

## **Parish Council – Historic background**

Parish Councils have their origins in the development of villages. All over England, during Saxon and Norman times, 1,000 or more years ago, villages were ruled by the Lord of the Manor. As communications were poor and central government often weak, there was little national control. Sometimes the villagers all met to make decisions which affected the whole community.

Gradually, Parish Priests and sometimes Schoolmasters joined the Lord of the Manor to become a kind of ruling clique because in small villages they were the only people who it was thought could reason properly. It was probably them that became the first effective parish councils.

By the Year 1601, Church Vestry Meetings were so organised and workable that it was natural for legislators to give them the responsibility of levying the poor rate. These were the first effective local taxes. Everyone in the parish was entitled to attend Church Vestry Meetings but in practice the work fell to a few individuals, like Parish Councils today.

Although the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act removed from Parish Vestries the responsibility for poor relief and handed it to Poor Law Unions (the origins of our present District Councils). During this time parishes had naturally accumulated responsibility for administering local charities and managing commons under distribution of land as a consequence of the 18th Century Enclosure Acts.

In 1894 although the Squire, the Parson and sometimes the Schoolmaster were still the leaders in the village, popular education was spreading and more people wanted a say in managing local affairs.

The Victorian Prime Minister, W.E. Gladstone, piloted the 1894 Local Government Act through the House of Commons. It met a lot of opposition, for example there were over eight hundred amendments moved during its passage through the House. Nevertheless, the Act became law and Parish Councils were formed.

There are now about 8,700 parish and town councils in England. Since 1997 around 100 new civil parishes have been created, in some cases splitting existing civil parishes, but mostly by creating new ones from unparished areas.

## **Parish Council - Role and responsibilities**

Members of the Parish Council are unpaid local people, elected by the local people. Elections are every four years: Local volunteers, however, may be co-opted when there are not enough candidates for seats at an election or when the electorate does not call for an election after a seat has fallen vacant. There are 9 seats on Bobbing Parish Council.

The Parish Council forms a democratically elected corporate body with a legal existence separate from that of its individual members. It is accountable to the electorate and is responsible for its actions.

Residents pay what is known as the 'precept'. This is a property tax, the level of which is decided every year by the Parish Council to meet its budgeted expenditure in order to carry out the everyday needs of the parish. The 'precept' is the Parish Council's share of the council tax collected by the District Council. A large proportion of the Parish Council's budget is spent on administration (paying the Parish Clerk's salary, audit fees, subscriptions, insurances, rents, etc.).

Consulting and listening to the residents to understand their needs, their wishes and their concerns is an essential aspect of parish councillors' work often working in partnership with other organisations, including Electoral Ward councillors, the voluntary and community sector, to improve services and the quality of life of parishioners.

Smaller parish councils (such as Bobbing and other rural settlements) have only limited resources and generally play only a minor role, while some larger parish councils have a role similar to that of a small district council.

### **Parish Council – The Parish Clerk**

The Parish Clerk is the Council's Proper Officer. This means that the clerk is not similar to a secretary simply taking the minutes at meetings, dealing with correspondence and archiving documents. The clerk is a qualified officer providing both professional advice concerning the laws of governance and administrative support to the Council.

Answerable only to the Parish Council as a whole, the clerk takes action to implement council decisions and acts as its finance administrator. They may also act as focal point and answer queries from the general public.

The Parish Clerk whose professional independence and delegated powers (if agreed by the council) allows them to act on behalf of the council, this must be formally agreed by the full council. Parish Councils are given legal powers, under a number of Acts of Parliament to carry out its functions (see main listing below). Duties are actions that the council must take by law. The Parish Council has fewer duties than County and District councils but it has a greater freedom of choice as to what local actions, considering practicalities and finance to take on behalf of the village residents.

The Parish Council's central role is to act in the interest of the whole parish community. Taking corporate actions to improve its quality of life and its environment, councillors try to provide this service responsibly and openly to that end they are bound by strict codes of conduct.

**Parish councils have limited duties.**

**The following are under the remit of local councils:**

- Allotments
- Burial Grounds, Cemeteries (closed)
- Bus Shelters
- Bye-laws – the power to make bye-laws concerning: baths and washhouses, cycle parks, mortuaries and pleasure grounds
- Clocks – public clocks can be provided and must be maintained
- Community Centres, Conference Centres, Halls, Public Buildings
- Drainage / maintenance of ditches and ponds.
- Entertainment and the Arts.
- Footpath maintenance.
- General Spending – parish councils can spend a limited amount of money on anything they deem of benefit to the community that is not covered by the other specific responsibilities
- Highways –right to enter into discussions about new roads, lighting, parking and proposed road widening. The consent of Parish Council required for diversion or discontinuation of highway, traffic signs and other public rights of way notices.
- Tree planting and verge maintenance
- Land – acquisition and sale.
- Legal proceedings – power to prosecute and defend any legal proceedings in the interests of the community, power to take part in any public enquiry.
- Litter - provision of litter-bins and support for any anti-litter campaigns
- Planning – parish councils must be notified of, and display for residents, any planning applications for the area. Comments submitted to the planning authority by the parish council must be taken into account
- Public conveniences – provision and maintenance of public toilets
- Recreation – provision of recreation grounds, public walkways, open spaces, village greens, gymnasiums, playing fields and boating ponds
- Rights of Way – footpath and bridleway maintenance
- Seats (public)
- Signs – danger signs, information/tourism/place names and bus stops signs.
- Tourism – financial contributions to local tourist organisations allowed.
- War Memorials.
- Water Supply – power to utilise stream, well or spring water and to provide such facilities for general use
- Provide community transport (such as a minibus).
- Suggest/provide in consultation, crime prevention measures (such as CCTV).

A full list of Parish Council powers, with references to applicable legislation, is available from the 'National Association of Local Councils'.

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