

# **WHAT IS A PARISH COUNCIL AND WHY BECOME A PARISH COUNCILLOR?**

## **What is a parish council?**

A parish council is a local authority that makes decisions on behalf of the people in the parish. It is the level of local government closest to the community, with the district authority (Carrick District Council) and the county authority (Cornwall County Council) above it in the hierarchy.

As it is the authority closest to the people, parish councils are invariably the first place people will go with concerns or ideas. For this reason they are a vital part of any community.

## **Why become a parish councillor?**

If you've never been to a parish council meeting before, you may be forgiven for thinking that parish councillors are a group of (probably older) people who meet now and then in a draughty village hall.

If, however, you live in a community where something 'big' has happened – such as a contentious planning application – you'll know that when people in the community need support and guidance, it is that same group of people in the village hall they will turn to.

By becoming a parish councillor you become someone your community will look to for help, guidance and support – a community leader with the power to influence decisions for the benefit of the people you serve. Seeing your community change for the better, as a result of decisions you have helped make, is something that can give you a sense of achievement and pride.

## **What decisions do parish councils make?**

Parish councils make all kinds of decisions on issues that affect the local community, and you can see a full list of the powers available to a parish council on our Powers & duties of parish council's page.

Probably the most common topics that parish councils get involved with are planning matters (they are statutory consultees), crime prevention and managing open spaces.

It's true to say that on their own, parish councils have limited powers to make decisions (other than those listed on the Powers & duties page). But they do have the ability to negotiate with, and the power to influence, those other organisations that do make the final decisions (such as the borough or county council, health authorities, police etc.).

In this respect parish councils are extremely powerful. The organisations that make the final decisions know that a parish council gives the best reflection of how a community feels about something, and its views will be taken seriously.

## **How much time does it take up?**

Councils usually meet once a month for the council meeting, to which members of the public are also invited. Meetings may last two or three hours, depending on what's on the list of items to discuss. Some councils may also have sub-committees to deal with specific subjects, such as planning matters.

In addition to the regular meetings, councillors are required to spare time for 'ad hoc' meetings – for example with architects or agents to discuss planning applications that the council must give its opinions on. Such meetings won't happen every day, so it's not going to take over your life.

## **How long does a parish councillor serve for?**

Once elected, parish councillors sit on the council for a maximum of four years. If they then want to stay in the post they can stand for re-election.

It doesn't mean that you have to stay for four years, if you find it's not for you or you can no longer meet the commitment you can stand down.

## **Am I eligible to be a parish councillor?**

To stand for election on a parish council, you must:

- be a UK or Commonwealth citizen, or;
- be a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, or;
- be a citizen of another Member state of the European Union;
- be at least 18 years old.

To be eligible to stand for an election for a particular parish, you must:

- be an elector of the parish, or;
- for the whole of the previous 12 months have occupied (as owner or tenant) land or other premises in the parish, or;
- during the previous 12 months have worked in the parish (as your principal or only place of work), or;
- for the whole of the previous 12 months lived in the parish or within three miles of the parish boundary.

You don't have to be connected to a political party. All of the current councillors are independent, with no political party affiliation.

If you do become a parish councillor you will have to sign up to the Code of Conduct.

## **What powers do parish councils have?**

They have a wide range of powers which essentially relate to local matters, such as looking after community buildings, open space, allotments, play areas, street lighting, bus shelters, car parks and much more. The Council also has the power to raise money through taxation, the precept. The precept is the parish council's share of the council tax. The precept demand goes to the billing authority, the District Council, which collects the tax for the Parish Council.

The Government introduced the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme in 2003 with the aim of encouraging Councils, on behalf of their communities, to have a greater say in the running and improvement of local services.

## **Parish Duties**

Tregony Parish Council has ten Councillors who stand for election every four years. This Parish currently has 6 Councillors and four vacancies which can be filled by co-option. The duties and functions of a parish council are many and varied.

Tregony parish council currently maintains the following :

- The footpaths of the parish
- The equipment and grounds of the play area at The Swing Park
- The green areas of the village
- The Sand Park and War memorial
- Parish noticeboards
- Parish seats and benches

The Parish Council pays contractors to cut the grass areas and footpaths in the parish.

The council meets monthly and considers planning applications and any other matters referred to it by local residents, Carrick District Council, Cornwall County Council and by central government. All

meetings are open to the public and there is a forum before the start of the meeting at which members of the public can raise concerns and ask questions.

There is also an annual meeting which all parishioners are invited to attend and to which the police, schools, local charities and organisations in the parish are invited to send representatives to report on happenings during the year.

Special public meetings are sometimes called on matters of interest to parishioners; examples were the proposed Housing Association development in Tregony and preparation of the Parish Plan (the five year vision for Tregony), and the introduction of Neighbourhood Watch Group.

All meetings are advertised on the Council noticeboards and at the Post Office.

Residents can bring to the attention of the parish council anything that concerns them, either directly or through the Clerk. If matters raised are not the responsibility of the council, the Clerk can bring them to the attention of the proper authority.

### **Don't take our word for it!**

The best way to find out what it's like to be a parish councillor is to talk to someone who's doing it now. Come along to a parish council meeting, or speak to one of our councillors and find out what they think of the job.

### **Interested?**

If you want to become a parish councillor this is what you need to do:

- write a letter to the Clerk, Mrs Mary Symons, Treburthes Farm, Ruanhighlanes, Truro TR2 5JP stating you wish to put your name forward for co-option