

What do Parish Councils do?

Parish councils - also called town councils, neighbourhood councils or community councils in some areas – are responsible for delivering local services.

What do Parish Councillors do?

Parish councillors make decisions about policies and services, keep an eye on how well things are working and represent local residents.

How do I become a Parish Councillor?

Most parishes in Northamptonshire have elections in 2021. On this website you can find out if you are eligible to stand for election and how you can apply.

What's in it for me and my community?

You should consider becoming a parish or town councillor if:

- You Want To Do Something Positive for Your Community
- You Want To Spend Your Time Productively
- You Can Think, Listen and Act Locally

What Parish Councils do

There are over 10, 000 parish councils (some of which are called town, community or neighbourhood councils) representing around 16 million people across England. They form the most local level of government and cover many rural and urban areas. Northamptonshire has 213 parishes with councils, plus 51 parish meetings (which do not hold elections). Together they cover almost all of the county, with the exception of unparished areas in Wellingborough, Kettering, Corby and the centre of Northampton.

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

- representing your local community
- delivering services to meet local needs
- striving to improve quality of life in the parish

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

- litter bins
- bus shelters
- car parks
- parks and open spaces
- community safety schemes
- planning
- community transport schemes
- crime reduction measures
- street cleaning
- cycle paths
- street lighting
- leisure facilities

They will often work with larger councils (district, borough or county) in your area called 'principal authorities' and cooperate to ensure the effective delivery of services to the local community.

What councillors do

Parish councillors are elected to represent a geographical area known as a ward or – mainly in smaller councils – the parish, town, community or neighbourhood council area as a whole. They are elected by people who live in the area.

If the parish council is divided into wards an election is held in each ward, the same way elections are held in district or borough wards. If the council doesn't have wards there is just a single parish council election.

Most parish council elections are on the same cycle as the principal authorities, with elections in 2020, 2025, then 2029 and every four years thereafter.

Councillors have three main areas of work:

- Decision-making: through attending meetings and committees with other elected members, councillors decide which activities to support, where money should be spent, what services should be delivered and what policies should be implemented
- Monitoring: councillors make sure that their decisions lead to efficient and effective services by keeping an eye on how well things are working
- Getting involved locally: as local representatives, councillors have responsibilities towards their constituents and local organisations. This often depends on what the councillor wants to achieve and how much time is available

The day-to-day work of a parish councillor may include:

- going to meetings of local organisations such as tenants' associations
- going to meetings of bodies that affect the wider community, such as the police, the Highways Authority, schools and colleges
- taking up issues on behalf of members of the public, such as making representations to the principal authorities
- running a surgery for residents to bring up issues
- meeting with individual residents in their own homes

Why should I become a councillor?

As a councillor you can become a voice for your community and affect real change. Councillors are community leaders and represent the aspirations of the public that they serve. Parish, town, community and neighbourhood councillors are the most local part of our democratic system and are closest to the public. By standing for your parish council you could make a real difference to your local neighbourhood.

Can I become a parish councillor?

Most people can stand for election, however there are a few rules. You have to be:

- a British citizen, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union, and
- 18 years or older on the day you become nominated for election

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 the 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 you want to become a councillor for

There are specific rules around candidacy. The full range of disqualifications for candidates is quite complex and some exceptions may apply. Full details can be found on the website of the National Association of Local Councils.

Which parish council can I stand for?

You can become a parish councillor for any parish in which you are in the list of electors or during the whole of the preceding twelve months you

- occupied land as owner or tenant in it, or
- had a principal place of work there, or
- resided in or within three miles of it

How much time will I need to spend?

It is possible to spend a lot of time on council work - but most people have jobs, families and hobbies that also demand a lot of time. However, as with most things, the more you put in, the more you (and your community) will get out.

Generally speaking, the larger your community the larger your workload will be. The times of the meetings vary, as do the venues. Parish councils normally meet in the evening. It is important to establish the pattern of meetings and venues to make sure they can accommodate your domestic and/or business arrangements. Most councils meet once a month and many also have committees, in which case you would probably be invited to sit on a committee. These usually meet in between the meetings of the full parish council.

Quite often councillors say that their duties occupy them for about three hours a week. Obviously, there are some councillors who spend more time than this – and some less, but in the main, being a local councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community and helping to make it a better place to live and work.

How do I become a councillor?

To stand for election, you can

- contact the parish council directly, or
- contact the Returning Officer at your borough or district council.

Application process

Now you're ready to take the next step to becoming a councillor.

Nomination

A prospective candidate must deliver to the Returning Officer for the election a valid nomination paper. This form is obtained as described in the previous section. The candidate's surname, forenames, residence and description (if required) must be entered and his or her number and prefix letter from the current register of electors. The Returning Officer has a copy of this register, and the clerk of the local council normally has one. The nomination paper must also contain similar particulars of a proposer and a seconder. They must be electors for the area for which the candidate seeks election (i.e. the parish, community or town or the ward if it is divided into wards): they must sign it.

Election timetable

Ordinary elections usually coincide with the election year of the principal council and must be held on the same day. The interval between elections is normally 4 years.

Find out more

To find out more about the application process and whether you are eligible to stand for election contact your principal council elections office.

Frequently Asked Questions

What title will I have?

An elected member of a parish council is called a councillor, abbreviated to Cllr. Conventionally you will be known as, for example, "Cllr. Bob Smith" or "Cllr. Mrs Jane Smith". You can use your title whenever you act, or wish to give the impression of acting, for the parish council.

What happens if I stand but am not elected?

As in any contested democratic process there is a risk of not winning. If the number of persons nominated is less than or equal to the number of places available then the election is uncontested and you are automatically elected. If there are more candidates than places and you don't win enough votes on Election Day then you will have lost the election. Some people may feel awkward about this, particularly as the people voting are quite often your friends, neighbours and community associates, however there is no shame in losing a contested election – it's part and parcel of public life and there will be other opportunities to get on to the council, either at the next election or if a vacancy crops up. Don't let the fear of losing stop you from putting yourself forward. Just think of what you could achieve if you knew you couldn't fail!

What support is there for newly elected councillors?

Being a councillor is a respected and valued role in a community. There is lots of support available to councillors, from training and development courses run by the local County Association of Local Councils, to representation by the National Association of Local Councils, based in London. Councillors would in the first instance seek assistance from fellow colleagues and the council's clerk (chief officer). Some councils have developed one-to-one mentoring schemes or buddy systems, which are a great way to make sure that new councillors understand their role. The support and continuous professional development of councillors is open-ended these days.

Can I get out of it if it's not for me?

Yes. You can withdraw your nomination if you decide before the election that you don't want to go through with it. If you are elected and decide subsequently that council life is not for you then you are free to resign at any time. However, be warned that when you start to make a real difference to community life and see the benefits that being a councillor can bring to you and your community it may just suck you in for life!

Am I personally liable for anything as a councillor?

Generally speaking, no. The council is a corporate body, which means that in law it has an identity separate to that of its members. Anything that the council decides to do by resolution is the action of the corporate body and any land, property, leases and other contracts are in the name of the council. The exception would be in extreme cases of negligence where an individual councillor has acted contrary to council policy, which may lead to personal liability.

Will my employer support me if I need time off for council business in work time?

Yes. You are allowed reasonable time off to go to meetings or to carry out your duties. The time must be agreed with your employer beforehand and your employer can refuse your request if it is unreasonable. A specific amount of time off is not laid down in law. Your employer doesn't have to pay you while you take time off for public duties, although many do. Your employment contract will normally say whether you are paid for this time off.

Does it take up a lot of time?

It can, but it doesn't have to. You will be required to attend meetings of the full council (monthly or bi-monthly) which are normally 2 to 3 hours long. You should be well-prepared for meetings and preparation can sometimes take longer than the meeting itself! If you are really getting your teeth in to council business you may put yourself forward for any committees that the council has (e.g. finance or planning committees), which will involve further meetings and preparation. Quite often councillors say that their duties occupy them for about three hours a week.

Thirteen excused for not joining the Parish Council

1. "I'm too young."

If you are eighteen (the age limit dropped from 21 to 18 way back in 2007) you are old enough (and see point 5 below.)

2. "What's the point of just joining a talking shop, they don't do anything."

Have you ever been to a meeting? Basing your judgement on watching 'The Vicar of Dibley' is definitely not valid.

3. "I haven't got any planning applications in at the moment."

Putting in for planning permission has got nothing to do with sitting on the council, whatever may have happened years ago. In fact, if your own application is discussed by the council, you would have to follow the council's Code of Conduct and national ethical standards, and the restrictions on participating in such circumstances.

4. "I'm too busy, and couldn't commit to attending every single meeting".

Meetings are rarely more frequent than one evening a month, and missing the occasional one is acceptable. Most meetings only take a couple of hours.

5. "I'm concentrating on finding a job or furthering my career."

Being a local councillor is a definite plus point to add to a CV – it shows you can make decisions, work in a team, are community minded and proactive. Prospective employers will be impressed.

6. "I haven't lived here very long and don't know the area well."

If you are a Commonwealth/EU citizen and have lived or worked in the parish for a year or already have your name on the electoral roll, you are eligible... Your views as an 'incomer' should be welcomed, as you will probably see things more objectively.

7. "I'm worried that I won't get many votes, and look silly."

Even if you are not voted on this time, you may well be approached if a vacancy occurs in the future and have to opportunity to be co-opted to the council.

8. "Our parish council is full of old fogeys."

Join up and change it then.

9. "I'd look a fool because I won't know what's going on."

You will be eased in gently; there is help, advice and training available. The clerk is the officer of the council, and he or she will be able to explain the rules.

10. "I'll have to sign that code of conduct thing that the press keep on about

The code of conduct is nowhere near as onerous as made out in the press - and is there to protect you – i.e. the code stops situations like the planning one above.

11. "I'll have to let everyone know all about my business and personal affairs."

The declaration of interest form completed at the outset asks you to list business interests within the parish area, to guard against bias when parish issues are debated. As for personal affairs, get real, everyone knows about those already!

12. "I'm too lazy, and not interested in my community."

An excellent reason for not joining.

13. "I prefer to let others do the work, and then criticize from the sidelines afterwards".

Also a valid reason for not joining, but do bear in mind, that expounding your views in the pub, rather than the council chamber, will not change a thing in your parish – and if you can't be bothered, does that mean it's fair game to criticize those who do make the effort?