

Rushbury Parish Council

Democracy and Citizenship Strategy

October 2008

Introduction

Democracy and Citizenship have moved up the political agenda in recent times. Democracy, of course, refers to a system of government by the people, typically in the form of placing power in the hands of freely elected representatives. However the centralization of power, a trend towards big government where all aspects of life are considered matters for the state and a reluctance on the part of governing parties to hold referenda has caused public disenchantment. There is a feeling that at national level with the party system it makes little difference which one is in power and this is reflected in poor election turnouts. However at a more local level individual candidates are probably regarded as more important but since the powers of local authorities are seen as relatively unimportant interest in local elections tends to be even less. At parish and town council level it is an unfortunate fact that often there is an insufficient number of candidates for a contested election. There is clearly a need to rekindle interest within the population in exercising democratic rights.

Citizenship, legal membership of a state, carries with it associated rights and responsibilities. The exercise of these rights and responsibilities forms the subject matter of citizenship now taught in schools. This encompasses not only strict legal responsibilities but also moral and social responsibilities. As with other elements of education the role of schools is not exclusive, much of the basics being learnt in the home and the community.

Parish councils are geographically the closest of the democratically elected tiers of government to the population they represent. Parish councillors are an integral part of the community they represent and serve and are therefore ideally placed to provide leadership in the promotion of participatory democracy and active citizenship.

Promotion of Democracy and Citizenship in Practice

The parish council has a role to play in ensuring that the annual electoral registration process is successful and in encouraging parishioners to vote in all elections.

As an integral part of local government parish councils should work with the principal authority to promote local democracy. An important aspect of this is bringing decision making as close as possible to the population being served. There is of course the need to balance the economies of scale with the implementation of local solutions. However there is no reason why for example parishes should not decide how and where their share of road maintenance funds should be spent but the work be carried out as part of a block contract let by the principal authority. This type of devolved decision making makes a reality of local democracy which should enhance public support and confidence.

By engaging with parishioners parish councils may encourage people of all ages to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Although all education should be a lifelong process it is particularly with younger members of the community that councils should work in this area.

The web site is an especially useful resource but the council should also investigate links with other organisations such as Young Farmers as well as local schools. Although citizenship appears to be taught as part of the secondary curriculum the involvement of primary schools may also be appropriate. Schemes to encourage individuals to become junior members of the council should continue to be pursued.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Some of the indicators suggested for monitoring the Community Engagement Strategy will also be related to the success of the Democracy and Citizenship Strategy, viz:

- Repeat surveys
 1. percentage of young people who feel engaged in democratic processes
- Election turnout
 2. percentage of residents who vote at parish council elections.

An additional indicators is:

- 3. number and type of campaigns mounted by the parish council to promote democracy and citizenship.

What We Will Do

The council will do the following as time and resources permit:

- continue to attempt to recruit one or more junior members (parishioners aged 14 to 17)
- investigate if we may make a contribution to a suitable topic at the local primary school
- investigate how we may engage with members of local youth groups such as Young Farmers to promote democracy and citizenship.
- publish materials in the Newsletter, display posters and incorporate suitable links in the Council Website to encourage all parishioners to register to vote at elections.
- publish materials in the Newsletter, display posters and incorporate suitable links in the Council Website to encourage all parishioners to vote at elections including reminding them of their right to a postal vote.