

IT TAKES ALL SORTS.

Local councils: represent your community, make a difference



Published by NALC

Second edition

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC)

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Printed by Darwin Press

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 - 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.

The Be A Councillor Campaign

The Be A Councillor campaign is driven and led by Local Government Leadership, part of the Local Government Group. It is a campaign whose aim is to encourage more local residents to stand for election as principal local councillors, and those existing councillors to stand for election again. There are 20, 000 elected principal local councillors in England, all with their own unique reason for doing so. The campaign works with the three main political parties to help them locate people to stand as council candidates in principal local elections. The campaign recognises that there are some sectors of society who are under-represented on principal local authorities – such as those under 45, women and people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. With the local elections taking place on 5 May 2011, the campaign aims to provide people with information to help them decide if they should be standing for election as a principal local councillor. More details about this campaign can be located at <http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk/>

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 in conjunction with the Be A Councillor campaign, highlights the experiences of just a few of these councillors and serves to show how rewarding representing your community can be. This (second) edition contains six new local councillor case studies.

Each councillor gives their reasons for becoming a local councillor in the first place, what motivates them to remain in their community role and what they want to achieve as local councillors in the future.

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 legislative change also means that people in London can now set up a local council in their own 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.

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 Richard Alvin

Chigwell Parish Council



As a person I am very active, my day job is the group managing director of the Capital Business Media group, so when a problem arose in my local area affecting myself and neighbours I had call to speak to the local council to see, what if anything, could be done about

it. As someone who has always had an interest in politics when a position became vacant on the council I decided to stand for election as you cannot be a passive complainer on the outside when you could be an active participant on the inside.

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

We have just completed an exercise to create a five year plan for the area and as part of that we held open days and actively sought the views from as many residents as we could so that all parts of the community were included. So now as we embark on that programme members of the community who came along and stuck a post-it on our ideas board, or wrote in will possibly see their idea actually come to fruition.

What advice would you give to a new councillor?

I am now the chair of the council's Planning Committee and so speak to local residents about problems they have with plans made by others which

are going to affect their properties or way of life. We cannot stand in the way of change, but change needs to be managed to ensure that our local area, the first village outside of London retains the right balance and would not have Dickens turning in his grave!

If you could attend a council meeting as a famous person (either living or dead), who would it be and why?

I am torn between Winston Churchill, a past MP for parts of my local area and Charles Dickens, spent a lot of time in Chigwell and said in a letter that [Chigwell is] the greatest place in the world...Such a delicious old inn opposite the church...such beautiful forest scenery...such an out of the way rural place. He is also said to have based the Public House in his novel Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of Eighty on the Kings Head Pub in the village, now owned by local resident Lord Sugar.

In undertaking your responsibilities as a

councillor, what might your typical week entail?

We have the main bulk of our structured meetings on a bi-weekly basis, so some weeks there may be nothing formal to do apart from be accessible and approachable from members of the community, but on weeks where I chair the planning meeting on a Wednesday, I will review the agenda the weekend before, looking at plans using the district councils online planning portal, then speak to the parish office on the Monday or Tuesday and see if we have received any representations from members of the public and plan for the meetings.

Councillor Ann Lovesey

Great Barford Parish Council



I am married with two married daughters and four gorgeous granddaughters. I am very lucky as I see them regularly and we have great fun. We have now lived in the village for more than forty years and I am still very involved, especially since my retirement from teaching post as

Deputy Head. I am now Chairman of the Lower School Governors as well as Church Warden.

Why did you decide to become a councillor?

I became a Parish Councillor in 1976. I stood for election because I felt I wanted to do something for my village. I had made one or two suggestions and asked questions of some of the councillors and they suggested I put my name forward. At that time there were enough candidates to have an election and I was successful at my first attempt. Great Barford at that time had less than 1,000 residents and Bedfordshire was still a County Council with three District Councils. At the time I was teaching full time in the local school and therefore knew many of the residents. I was also involved with the local church and scout group in a lay capacity and the Women's Institute.

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

Great Barford now has about 2,000

residents with more housing being built. It is a rural area, but only five miles from Bedford. We are now part of the Bedford Unitary Borough. We have just completed our Parish Plan and the involvement from the community has been great. We look forward to being able to deliver what is planned for the next five years, either from parish Council involvement or from the community groups working on specific areas. A lot of people volunteered to be involved in carrying the plans forward. It is very rewarding being a local Parish Councillor, trying to do what local people want in an affordable way to make life better for the community as a whole.

What kind of services does your local council provide for the community?

The parish council has changed beyond all recognition since my early days. We are now far more focussed in trying to carry out the wishes of the electorate as well as the young people. We have a playing field and two play areas, one for under 10's and one for older children.

If I were to be offered £50,000, it would be great to be able to provide something for the teenagers to do, especially in the darker months to help keep them safe and occupied. We also have an area of thriving allotments which are very popular within the village.

How do you balance work life with your role as a parish/town councillor?

I was nominated for my County Committee on the day I missed a parish Council meeting!! I have remained on it for over 10 years and spent 6 years as Chairman. I am also the representative on the NALC Council and have served on all the committees. I have thoroughly enjoyed these experiences as they have given me an insight into other councils.

Councillor Talis Fairbourn

Wroughton Parish Council



My background's in law, business, and music – but really, I'm a songwriter and performer. My work addresses green issues, local history and to a degree, politics (among other things). I'd never considered being involved in local politics, until a new friend in the village

to which I moved, drew me in by telling me about her own involvement. She convinced me that it was a thing I could do, and that it was a thing worth doing. She was right!

Why did you decide to become a councillor?

There was a vacancy; someone had to fill it. I was encouraged to think that I could do a good job, and that I might even enjoy it. Both these things I believe I have found to be true. I've learned a great deal, done things I had never done before, and have my horizons broadened. I've also at times been frustrated and aggravated, of course! Chiefly, I suppose, I got involved because I became friendly with another Councillor and she drew me in – and since it was clear that she found it a rewarding and responsible task, I was interested to know more.

How do you balance work life with your role as a parish/town councillor?

It's a challenge, with all the evening meetings, but even as chair, there is a recognition that councillors have

real lives outside the political role, which may cause them to miss the odd meeting. It's the work in between – reviewing papers, both impromptu and scheduled meetings, a little research and note making, and dealing with members of the public stopping me in the street (or the library, or the country market!) to talk to me about things they'd like to see addressed – that's what takes the time, really. Fortunately, much of it fits flexibly around the rest of my life, and with a good team around me, there's cover for anything I can't manage.

What is the most challenging aspect of your role?

Handling the vastly different personalities on the council, definitely. Whilst there's strength in the assorted councillors' diverse interests and experiences, there's also distance between the expectations of different Members, and the degree to which they will speak out on various issues. Also, a style of chairing which suits one subset of the Council may not be so appropriate with a different grouping.

Why should people get involved locally?

Everyone who's part of a community benefits from the input of other people to that community. It makes sense for everyone therefore to do their bit and contribute; if everyone sat back and let 'other people' do it, we'd soon have no community organisations of any kind - voluntary, cultural, sporting, youth, or local government. And that's not even starting on the challenges one can meet, the things one can learn from such involvement, or the immense satisfaction one gains from being part of something that makes a difference in one's community.

Councillor Deryck Nash

Cirencester Town Council



I came to the area at the end of a full time career in the Army and settled here nearly forty years ago. Now I now cannot conceive living anywhere else. I trained as a Management Accountant and worked for British Coal

until my post was made redundant as that industry declined in the nineties. I became really involved in local community organisations and charities and my “third career” in local politics seemed to follow of its own volition.

What has been the most satisfying moment of your time as a councillor?

My most satisfying moment was receiving a Christmas card from a constituent which read ‘You will not remember me Mr Nash but you helped me get a bath aid when no-one else did. I would just like to thank you and wish you and your family a very happy Christmas.’ This simple act means more to me than all the meeting VIPs or attending important occasions ever could.

Why should people get involved locally?

I think that complacency and an unwillingness to actually do something are the chief reasons for stagnating communities. Very often it is the small things that can make a huge difference.

If more people were willing to get involved, even if it is just something simple like litter picking in their own immediate neighbourhood, then things will start to happen. Others will start doing the same in their areas and before you know it the whole parish is clean and litter free.

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

Tolerance of the views of others; a desire to help your community and the people who live in it and a determination not to be easily beaten!

How would you hope the role of local councils will change over the next 20 years?

I feel that it is important for large urban communities to have Parish Council's inside of Boroughs, as it gives local people the opportunity to get involved in their small local communities. It is also easier for more people to get involved and voice their opinions.

What is the most challenging aspect of your role?

Handling the vastly different personalities on the council, definitely. Whilst there's strength in the assorted councillors' diverse interests and experiences, there's also distance between the expectations of different Members, and the degree to which they will speak out on various issues. Also, a style of chairing which suits one subset of the Council may not be so appropriate with a different grouping.

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.

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 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 Gwen Radcliffe

Oundle Town Council



Cllr. Radcliffe has been active on the Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils for some years and is currently the Chairman of the Finance Committee on the National Association of Local Councils (2011).

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 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 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.

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.

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 Be A Councillor Campaign

<http://www.beacouncillor.org.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

Local Government Leadership

www.localleadership.gov.uk

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