

## **Making an impact - The promotion of participation in local community democracy**

### **What it is all about?**

This leaflet gives you a brief insight into parish and town councils. The National Association and County Associations of Local Councils feel that this is a very important time for the renewal of local community democracy. It is important that the number of people involved in community democracy as candidates or voters increase. This leaflet seeks to show the importance of community engagement.

If you need any further information please contact your local parish council. Alternatively you can contact your local county association of local councils (please visit [www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk), for more details) or you can contact the National Association.

### **What are parish and town councils?**

There are around 10,000 parish and town councils in England and Wales. Parish and town councils are corporate bodies and local authorities.

### **What do these councils do?**

Parish and town councils are the part of local government closest to the people. Very importantly, these councils can "precept" - raising a sum collected with the council tax each year to improve facilities and services for local people.

Their powers and duties cover many things that we take for granted in making the lives of local communities more comfortable. These include the provision and maintenance of community transport schemes, traffic calming measures, local youth projects, tourism activities, leisure facilities, car parks, village greens, public lavatories, litter bins, street lighting, street cleaning, burial grounds, allotments, bus shelters, commons, opens spaces, footpaths, bridleways, and crime reduction measures.

Parish and town councils can also comment on planning applications and can be represented at public inquiries.

### **Dramatic change in recent years**

For some time, parish and town councils in England and Wales were thought of as the neglected part of local government. But things have changed dramatically over the last few years. Parish and town councils have been empowered to develop their role in providing services and functions to their local community. And this, after all, is right, because this is the closest tier to the local community.

*The Rural White Paper for England*, published in November 2000, is a welcome development for local community democracy and for the role of town and parish councils. It represents a real shift in favour of local community democracy, with a strong emphasis on 'bottom up' local government, and it provides an exceptional opportunity for town and parish councils to develop their role, working in partnership with other local authorities. The need for partnerships is fundamental.

### **What do elected representatives do for me?**

Community, parish and town councillors represent the people living in their local area at the closest level to the community. When decisions are being made they are there to put your views across. Even if you did not vote for them, they still have a duty to represent you and your interests. If there is an issue that you feel strongly about, let them know. They are elected by you. They are there to represent your views and interests.

### **How do I get involved?**

All councils will welcome your contribution -likewise community groups. Often being active in a local group is an excellent way of gaining confidence to put views forward. If you like being involved why not consider being an elected councillor -join the decision making team. Parish and town council elections usually happen every four years and in between there may be elections to fill casual vacancies.

## **Standing as a community, parish and town councillor**

Anyone who fulfils the following criteria may stand as a parish or town councillor. A parish or town councillor must be aged 21 years or over, be a British subject, a citizen of the Irish Republic or a citizen of a member state of the European Union and be a local government elector of the parish; or a person who has, during the whole of the twelve months before he or she was nominated as a candidate, occupied land or other premises as owner or tenant in the parish. Or has during the same period, resided in that area or within three miles thereof, or has during the same period, had his or her principal or only place of work in that area.

## **How much time does it take up?**

Being a parish or town councillor can enhance your private and social life. 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, but in the main, being a parish and town councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community, and helping to make it a better place to live and work.

## **The Election Procedure**

Ordinary elections of local councillors take place on the first Thursday in May every four years, but are postponed for three weeks if the polling day coincides with that for a parliamentary general election or a European Assembly election. For most local councils election year is 2003, 2007 etc. but where the principal authority (county, district and unitary authority) councillor is elected in some other year that is also the year of the local council election. Reorganisation of local government may cause alteration of the election day and election year in some cases.

The election timetable is as follows:

- **Publication of notice of election**  
Not later than the twenty-fifth day before the day of election.
- **Delivery of Nomination papers**  
Not later than noon on the nineteenth day before the day of election.
- **Publication of list of candidates**  
Not later than noon on the seventeenth day before the day of election.
- **Delivery of notices of withdrawals of candidature**  
Not later than noon on the sixteenth day before the day of election.
- **Notice of Poll**  
Not later than the sixth day before the day of election.
- **Polling**  
Between the hours of 8 in the morning and 9 at night on the day of election.

In calculating the timetable the following days are disregarded; Saturday, Sunday, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, a Bank Holiday and a day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

## **Nomination**

A prospective candidate must deliver or send by post to the Returning Officer a valid nomination paper. This form is obtained from the Officer. 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 or town or the ward if it is divided into wards): they must sign it.

## **What Next?**

The Returning Officer appointed by a Principal Authority (District, Borough, County or Unitary Authority) is the person responsible for the conduct and arrangement for parish and town council elections. If you are considering becoming a candidate for election it could be wise to contact the Returning Officer to obtain any more detailed information. Also for more information about what life is like as councillor contact your local County Association of Local Councils or alternatively your local parish or town council.

**Note for information:** The National Association would like to extend its thanks to all the County Associations of Local Councils, Principal Authorities and the Electoral Commission in providing information relevant to this leaflet.