

Becoming a Town or Parish Councillor

Parishes are the smallest areas of civil administration in England. The civil parish was separated from the church parish in 1894. Our present day Town and Parish Councils provide the statutory first tier of local government that is closest to the people.

There are some 10,000 parishes in England of which nearly 8,500 have Town or Parish Councils which are elected every four years.

The remainder have Parish Meetings which are required to meet at least twice a year.

There are 269 parishes in Cumbria. Of those, 234 are administered by a Town or Parish Council and 35 by Parish meetings. Over 2000 Councillors serve on these bodies. Some areas in Cumbria are unparished.

These local councils vary widely in geographical size, number of councillors (from 5 to 20) and levels of expenditure (£250 to £250,000) - there is no such thing as an average Town or Parish Council!

Town and Parish Councils have a wide range of duties and powers, such as

- maintaining community buildings and land.
- raising money through the local council tax and grants.
- contributing to improvements in lighting, roads, transport and recreation
- consulting on plans for the future.
- commenting on planning applications

Town and Parish Councils are the essence of local democracy and have a vital role in speaking and acting on behalf of the communities they represent.

The council is a team consisting of the Chairman (who ensures a balanced debate and leads the council), the Councillors (who do the debating and decision-making) and the Clerk (who ensures that the council acts in a legal manner and takes action on the decisions made). In a Town Council, the Chairman may be referred to as the Mayor.

Councillors are from the local community and represent the views and concerns of those who elect them. They understand local concerns, debate issues within council meetings and use their best judgement to make decisions.

They are generally unpaid but some councils approve the payment of expenses incurred whilst on official business.

The role of a Councillor is not just confined to meetings - many are active in other community areas and bring that expertise and knowledge to the council meeting to benefit all.

Councillors are known locally and are often asked for advice or help; it is their responsibility to seek an answer or solution through the council.

Training to be a councillor is available through the Cumbria Association of Local Councils (CALC).

Just as there is no such thing as an average Town or Parish Council, the same can be said of each councillor's workload. Councillors commit the time, effort and energy that they can, individually, afford. All want to serve their community but it is acknowledged that full time work, families and other circumstances affect every Councillor differently.

Town or Parish Councils must meet at least four times annually (including the annual meeting); many meet more often than this. Some councils have committees or working groups that you can join and contribute to.

Attending meetings means that you will need to be familiar with the items on the agenda - that is, the list of topics published and publicised in advance of the meeting. You will need to spend some time reading the reports and papers to prepare yourself for the debate.

If you do not attend a meeting for over six months, you will be disqualified as a Councillor.

Getting elected is one thing, making the best use of your skills, knowledge and personality for the benefit of your community is another.

A willingness to contribute - be prepared to speak and take part.

Seeing different points of view - listen to others and try to understand their position.

Being a problem solver - many local issues are long-running, complex and sensitive. Try to seek solutions through mutual agreement.

Being accessible - A Councillor should not be remote from the community that he or she serves. Members of the public will want to know who you are and how they can contact you.

Patience - Take the time to understand what people are saying or trying to do.

Being a good and effective Councillor comes with time - you will become familiar with local government procedures and rapidly gain confidence as you take part in meetings.

Town and Parish elections are held every four years - your Council Clerk will advise you on how to submit your nomination papers to enable you to stand as a candidate.

Sometimes casual vacancies occur during the four year cycle and these can be filled, either by election or by co-option. (Co-option is used when an election is not called - you submit your name with other applicants to the Parish Council; they vote for their choice to fill the vacancy.)

No formal qualifications are required to be a Councillor but there are rules to satisfy if you are to submit your name. There is no deposit to pay to stand for election.

All Councillors must agree to abide by a Code of Conduct and to declare any interests which may conflict with their duties as Parish Council members.

How do I get more details about being a Councillor?

Contact your local Council Clerk and ask about any vacancies that they may have advertised.

Or contact the Cumbria Association of Local Councils (CALC) on 01768 812663, email: office@calc.org.uk .

Or write to:
Cumbria Association of Local Councils
Fire & Rescue Headquarters
Carleton Avenue
Penrith
Cumbria
CA10 2FA