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GET INVOLVED, INFORMED AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Introduction

If you want to do something for your local community why not think about becoming a parish or town councillor.

What are local councils?

There are many types of local councils, all with different responsibilities. The thing they have in common is that they all provide local services for local people.

There are around 8,500 local councils representing around 16 million people across England and they form the most local tier of government making decisions on behalf of their residents. In Worcestershire there are three levels of local government; parish and town councils are known as the first and the tier of local government closest to the people. The next level is the district councils which cover an area that includes a number of parish councils whilst the county council covers the whole of Worcestershire. There are six district councils in Worcestershire - Bromsgrove, Malvern Hills, Redditch Borough, Worcester City, Wychavon and Wyre Forest.

Parish and town councils were established by the Local Government Act of 1894 and there are 150 parish and town councils and 10 parish meetings in the county. There is no legal difference between a parish and a town council; they both have the same powers and functions, the only difference is in the name and the fact that the chairman of a town council is referred to as the town mayor.

In this paper any reference to local councils refers to parish or town councils not to the district or county councils.

What services do they provide?

The main role of parish and town councils is set out in law and they have a wide range of functions and powers to provide a variety of local services. Parish and town councils also have by law the right to be asked about their view on some services that are the responsibility of other levels of local government.

Their work falls into three main categories -

- Representing the local community
- Delivering services to meet local needs
- Striving to improve the quality of life in the local area



Each year a sum of money raised locally called a 'precept' is collected through the council tax. This money is invested back into the local neighbourhood by the local council to improve facilities and services. Local councils can also apply for grants and loans and, if they own property, can receive money from rents or leases.

Councils usually meet once a month and meetings may last two or three hours depending on what is to be discussed. In addition to regular meetings a number of councils have additional meetings to look at specific areas or services.

The purpose of a local council is to improve the lives of people in their local community and to give their local community a voice and the means to achieve this.

Having identified what a parish and town council is and what it does the next step is to consider what councillors do,

What do parish and town councillors do?

Councillors should represent all sectors of the community and have a dual role. Firstly they play a vital part in representing the views and concerns of the communities they serve to the parish council itself and through it to the district and county authorities. Secondly they report back to residents on issues affecting the parish.

The first role is carried out by attending meetings and liaising with the clerk. Individual councillors do not have, and cannot be given, powers to make decisions on behalf of the council. This applies to the chairman as much as to the other councillors, although the chairman does have personal responsibilities in connection with the running of formal meetings.

It is the councillor's task to bring local issues to the attention of the council and help it make decisions on behalf of the local community. Through this they can help to improve the quality of life and the environment in their local area. Councillors help to influence and shape the long term development policy for the parish, and as part of the planning process, comment on planning applications in the parish.

Every councillor must sign a declaration of acceptance of office before taking office. Once elected, parish councillors sit on the council for a maximum of four years. If they want to stay in post they can stand for re-election.

Parish or town councils can pay an allowance to their members but no local councils in Worcestershire do this.