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Publications

All about local councils

National Association of Local Councils

www.nalc.gov.uk

Published by
National Association of Local Councils (NALC)

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is for anyone wanting to know more about parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils (local councils), the role of local councillors and what you need to do if you would like to stand as a candidate in local council elections.

We have also provided a range of case studies which highlight the different kinds of work that local councils and councillors do, showing that size is no bar to making a real difference in the local community.

WHAT ARE LOCAL COUNCILS?

Local council is a universal term for community, village, neighbourhood, parish and town councils. They are the first tier of local government and are statutory bodies. They serve communities and are elected by residents. They can raise their own precept (a form of council tax). There are 10,000 local councils in England and 120,000 councillors who serve on these local councils.

WHAT DO LOCAL COUNCILS DO?

Your local council has an overall responsibility for the well-being of your local community. Their work falls into three main categories:

Delivery of services including:

- allotments
- leisure facilities
- bus shelters
- litter bins
- car parks
- local illuminations
- community centres
- parks and open spaces
- public toilets
- street lighting
- festivals and celebrations

Improve quality of life through:

- Local housing and infrastructure through neighbourhood plans
- Promoting dementia friendly communities
- Tackling loneliness
- Acting as community hubs
- Funding community projects and vital services that have been cut

Give communities a voice through representing:

- To the local police and health services
- On planning matters with principal authorities and developers
- To parliamentarians and government

LOCAL COUNCIL CASE STUDIES

Northwich Town Council's community regeneration scheme

Electorate: 15,746
Precept: £488,563

Northwich Town Council has worked hard to regenerate their town and make their community proud of where they live. Through working in partnerships with their principal authority and local community groups they have led the planning and regeneration of the town and held events throughout the year to encourage participation from the whole community. Thanks to the town council, Northwich is now buzzing with free activities held in the parks, open spaces and town centre. Thanks to the work of the town council the main high street is thriving with more people visiting shops and local businesses than ever before leading to a boom in the local economy.

The saviours of vital services: Cogenhoe and Whiston Parish Council

Electorate: 1,196
Precept: £22,000

Northamptonshire has had well publicised challenges with funding over the past few months. With these challenges came cuts to the single bus service that residents from seven villages relied on to travel to work, shops, schools and hospitals in Northampton. Cogenhoe and Whiston Parish Council had 3 months to save the bus service and worked quickly in partnership with other local organisations to learn what would be needed to set up a replacement bus service. After calculating the costs, the parish council stepped in to setup a replacement not for profit bus service. The bus service is now used daily by hundreds of residents and has proven to be a vital lifeline to communities in and around Cogenhoe and Whiston Parish Council.

Watchet Town Council building strong links with their community

Electorate: 3,006
Precept: £173,684

Watchet Town Council has worked hard to build relationships with stakeholders from across their community. The council has consistently maintained strong partnerships with principal authorities, neighbouring parishes and community groups to deliver efficient services for their community, while building new partnerships with local businesses, Community Interest Companies (CIC's) and social enterprises to help understand their needs and create jobs in the area.

To ensure the council are consistently representing the views of the community the council has appointed councillors to be representatives onto 20 local community groups which has helped the council keep an open dialogue with the community and learn about the issues that are effecting them. Through these relationships the town council has developed an in depth understanding of what the community wants them to deliver.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT TIERS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government structures can often be confusing. As mentioned earlier local councils are the first tier of local government and deliver the most local form of services. Principal authorities are the tier above local councils and are often bigger in size and represent a larger area such as a county or district rather than neighbourhoods and communities. Usually principal authorities are referred to as borough, district, or county councils. They are responsible for services across counties and districts including education, transport, rubbish collections, housing, council tax collections and fire and public safety to name a few. Local councils often work in partnership with principal authorities and are delivering more services on their behalf than ever before. When referring to local councils this document will be referring to town and parish councils, not principal authorities.

HOW DO LOCAL COUNCILS GET THINGS DONE?

Your local council is made up of a number of councillors who meet regularly to make decisions about the direction of the local council and the work it does for the community. As elected bodies local councils are responsible to the people they represent – their local community. Attending a council meeting is the best way to find out what they do. Give the council a call and find out when its next public meeting is scheduled to take place and find updates on their website and social media channels.

WHERE DO LOCAL COUNCILS GET THEIR MONEY FROM?

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

HOW ARE LOCAL COUNCILLORS ELECTED?

Local councillors are elected to represent a geographical area known as a ward or in some cases the parish as a whole. They are elected by people who live in the area. If the local council is divided into wards an election is held in each ward, the same way elections are held in principal authority wards. If the local council doesn't have wards there is just a single local council election. To find out when your local council has elections contact your local electoral office at your principal authority. For details visit www.aboutmyvote.co.uk.

WHO CAN VOTE IN LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS?

To vote in any election you need to be registered to vote. To get on the electoral register contact the electoral services at your principal authority or visit www.aboutmyvote.co.uk to download a registration form. You can register to vote when you are aged 16 years or over but you need to be 18 or over to vote. To vote in a local council election you need to be a British citizen, Irish citizen, European Union citizen or citizen of a Commonwealth country (including Cyprus and Malta).

WHAT DO LOCAL COUNCILLORS DO?

Local 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 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 constituents and local organisations. This often depends on what the councillor wants to achieve and how much time is available. The day-to-day work of a councillor may include:

- going to meetings of local organisations and community groups
- going to meetings of bodies that affect the wider community, such as the police, the Highways Authority, schools and colleges
- taking up issues on behalf of members of the public, such as making representations to the principal authority
- running a surgery for residents to bring up issues
- meeting with individual residents in their own homes.

LOCAL COUNCILLOR CASE STUDIES

Cllr Nick Penny, Coleford Town Council, Gloucestershire

Cllr Nick Penny has been the driving force behind Coleford Town Council's goal to regenerate the town by providing a high quality green leisure park close to the town centre. The town council took on this ambitious project when they bought nine acres of open space from the principal authority five years ago. They had major plans to transform the space into a place that incorporated activities for all ages. Cllr Penny worked in partnership with local skate and bike enthusiasts and young people to design a vision for the park and to form a Friends of Coleford Skate Park group which has taken on the duty of looking after the park.

Cllr Melissa Boyden, Asfordby Parish Council, Leicestershire

At the age of 19 Cllr Boyden suffered a serious illness which left her learning how to walk again. Following the illness Cllr Boyden decided she wanted to make a positive change to her community and saw joining a parish council as a way to do that. With this, Cllr Boyden joined Asfordby Parish Council and immediately brought new ideas and a reinvigorated energy to the council. She organised a number of community events including a Summer Fete which brought over 500 residents from Asfordby together to celebrate the village.

Cllr Sam Kenward, Beccles Town Council, Suffolk

When he was appointed to Beccles Town Council, Cllr Sam Kenward introduced the idea of a Youth Champion role to the council. Cllr Kenward has been appointed as Youth Champion on a number of occasions and in that role has been engaging with young people and carrying out work with them to ensure they have a voice in the community. He has held annual 'parliament weeks' at the local high school, in which he managed to encourage university students to get involved in debates on democracy with school pupils. Cllr Kenward was also successful in applying for a grant to produce a local youth information magazine with the aim of engaging young people in democracy and local decision making.

COULD I BECOME A LOCAL COUNCILLOR?

As a local councillor you can become a voice for your community and make a real change. Local councillors are community leaders and should represent the interests of the communities they serve. Local councillors have to be residents of the area their local council serves, making them the most local part of our democratic system and closest to the community. Why don't you stand for your local council and see what difference you can make to your local neighbourhood?

HOW MUCH TIME DOES IT TAKE?

Our local councillor census survey told us that councillors spend on average about three hours a week on council work. Obviously there are some councillors who spend more time than this – and some less, but in the main, being a local councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community and helping to make it a better place to live and work.

DO LOCAL COUNCILLORS GET PAID?

Working as a local councillor is a completely voluntary role. However, local councils do have the power to pay allowances to councillors, subject to approval from the local council.

HOW DO I CONTACT MY LOCAL COUNCILLOR?

To find out who your local councillors are, contact your local council or visit your local council's website. They will provide you with contact details of the clerk for your local council. The clerk will have the contact information you need to locate local councillors.

HEAR FROM SOME LOCAL COUNCILLORS...

Cllr Kellie Hinton, Henley Parish Council, Suffolk

As a young mother of one, living on a low income in one of the wealthiest towns in the UK, one of the first questions people ask me when they meet me is, "How did you get involved in local politics?"

I've become adept at answering this in a multitude of ways, normally involving words that wouldn't look out of place in a Miss Great Britain acceptance speech about world peace.

Yes, it does feel like this is a calling and it is a natural fit for me in my life, but the truth is I didn't 'get' into local politics. If anything, I stumbled, tripped and fell into my local community. I was unruly, free and financially broke, living in the local YMCA. I was co-ordinating their garden renovation project and happened to meet the Mayor of Henley and I decided that unlike most people with authority and generally most people older than me at that time, I liked this person, I believed in her.

That was the planting of the seed. The watering of that plant came some time later, after I'd left the YMCA to have my daughter. I came across the now former

mayor and she invited me to a meeting of the local independent party she was a member of. Honoured to be asked, I accepted. They nurtured me through my first election in 2011, aged 25.

Once I'd been elected, like any new councillor, I started to find my feet. I got involved in a community-led initiative for a new skate park and I became the deputy for Henley in Bloom, part of the Britain in Bloom campaign. I did not know how interested and involved I would become in both of those projects at the start but here I am, having dedicated the last six years to them.

My council work has been focused primarily on recreation and amenities in the town and we have had a lot of success, even representing the UK in Entente Florale – the world's largest horticultural competition.

There are people who specialise in finance or law and they have an obvious role within community groups or local councils. Then there are people like me, whose speciality is engaging with the community itself. We are not the obvious candidates. We are the new mums with time on their hands or students yearning for experience or the people written off because of their apparent lack of academic skills and not appreciated for their people skills. We may not be retired, have owned a business, we may not even own our own homes, but we are people who can change the face of local politics.

Cllr Shaida Akbar, Wexham Court Parish Council, Buckinghamshire

I have lived in the parish of Wexham all my life and have always been passionate about serving my local community. I believe that strong ties in the community are important and that parish and town councils have a leading role to play in helping the community achieve this.

I first heard about becoming a parish councillor through my local Labour party. As soon as I heard about the opportunity I wanted to put myself forward.

I have always been an individual that wants to make a positive change in the community. Before my role as a parish councillor I got involved in a lot of initiatives which helped raise money for good causes. I have tried to instil this in the parish council and recently I led a project to partner with Action Relief volunteers to hold a charity car wash which raised over £3,300.

Being a parish councillor can be a big commitment and can take away a lot of your personal time. At times it can be very challenging and you can often be put under a lot of pressure. I think you need to prepare yourself for that commitment if you are to be a successful councillor, but there are things your council can do to help ease the burden.

I am a mother of four and as many parents know, childcare can take up a lot of your time. Thankfully I am chairman of a parish council which is very flexible. We hold one meeting every month which is just enough to allow us to make the best use of councillors' time and get on with our priority of supporting the community.

OK, I'M INTERESTED, WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Most people are qualified to stand for their local council but there are a few rules. You have to be:

- A British citizen, or a citizen of the Commonwealth, or the European Union
- 18 years of age or older
- Live in an area that is served by a local council

You cannot stand for election if you:

- Are the subject of a bankruptcy restriction order or interim order
- Have within five years before 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
- Work for the council you want to become a councillor for.

There are specific rules around candidacy.

The full range of disqualifications for candidates is quite complex and some exceptions may apply.

You should refer to the website of the Electoral Commission for full details: **www.electoralcomission.org.uk**

DO I NEED TO BE A MEMBER OF A POLITICAL PARTY?

No, you don't have to be, most local councils are not political and most councillors sit as independent members of the council. If you would like to be a representative of a political party you will have to contact the party you want to represent and go through their processes.

CO-OPTIONS

Local councils can co-opt residents to support their work. This enables them to get new expertise or someone from a part of the community that is not represented on the council. Contact your local council to see if any of these opportunities are available.

THERE ARE NO LOCAL COUNCILS IN MY AREA. HOW CAN I GET ONE SET UP?

A local council can empower your community. Principal authorities now have responsibility for the creation of new local councils. You can petition your principal authority and request for a local council to be set up in your community. Local councils are able to raise their own funds locally, all of which will be invested back into the local community for the well-being of its residents. If you would like more information on setting up a local council the National Association of Local Councils has provided advice on their website: **www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/create-a-council**