

ENGLISH VILLAGE OR TOWN GOVERNMENT (Parish or Town Councils)

What is a Parish?

There are two sorts of parishes whose boundaries do not always coincide. These are (i) the Ecclesiastical Parishes centred on an Anglican church with a parochial church council (PCC) and (ii) the Civil Parishes, which are part of local administration; some of them are called towns.

What is the Civil Parish?

A civil parish is an independent local democratic unit for villages, smaller towns, and suburbs of urban areas. Each parish has a Parish (or Town) Meeting consisting of all its local government electors and most (where the electorate exceeds 200) have a Parish or Town Council. Over 13 million people live in such parishes.

What is the Parish (or Town) Council?

The council is a small local authority. Its councillors are elected for four years at a time in the same way as for other councils. Bye-elections may be held to fill vacancies occurring between elections. The council is the corporation of its village or town. Each year the councillors choose a chairperson from amongst their number - in town councils, they are usually called Town Mayor.

What Powers have Parish Councils to do things for their areas?

Parish councils have a number of formal powers. Many provide allotments, and look after playing fields, village greens and other types of leisure activities such as swimming pools. They have a hand in maintaining or guarding rights of way, bus shelters, public seats and smaller scale street lighting. Councils are concerned with the provision of halls and meeting places.

How do they do it?

The parish council can do these things by actually providing them itself or by financially helping someone else, such as a volunteer or a charity, to do them.

What else do they do?

A variety of things. Some provide village guides or leaflets to newcomers, or help the Meals-on-Wheels scheme, or a local bus service. They make village surveys. One runs a holiday hotel. Many provide car or cycle parks. Others provide public conveniences, litter bins and seats, and can prosecute noise-makers or litter bugs. Many appoint charitable trustees and school managers. Very often the cemetery is managed by the Parish Council. Often, Parish Councils implement and co-ordinate crime prevention measures, as well traffic calming initiatives. They have the power to improve the quality of community life by spending sums of money on things which, in their opinion, are in the interests of the parish or its inhabitants, and many kinds of activities are aided in this way.

How much do they cost?

Parish Councils are the most unbureaucratic and the cheapest kind of local authority in existence. Their funds are a tiny part of the council tax and they get no general government grant - so they have every incentive to keep expenditures low and be economical.

What else is important?

Parish Councils have lately become more important because the district councils and unitary authorities have become larger and more remote. The parish councillors know the village and can (and increasingly often do) represent its views to other authorities like the District Council, the County Council, the Borough Council, Health Authorities, providers of services like Railtrack, and to Ministries. They are entitled to be consulted on planning applications and are

often consulted on such things as schools and roads. They put the parish's case at public inquiries.

Who controls the Parish Council?

You elect its members every four years and you are entitled to go to the annual parish meeting and say what you think. The accounts are strictly audited every year.

Parish Reviews

Parish and town boundaries are reviewed by the Local Government Commission; the aim is to make existing parish and town boundaries correspond better to the social communities in which people live and to create new council for areas which have not has them before.

How does one find out more?

The Parish Councils' Meetings are open to the public, and an assembly of the Parish Meeting for all the parish electors has to be held, by law, every year in March, April or May.

In every county there is an Association of these councils, and they are united in the National Association. You can find out more on parish and town councils from your nearest County Association, simply by asking.

If you want to read a brief guide that tackles these issues in more details, there is a short booklet called the Powers and Constitution of Local Councils. Published by the National Association of Local Councils (publishers of this leaflet), the publication can be obtained from your nearest county associations. A number of other useful publications are also available.

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