

What is a Town or Parish council?

Parish and Town Councils are the same; they have the same powers and act within the same legislation. A Town Council is a Parish Council that has usually decided to have a mayor and call itself a Town Council. Parish and Town councils are the tier of local government **closest to the people**.

Parish Councils represent the concerns and aspirations of a genuine local community. They are not a voluntary organisation, not a charity nor (a common mistake) anything to do with the Church.

Parish Councils often do not have a permanent office or any full-time staff and will meet in the local hall or school. The part-time nature should not, however, 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 very effectively. A larger Parish or Town Council can cover quite large populations and will often provide a wide range of services from leisure facilities, support for museums, Tourist Information Centres, town centre closed-circuit television systems, as well as those services similar to smaller Parish Councils such as maintaining closed Church of England churchyards, providing halls and allotments

Despite being strictly audited each year, Parish Councils are the most non bureaucratic and the cheapest kind of local authority in existence.

What can they do?

As Parish Councils were created in law, they can only act within the law by exercising their powers and functions which have been conferred on them by Statutes (i.e. Acts of Parliament). Anything a Parish Council tries to do outside these powers is *ultra vires*, in other words, outside the law.

Section 11 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997 also acknowledged that some communities not yet represented by this tier of local government (Parish or Town Council) might choose, and could petition, to demand its own elected Parish or Town Council. An indicator of how important local representation can be to people.

The range of powers available to Parish Councils continues to change. The Localism Act was introduced in November 2011. The aim of the Act was to devolve more decision making powers from central government back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils. The Act covers a wide range of issues related to local public services, with a particular focus on the general power of competence, community rights, neighbourhood planning and housing. The key measures of the Act were grouped under four main headings:

- new freedoms and flexibilities for local government
- new rights and powers for communities and individuals
- reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective
- reform to ensure decisions about housing are taken locally.

Parish and Town Councils have many powers if they choose to use them. It is how and which of these powers that councillors decide to use, that makes a vibrant forward thinking Parish Council and can bring positive benefits to communities. The basic responsibility of Parish and Town Councils is 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. Parish and Town 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 people. Town and Parish Councils do not receive Council Tax directly from the public, but are primarily funded at present from a small percentage of the Council Tax charge made by District/Unitary authorities to local householders. Their annual budgets can be anything from £1000 to sums in excess of £5,000,000, with some even raising further income from services they provide. Parish and Town Council budgets are a tiny part of the whole Council Tax and Parish and Town Councils do not receive any Government funding or income from business rates. The way that local government is financed is under great scrutiny and there is likely to be a fundamental change in the way that the whole of local government manage their services to the community.

Whatever the make up of your council, it embodies the representation of people's hopes and concerns for ensuring that local services are provided efficiently and effectively for the benefit of community wellbeing. A well informed council is aware of what its community needs and strives to provide this through team work, accessing grant funding, representation at other meetings and lobbying appropriate bodies.

Town and Parish Councils have a duty to appoint or employ a Clerk to record and carry out the council's decisions. Depending on their size and the services provided, they may employ staff for the benefit of the community. All councils must meet at least four times a year (although most meet more often) and their meetings must be open to the public, although for certain restricted items of confidentiality they may occasionally exclude the public.

A Parish or Town Council *is* the collective voice of its community.