



It takes

all sorts

**Local councils: represent your
community, make a difference**



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

///NALC

Commission for Rural Communities

The Commission for Rural Communities provides well-informed, independent advice to Government to ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. In doing this it acts as:

- **Rural advocate:** the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- **Expert adviser:** giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- **Independent watchdog:** monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

National Association of Local Councils

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is the national representative body for 9,000 local councils throughout England. In all there are over 80,000 community, parish and town councillors across England. These councillors, who serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to major cities, are all independently elected. The councils have powers to raise their own funds through council tax. Local councils provide employment for over 25,000 staff while their annual expenditure exceeds £500m. Together, they can be identified as one of the nation's single most influential grouping of grassroots opinion formers. Around 16 million people live in communities served by local councils nationally – this represents up to 30% of the population. Over 200 new local councils have been created since 1997.



Introduction

Throughout England parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils (local councils) work towards improving community well-being and providing better services at a local level. They are the tier of local government below the level of district, borough or unitary council (principal authorities) and are the tier of local government closest to the people. The term 'local councils' refers to parish, town, community, neighbourhood and village councils and not to the district, borough, unitary or county council tier of local government.

Sat on these local councils are some 80,000 elected local councillors, people just like you, who give up a little of their time each week to represent the interests of their local community. This booklet, developed by the National Association of Local Councils and supported by the Commission for Rural Communities highlights the experiences of just a few of these councillors and serves to show how rewarding representing your community can be.

What are local councils?

There are over 9,000 parish, town, community and neighbourhood councils (local councils) representing around 16 million people across England and they form the most local level of government. Each year a sum of money raised locally 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. Many local councils also supplement the money collected locally through applications to grant and fund providers securing further resources to invest in the community. It is your local councillors representing the aspirations of the community who will decide how to spend this money.

Local councils can be found in a diverse range of communities, both rural and urban with many to be found in some of England's biggest cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Newcastle. Recent legislation change also means that people in London can now set up a local council in their local area. Whether urban or rural, local councils all have one thing in common, their purpose is to make the lives of the people in their local community better and to give the local community a voice and the means to achieve this.



Councillors at NALC's Leadership Academy

So what do local councils do?

Your local council has an overall responsibility for the well being of your local neighbourhood.

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

Your council might provide, maintain or contribute to the following services:

**Allotments; Leisure facilities; Bus shelters;
Litter bins; Car parks; Local Illuminations;
Community Centres; Local youth projects;
Community safety schemes; Parks and open spaces;
Community transport schemes; Planning; Public lavatories;
Crime reduction measures; Street Cleaning; Street lighting;
Cycle paths; Tourism activities; Festivals and celebrations;
Traffic calming measures; and many more!**

They will often work with the principal authority in your area and cooperate to ensure the effective delivery of services to the local community. It is your local councillors, helped by your local council clerk, who identify local needs and ensure delivery.



COUNCILLOR FIONA COWAN

Collyweston Parish Council

A Scot by birth, I moved to the East Midlands in 1995. We fell in love with

the area, so picturesque and rural. My professional background takes in marketing, cinema management, public relations for business and charity, and magazine publishing. Collyweston is a tiny village, cut in half one way by the A43, and the other by two local roads which have become a commuter rat-run. The village lies close to the borders with several counties and districts, so the village often feels left out of or neglected by official initiatives that tend to be organised within political boundaries. It used to have several pubs, a school, a butcher, a post office and a garage; all it has now is a gastro-pub and there are moves afoot to set up a community village shop.

What do you like most about living in Collyweston?

It's small, it's quirky, its parish council punches above its weight. It's got history coming out of its ears, and it has its fair share of local characters.

How did you first get involved with your local council?

I joined the village hall committee, to try and save it from closure. When initially approached about the parish council I believed I could not spare the time. My partner was co-opted at that time, and was clearly getting to know about the community far more quickly and thoroughly than I was ... so when I was approached again, I agreed to be co-opted as well. So, I got involved out of nosiness as much as a sense of public service!

In what way do you feel that local councils can help to support younger people in the community?

Youth councils are underrated, and can be an investment in the success and inclusivity of more 'grown up' political and civic

numbers – Return on Investment is a qualitative as well as a quantitative thing, and in some communities an objective benefit to a smallish number of people is a springboard to all sorts of further activity and benefits. Providing transport and supervision to enable young people in isolated or rural communities to access facilities elsewhere is vital.

Why should people get involved locally?

In a town or city it's hard to affect important things, such as planning decisions or road maintenance budgets or healthcare provision. In something as small as a parish it's much easier to know the right people to talk to about anything worrying you. It's also, I have found, a great way to improve the skills you will need in the paid workplace, because if you're willing to have a go at something scary, other people will let you! Thus, I've made public presentations, chaired public debates (complete with angry mobs), and addressed key decision-makers – and can now feel comfortable doing so.

What film, song or book title would best describe your role as a councillor?

Truly Madly Deeply ... especially the 'madly' bit! I'm not someone who can do a job mechanically or half-heartedly. Being a councillor can be demanding, but because the work has an impact on the lives of everyone in my community, and further afield sometimes, I know it's worth the extra time and thought and energy that I throw into it.



COUNCILLOR PETER BAGGOTT

Ingatestone and Fryerning Parish Council

I became a Parish Councillor in 1993 after taking early retirement following 36 years service with a major multi national motor manufacturer latterly in the Marketing area of the European Division. I have lived in Ingatestone for 40 years; I am married with two adult children and two grandchildren.

The Parish of Ingatestone and Fryerning is situated in the metropolitan green belt in Essex and is one the original parishes that

were created following the Local Government Act of 1894. The population of the parish is 4,800. Ingatestone itself is situated on the main London to Norwich road and historically was one of the coaching stations on this route. Because of its situation in the green belt, Ingatestone has not expanded significantly beyond its original boundaries.

Fryerning lies to the north of Ingatestone and is totally agricultural with a number of large houses built during the early part of the 20th century.

What do you like most about living in the parish of Ingatestone & Fryerning?

Apart from the convenience of having good transport links and the relatively near proximity of many of the necessary facilities, it is the community spirit. Ingatestone locally is considered a village, this might seem odd with our population, but there is little doubt in my mind that by virtually any other measure we are truly a village with all the community benefits that accrue from this.

If you had to describe your role as a councillor using three adjectives, what would they be and why?

Patient, persistent, practicable. I think these are self evident. Be practical in your aims, persistent in your workings and above all patient.

How has your local council helped to build a sense of community in your local area?

We have tried to achieve this by working with our residents and our local groups, societies and organisations. We involve people from outside of the council in activities such as a Village Appraisal and Village Design statement. There has always been a strong community feeling here which is all the more gratifying given the fact that many of our residents commute into London for their employment. A further sign of the existing community spirit is the large number of thriving clubs, organisations etc which exist locally.

How has the tier changed during your time as a councillor?

From a local point of view I have seen our council evolve from a fairly low key traditional type of operation to an efficient, well resourced Quality Council which is prominent in the parish, communicates well with our residents and is respected by other organisations.

Many communities, particularly in England's urban centres, are yet to petition for a local council. What would you say to convince them of the value of a local council for their local area?

Predominantly, that a local council is their best chance of having a local voice and the ability to express a local view to those who have influence over our lives.

Ok, so explain a little more about the role of a local councillor

Local councils are made up of a number of councillors who meet regularly to make decisions on the work and direction of the council. As elected bodies local councils are responsible to the people they represent – that's your local community.

Local councillors have three main areas of work:

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.

Monitoring: Councillors make sure that their decisions lead to efficient and effective services by keeping an eye on how well things are working.

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.

Activities are varied and may include:

- Going to meetings of local organisations such as tenants organisations
- 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 district or borough council
- Holding a surgery for residents to bring up issues
- Meeting with individual residents in their own homes

What support is available?

Your colleagues on the council will be happy to help you find your feet and the clerk to the council is there to assist you in your responsibilities. Within your county your council is supported by your local county association of local councils. In some urban areas where there is not a county in existence you can still access support from your most local county association. This support can be in terms of advice or through support in training and development opportunities. At a national level support comes from the National Association of Local Councils. Both organisations work to develop tools to help you in your role. Full contact details for county associations can be found on the National Association of Local Councils website.



Councillor Amjad Zaman, Mayor
of Keighley Town Council 2008/09

What do local councils do?

As a councillor you are in a great position to help identify the needs of your community and to deliver projects and initiatives that will help to make your local area a better place to live. Local councils are best placed to identify the needs of the local community and show great imagination in developing ideas to tackle the issues most relevant to their local area. Initiatives across the country vary in size and scope but they all have one thing in common, the well being of local people.

Crime reduction

Crime is a concern for everyone but local councils can ensure safer streets through crime reduction measures. A number of local councils across the country now fund Police Community Support Officers or Parish Wardens, others have introduced extra street lighting where necessary and some even fund cctv in their local area.

Community and arts centres

Many local councils own, manage or support community or arts centres in the local area. Community centres can form an invaluable hub for local people as a place to meet or engage in a variety of activities.

Tackling climate change

Local councils are playing their part in taking measures to tackle climate change and embody the ethos that it is vital we act locally. It may be something simple like installing lighting for footpaths powered by solar panels or wind turbines. An even simpler contribution may be to provide advice to the community about measures we can all take, simple solutions like ensuring houses are properly insulated or advice about what to look for when buying new electrical equipment for the home. Local councils are also involved in more significant projects, often working with partners from the local area such as environmental groups or the local principal authority. There are now examples of local councils taking a green approach where public buildings require renovation to ensure they are more environmentally friendly. Local councils are also providing a leadership role where a community aspires to reduce carbon emissions with the aspiration of becoming carbon neutral. As a local councillor, supported by the local council, you can work with local people to help them understand climate change, how it impacts upon them and how they can make a difference.

What else do local councils do?!

The Local environment

The state of our local environment can affect us all where it is not adequately looked after. We all appreciate the affect that clean streets and a little greenery can have upon us and local councils play their part in ensuring this aspect of our well being is looked after.

Community transport schemes

A lack of public transport usually affects the most vulnerable members of our communities, older people, young families and the disabled. It can leave people feeling isolated and can significantly affect their quality of life. Many of us take a shopping trip or a health appointment for granted but for some it is not so simple.

Local councils across the country run and contribute to community transport schemes. These schemes often provide subsidised transport to ensure people can access services and more fully feel part of the community.

Youth engagement

Many local councils recognise the importance of engaging young people in the local area and of listening to their views. Many local councils fund youth councils which are a valuable way for young people to put across their views and participate more fully in local government and the decisions that affect their lives. A number of local councils also fund youth outreach workers whose role is to get out and about meeting young people who may be more detached from the decision-making process. These measures often reach out to members of the community who feel ignored or sidelined by the mainstream and can help to improve community cohesion and reduce instances of anti-social behaviour.

A great many local councils have also ensured that they provide for younger children in the community. Safe and accessible playgrounds have become a major feature of many areas represented by a local council often as a result of the council asking the community what local priorities should be.

Leisure

In a hectic world the way in which we spend our free time is increasingly important. Local councils help to provide leisure activities for the local community. They provide or contribute to the provision of facilities such as leisure centres, arts centres, playing fields and open spaces, and museums. In addition to this they might also organise activities such as fetes, festivals and celebrations.



COUNCILLOR GWEN RADCLIFFE

Oundle Town Council

Oundle is an ancient market town situated beside the River Nene. The town is bordered by water meadows which provide a habitat for a diverse assortment of wildlife.

How did you first get involved with your local council and why?

As a mother of two sons, under 5 at the time, I was unimpressed with the play facilities in the Recreation ground and was my usual vocal self on the issue at Oundle Young Wives. Lotte Mason OBE, a close neighbour in her 80's and retired Town and District Councillor suggested I take action and stand for election in 1979, volunteering to babysit if required.

How do you feel that you make a difference?

The Town Council's direct provision and/or management of community facilities contributes to what makes Oundle special. As an active Councillor I can influence other authorities in their plans for services to Oundle. This may only be minor mitigation of problems at times, but things could be worse otherwise.

What film, song or book title would best describe your role as a councillor?

Great Expectations

What three key attributes would you say are most important for a councillor to possess?

Commitment – not worth doing if you don't get involved;

Analytical thinking – need to think things through before making decisions;

Thick skinned – Don't take things personally, be patient and exercise self-restraint in conversation.

What mechanisms does your local council have in place to keep you aware of the wishes of local people?

Public participation at all meetings, Council office open five days a week, councillor details publicised widely and feedback sought in newsletters and vibrant town meeting.

HOWEVER, only a small amount of feedback comes to me this way. Most of my awareness comes from living in the community. I am 'lobbied' everywhere I go from the queue in the butchers to when I am having my hair done. This is both the joy and the burden of the first tier.

What has been your proudest moment representing your local community?

Chairing the Courthouse Working Party from the initial approach from the County Council to the transfer of the asset (for £1), through feasibility study, public consultation, lottery bids and the £500,000 renovation to the Royal Opening. (Then seeing my younger son married in the building).



Local councils often ensure that the area has adequate play facilities for local children (Great Notley Parish Council, Essex)



Local councils work to improve the visual appearance and Quality of life for local people and visitors (Oswestry Town Council, Shropshire)



**COUNCILLOR
DAVID SMITHSON**
Halewood Town Council

Halewood is located within the Merseyside area. A largely urban area surrounded to the north and east by farmland.

What do you like most about living in Halewood?

It has a great sense of community spirit which I felt the first time I visited the area and that feeling has always been there over the last 16 years since I moved here. Logistically, Halewood is also very well connected to local transport links which has many benefits.

How did you first get involved with your local council?

I was the Chair of the local residents association and the local councillors were co-opted on to the committee as non-voting members. We used to meet regularly to share issues in the locality with them so they were aware of topical concerns and I started attending their meetings to follow and better understand the decision making process.

What is the most challenging aspect of your role?

Managing expectations! Sometimes you have to make tough decisions which you know are not going to please everyone but so long as you have not put yourself in a position where you have promised something you cannot then deliver you should be safe, but you may still inevitably upset someone along the way.

What has been your most rewarding moment representing your local community?

Every time you help someone, especially with a tricky piece of casework, it is very rewarding but I think being named as the NALC Council of the Year for 2008 is probably the highlight to date.

In what way do you feel that local councils can help to support younger people in the community?

Giving them a voice and an opportunity to have a say about what happens in their community. In Halewood we set up a Youth

Council last year with its own budget to spend on what the Youth Council felt needed doing to help young people.

Why do you think that people should get involved locally?

It always disappoints me that so many people are turned off by politics these days and yet they pay their taxes week in week out which the politicians they appear to despise so much have control of spending. I always try to emphasise to residents that it is their money we are making decisions about how to spend it so they have every right to have a say in how and who spends it and to have a view on the quality of services they receive.

If you had to describe your role as a councillor using three verbs, what would they be and why?

Challenge – because nothing is ever easy to resolve when dealing with the public purse and not every decision is met with universal agreement! Balancing the competing demands of local residents, the budget and local authority officers is always a challenge.

Satisfy – when you see that you can make a difference and get something done to help a resident or when a piece of work or a project you have initiated comes to fruition it is immensely satisfying.

Understand – whether it is colleagues, local residents or council staff you always have to be able to listen and understand their problem or viewpoint and empathise with what they are dealing with. You also need to understand a lot of regulations and legislation to be able to perform this role. It is not simply about taking the route you think is best without understanding your legal obligations and constraints.

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, and
- 18 years of age or older

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.electoralcommission.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.

We don't have a local council in my area. How can I set one up?

Your local community can petition your district or borough council for a local council for your area through a Community Governance Review. Check out the NALC website for further details about what you will need to do.

Useful contacts

These contacts can give you more information about becoming a councillor, information about local councils or more general information around a wide variety of issues that are of interest to the local council tier of local government.

The National Association of Local Councils

www.nalc.gov.uk

The Commission for Rural Communities

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

The Electoral Commission

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

The Department for Communities and Local Government

www.communities.gov.uk

The Department for Constitutional Affairs

www.dca.gov.uk

Action with Communities in Rural England

www.acre.org.uk

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

www.defra.gov.uk

Local Government Association

www.lga.gov.uk

Directgov

www.direct.gov.uk

British Youth Council

www.byc.org.uk



**Commission for
Rural Communities**

Cheltenham Office

John Dower House, Crescent Place
Cheltenham, Gloucs. GL50 3RA
Telephone 01242 521381

London Office

55 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2EY
Telephone 0207 2703220

Email info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk
www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

National Association of Local Councils

109 Great Russell Street, London
WC1B 3LD

Telephone 020 7637 1865

Email nalc@nalc.gov.uk
www.nalc.gov.uk