide by majority decisions.
- To represent the Parish Council on outside bodies to which the Councillor is appointed including the Standards Committee and Governing Bodies.
- To maintain proper standards of behaviour as an elected representative of the people.
- To fulfil the statutory and locally determined requirements of an elected member of a Local Authority and the Parish Council, including compliance with all relevant Codes of Conduct and maintaining high ethical standards (including not disclosing confidential information and not using Council resources for political purposes or any other reason unless agreed by the Council).
- To participate effectively as a member of any committee or working party to which the Councillor is appointed.
- To contribute constructively to open government and democratic renewal to actively encourage to the Parish to participate generally in the government of the area and provide access to information where appropriate.
- To uphold the Parish Council's Standing Orders and ethical standards (ensuring that the impartiality of council staff is not compromised).
- To produce an annual report to enhance their accountability to the public by providing details of official activities and the contribution made to the effective operation of the Parish Council.

Who can be a Town or Parish Councillor?

You do not have to be a member of any political party. Good Town or Parish Councillors are concerned with local community matters.

To be a Town or Parish Councillor you must be:

- a British citizen, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union, and
- 21 years or older on the day you become nominated for election
- for the whole of the 12 months prior to nomination you must:
 - a.) have been an elector of the parish and either occupied or owned/rented premises in the parish, or
 - b.) resided within 3 miles of the boundary of the parish, or
 - c.) had your principal or only place of work in that area

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 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 that you want to become a councillor for.

What skills will you need as a Town or Parish Councillor...

Communications

- Seek out and listen to others' views
- Listen actively, ask questions, check understanding
- Be objective and rigorous in analysing and evaluating complex information
- Present information clearly, concisely and accurately and avoid 'jargon'
- Keep people informed through regular feedback
- Know who to speak to or write to
- Develop IT skills - e-government

Leadership

- Represent the Council and the community
- Have a clear vision and communicate this to others
- Be results orientated, lead by example
- Take responsibility
- Champion initiatives and implement change
- Foster a culture of trust, empowerment and participation
- Develop public speaking skills

Personal Effectiveness

- Demonstrate integrity, be reliable, consistent and open
- Remain calm and objective in difficult situations
- Be creative, developing new ideas and identifying alternative approaches
- Strive for improvement
- Manage available time well by prioritising
- Use interpersonal and negotiating skills

Knowledge

- Understand the law relating to Parish Council meetings
- Understand the Code of Conduct
- Understand planning law and local policy
- Understand the roles of different tiers of local government
- Know your local County Councillor/District Councillor and key officers
- Know about local voluntary sector organisations external funding opportunities

How do Councillors develop useful skills and knowledge?

- Even new Councillors probably have many of them
- Principal Councils have induction programmes do/should parishes?
- Use the Council's resources - your Clerk and serving Councillors
- Your Local Council's Association - courses/articles
- Your County/District/Unitary Councillor
- Look out for good practice anywhere - and copy it!

Training needs analysis and development plan

- Draw up your own list of skills/knowledge you might feel is important
- Identify the things you think you are good at - and carry on with them
- Identify any weaknesses decide which are most important and decide how to achieve improvements
- Not everyone can be best at everything - the Council can be a team - working to individuals' strengths
- Be realistic - but strive for continuous improvement

Standing for Election

Getting elected to most Town and Parish Councils is not difficult if...

- You are willing to put yourself forward as a councillor
- Opposed, the electorate chooses you.
- Elected, you are prepared to make time and the effort to be an effective councillor.

Elections of Town and Parish councillors take place every 4 years on the first Thursday in May. These are known as ordinary elections. General and European elections may cause alteration of the election day.

For most Town and Parish Councils election year is 2023, 2027, 2031 etc. where the principal authority (county, district or unitary authority) councillor is elected in some other year that is also the year of the Town or Parish election.

Getting nominated...

As a prospective candidate you must deliver or send to the principal authorities Returning Officer a valid nomination Form. This form is obtained from the Officer. Your surname, forenames, residence and description (if required) must be entered together with your number and prefix letter from the current register of electors in the parish. The proposer and seconder must sign the nomination form.

Casual vacancies...

Casual vacancies on a council are when a councillor dies, resigns or is barred from office. In this instance there must be a by-election. It is important that you stand election rather than be co-opted to the Town or Parish Council as an election gives you a democratic mandate.

Why stand for election?

Your parish council may be doing good things with your community and you wish to have more involvement in the decision-making process. You may feel that you have the time and ideas to work with your community and council to make further improvements in local services and facilities.

Equally you may be dissatisfied with your town or parish council. It is very easy to just sit on the side-lines and complain. It is far more productive to get elected and try to make a change from within. The 4 yearly elections are a good time for a committed group of residents to all stand for election and effect real change especially in those councils where there has not been a contested election for many years.

Getting Elected - how, what you need to do...

1. Ordinary v by-elections. Ordinary elections are held every 4 years. All existing councillors stand for re-election. By-elections arise when a council seat becomes vacant between ordinary elections. This is known as a casual vacancy. Elections must be advertised by town and parish councils for casual vacancies.
2. Are you qualified to stand?
3. Ensure you are a registered elector and on the electoral roll.
4. You do not need to be a member of any political party (the majority of parish councils are non-political).
5. If you do not plan on spending any money getting elected you do not need an electoral agent. There are strict legal conditions on what can be spent by whom and on what.
6. The organisation of elections varies from principal authority to principal authority. Principal authorities organise parish council elections to coincide with their own ward elections.
7. In some instances, all principal authority councillor elections are held at the same time for all wards every 4 years. In others an election cycle is used with 1/3 of councillors retiring and elections being held 3 years out of 4. If the principal authority has 42 councillors then 14 will be standing for re-election three years out of four. If in doubt ask the monitoring officer (Monitoring Officer for Smith's Wood is based at Solihull MBC).
8. In parish council elections all councillors retire and may offer themselves for re-election.

9. Get the forms from your principal authority monitoring officer. Their details are often to be found under 'Democratic services' although some authorities may use a different name.
10. As a prospective candidate you must deliver or send to the principal authorities Returning Officer a valid nomination form. This form is obtained from the Officer. Your surname, forenames, residence and description (if required) must be entered together with your number and prefix letter from the current register of electors. The Returning Officer has a copy of this register.
11. Your nomination form must also contain similar particulars of your proposer and seconder. They must be registered electors in the parish. The proposer and seconder must sign the nomination form.
12. Ensure you understand the times when you MUST return the completed forms.
13. Do not rely upon another person to get the forms for you. If possible collect them.
14. Complete the forms and get them signed by proposer and seconder.
15. You will need the electoral roll numbers for your proposer and seconder. The monitoring officer will provide these for you.
16. Double check the forms and ensure that they are signed and dated.
17. Take the completed nomination forms back to your principal authority monitoring officer and hand deliver them. Get them to check that the forms have been correctly completed.
18. Do not leave returning the forms to the last minute. If there is a missing signature or mistake you may need to return home.
19. Ensure that you get a receipt for the forms which is signed and dated. Errors have been known to happen.
20. Don't forget to vote yourself and get your friends to vote.
21. In the majority of cases particularly in rural areas you may be elected unopposed as many councils have vacancies which they have been unable to fill. This is known as an uncontested election as the number of candidates is less than or equal to the number of council seats to be filled.
22. If the election is contested (more candidates than seats available) those candidates with the most votes are elected until all the council seats have been filled.