

The Importance of a Parish or Town Council

Why become a Parish Councillor?

The recent debate about the form of local government in Devon has perhaps led some of us to consider the place and importance of town and parish councils in the community. Let's get one thing out of the way at the outset – you won't get rich or powerful being a member of your local parish council though you might just earn the grudging respect of your peers and even the thanks of your constituents! So what will you get from the job, and what may be expected of you once you've won your seat?

I've been a town councillor in Sidmouth for nearly 30 years. It's one of those 'piece of string' jobs in which you have a bit of choice as to how much time and effort you make but there will always be a minimum commitment and you will all too often find yourself getting more heavily involved as you realise the nature of the new club you've just joined.

As the tier of government that's actually based on the street where you live, you become the first point of call for that society's worries and concerns. Parish councillors often live and work amongst their electorate, their office and clerk (if they have them) are on that same street so even if it's not your responsibility (and it usually isn't!) it'll be your ear that gets bent!

That makes it seem like a thankless task but it's what you give and what you get back that proves the opposite. Through the planning process you get a chance to shape the place where you live and hopefully get consulted about the wider district or county and what will go on there. Through the precept and grants you can help the clubs and societies that enhance your village or town and by exercising rights under the power of well-being you can become involved in the maintenance of arts and sports provision. There are allotments, village greens and parks, many of which have for historical reasons been given over to the very local people who will treasure them for future generations. If you're part of a larger set-up you may find yourself dealing with tourism promotion, Christmas lights, car parks and hopper buses, public conveniences, street markets and even town centre management.

And don't forget the roles you can play away from the actual meetings – I sit as a School Governor, I'm on the board of a local charity, I go to meetings about Devon's maritime heritage and the Jurassic Coast – all as a representative of the town council. That's what being a councillor means to me; a chance to make a difference, to shape the future of the place I live in according to the wishes of the people who live there and to meet some interesting colleagues and learn a bit at the same time. Why not give it a go?

Simon Pollentine
Sidmouth Town Council

P.T.O.

A couple of years after moving to Devon I applied for a co-opted vacancy on our Parish Council here in Shebbear. This was not, as is sometimes alleged of incomers, in an attempt to “change” things, but as a recognition that things were changing anyway, and it was better in my view to try to influence the type and extent of change, rather than passively allow whatever changes the fortunes of life wished to impose upon the community.

When you put yourself up for election, normally you do so because you feel you have a talent or skill that the community can benefit from, and you want to do something for other people, collectively rather than individually. One of the most fulfilling parts of being a councillor is when you realise you are actually making a difference; a tally of the number of phone calls you get or callers at the door, bringing a problem and seeking a solution can tell you if you are doing things right.

About ten years ago I helped to persuade the County Council to install an additional street light at a particularly murky corner. An elderly gent who lived there was really quite concerned about his own safety as there is no pavement and he was afraid of being hit by a vehicle. Every autumn at the beginning of the season, he calls at my door with a brace of pheasant, which his son has shot. It’s his way of saying thank you for the street light. I remind him that it was several years ago when the light was put in and I don’t need to be thanked every year, but he points out that while the light is still working, he is still grateful.

Richard Clark
Shebbear Parish Council

I have been a Parish Councillor for 16 years and been involved in numerous initiatives over the years including, two Parish Plans, Village Design Statement and Village/Conservation Area appraisals.

But the project that has given me the most satisfaction has been the redevelopment of the Children’s play area in South Brent. Over this period, four pieces of equipment have been installed at a cost of nearly £50,000, funded from the Parish precept, local fundraising and grants. It gives me enormous pleasure seeing the next generation so excited when a new piece of kit is unveiled.

By doing this kind of work, both the children and their carers see that the Parish Council can make a difference!

My proudest achievement was being elected, by my peers, Chairman of the Council for four consecutive years (2005 – 2009) and representing South Brent across the County.

Without Parish Councils local democracy would be diminished. Parish Council are the first tier of Government, closest to the electorate. The decisions they make are seen to make an immediate impact on the quality of the lives of the residents of a Parish.

Glyn Richards
South Brent Parish Council