

Parish Council Information

What is a Parish Council?

A parish council is a local authority that makes decisions on behalf of the people in the parish area. It is the level of government closest to the community, the grass roots of democracy. Parish councils are invariably the first place people will go with concerns or ideas. And for this reason they are a vital part of any community.

Over 16 million people in the UK live in communities served by local councils (parishes), around 25% of the population. Roughly 41% of Swindon Borough households are currently within parishes.

What responsibilities do Parish Councils have?

Local councils generally work towards improving community wellbeing and providing better services at a local level. Their activities fall into three main categories: representing the local community; delivering services to meet local needs; seeking to improve quality of life and community wellbeing.

Parish councils make all kinds of decisions on issues that affect their local community. The most common topics that parish councils get involved with are planning matters (they are statutory consultees), crime prevention, managing open spaces and campaigning for and delivering better services and facilities. They can influence anything from local signage, writing a full local plan, to running community facilities.

Through an extensive range of discretionary powers local councils provide and maintain a variety of important and visible local services including allotments, bridleways, burial grounds, bus shelters, car parks, commons and open spaces, community transport schemes, community safety and crime reduction measures, events and festivals, footpaths, leisure and sports facilities, litter bins, public toilets, planning, street cleaning and lighting, tourism activities, traffic calming measures, village greens and youth projects. These existing powers were recently strengthened by powers contained in the Localism Act 2011, including the extension of the General power of competence to eligible local councils.

Who runs a Parish Council?

The council is made up of councillors elected by the electors of the parish. Every year the council elects one of them to be the Chairman of the Council (called the Mayor of a Town Council). The council has a paid officer who organises meetings and helps to carry out the council's decisions - this officer is usually called the Clerk. The Clerk does not vote or make decisions; that is the role of the councillors.

How would I become a Parish Councillor?

Elections are held every four years and will usually coincide with a Borough Council election. Details of when elections are held can be found on the Council's website. A Public Notice of a forthcoming election will also be placed on public noticeboards.

Sometimes the number of people who put their names forward for election equals or is less than the number of seats on the council. In these circumstances there is not a poll on election day and the people nominated are deemed elected. If the number deemed elected is less than the number of seats on the council, then the council is required to co-opt people onto the council to fill the vacancies.

If a seat on the council becomes vacant between normal elections then a special procedure has to be followed which can lead to an election or, more usually, the co-option of a new councillor. It is good practice for a council to advertise widely in the parish if it is seeking to make a co-option.

How can I find out more?

You can visit the following websites for more information about parish councils:

- www.localgov.co.uk
- www.wiltshire-alc.org.uk
- www.nalc.gov.uk
- www.swindon.gov.uk/parishes

Alternatively you could contact a local parish council or speak to your local Borough Councillor.