

What is the Parish Council, and what does it do?

Local Government services are divided in various ways, and in the area around the villages of Oakington and Westwick there are three main divisions – Cambridgeshire County Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, and the Parish Council (or this would be a Town Council in a larger conurbation). All have varying, though sometimes divided, responsibilities for the services and resources made available to members of the public, and for ensuring compliance with the various pieces of Local Government legislation that are in force.

A Parish Council is responsible for a predefined area within the District or County, usually including and surrounding one or more villages, and known sometimes as a ‘civil parish’. This should not be confused with the type of parish associated with a church, though there will often be some overlap geographically in such areas.

Whereas the County and District councils can tend to be fairly political in their policies, the Parish Council is usually independent in political orientation, focussed more on the requirements of the people and resources in the local area rather than more grandiose objectives, although it does of course have to operate within the constraints of national law.

Money to support the operation of all three tiers of local Government is provided through Council Tax (as is the funding of the Police and Fire and Rescue services in this area), or direct from the Government. So for any of these organisations to provide you with services requires that you pay for these in some way at the end of the day, whether it be through Council Tax, Income Tax, or another of the range of taxes we undergo. In the case of a parish council the money budgeted and spent each year is mostly obtained from the Council Tax through what is known as the “Parish Precept”, though we can also obtain other money in support of things like infrastructure required to support planning requirements, for example, and from various grants and the like.

The table below shows just a few of the Local Government services provided locally, and who is mainly responsible for these around this area:

Service	Cambridgeshire County Council	South Cambridge District Council	Parish Council
Community centres and village halls	No	Yes	Yes
Education	Yes	No	No
Highways	Yes	No	No
Housing	No	Yes	No
Parks and open spaces	No	Yes	Yes

Service	Cambridgeshire County Council	South Cambridge District Council	Parish Council
Planning	Yes	Yes	Yes
Recycling and rubbish collections	Yes	Yes	No
Social services	Yes	No	No
Street lighting	Yes	Yes	Yes

Where a smaller council does not directly provide the service a larger council is involved in, it is often consulted by the larger council on matters that affect it, and in some cases will be asked to contribute towards the cost of a provision that will affect it and the local residents directly.

What does the Parish Council actually do?

So, given this framework, what does the Parish Council do? A parish council has an overall responsibility for the well-being of its local community. Its work falls into three main categories:

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

A Parish Council might provide and/or maintain some of the following services:

- allotments
- burial grounds / cemeteries
- car parks
- community transport schemes
- footpaths
- bridleways
- charities
- bus shelters
- commons / open spaces
- crime reduction measures
- leisure facilities
- clocks

It will also co-operate with the District and/or County councils on:

- litter bins
- local youth projects
- open spaces
- public toilets
- planning
- street cleaning
- street lighting
- tourism activities
- traffic calming measures
- village greens

Since 2007, eligible local councils also have an additional statutory power originally known as the 'Power of Well-being', but now as the 'General Power of Competence'. This means that they have the power to do anything which they consider would achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area. There are particular criteria they must follow to do this but it means that they can, for example, use part of their precept to support an

affordable housing scheme in order to make local homes more affordable for local people, even though housing is not normally a Parish Council responsibility.

Who works for the Parish Council?

The Parish Council is mainly staffed by unpaid volunteers (Councillors) from the Parish who have an interest in helping the local residents in the areas discussed above. The Parish Council itself elects a Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson from the Councillors, and employs a Clerk who is trained and qualified in the legal and financial aspects of Parish Council activities. This is a paid post, possibly the only one in the Parish, though a Council can if it thinks it appropriate employ other persons such as ground staff and caretakers for the resources it controls.

What do parish or town councillors do?

Councillors have three main areas of work:

1. **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 local policies should be implemented;
2. **Monitoring:** councillors make sure that their decisions lead to efficient and effective services by keeping an eye on how well things are working;
3. **Getting involved locally:** as local representatives, councillors have responsibilities towards their parishioners and local organisations. This often depends on what the councillor wants to achieve and how much time they have available.

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

- going to meetings of other local organisations
- going to meetings of bodies that affect the wider community, such as the police, the Highways Authority, schools and colleges
- bringing parishioners concerns to the attention of the council
- doing investigation work on activities happening in their local area

Am I suitable to be a parish councillor?

As a councillor you will be a voice for your community and help affect change. It helps if you're a "people person" who enjoys talking to other residents but, most importantly, you need to have the concerns and best interests of the parish as a whole at heart. Councillors are community leaders and should represent the aspirations and hopes of the public that they serve.

Most people are qualified, but there are a few basic rules. You must 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, and
- live or work in or near the parish.

You cannot stand for election if you:

- already work for this council
- are the subject of a bankruptcy restriction order or interim order

- have, within five years of 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.

How much time does it take & when?

The time involved is on average less than a couple of hours a week. Obviously some councillors will spend more time than this, and some less, but generally being a parish councillor is an interesting and enjoyable way to contribute to your community and help to make it a better place to live. Council meetings are held in the evening – as are most meetings of the other groups which Councillors attend on the Council's behalf.

Talking and listening to your fellow parishioners can be done at any time but you must be able to spend a couple of hours roughly once a month (in the evening) attending the Council meeting, this is an obligation. Council meetings cannot take place unless a specified quorum of Councillors attends.

Parish Councils are the most local part of our system and the closest to the public. Why not stand for your local Parish Council and see what differences you can make to your community?

How to become a Councillor?

Firstly, contact your local Clerk to the Parish Council who can provide you with more details about the function. If there are currently any vacancies you could be co-opted by a vote of existing Councillors, otherwise you can stand for the next Election (local council elections are normally held every four years).

Why not check with the Clerk to your Parish Council now – you may be just what they need!