



## What is a Town or Parish council?

Local councils are the tier of local government **closest to the people**. They are **local** councils. Parish, Town, Community or City Council – in Cornwall they are the same. They have the same powers and act within the same legislation. A Town Council is a Parish Council that has usually decided to have a mayor and call itself a Town Council.

Local councils represent the concerns and aspirations of a genuine local community. They are not a voluntary organisation, not a charity nor (a common mistake) anything to do with the Church.

Local councils often do not have a permanent office or any full-time staff and will meet in the local hall or school. The part-time nature should not, however, be taken as any indication of the effectiveness and efficiency of the council as many Parish Councils work very hard for their electors and can run a wide range of services very effectively. A larger local council can cover quite large populations and will often provide a wide range of services from leisure facilities, support for museums, Tourist Information Centres, town centre closed-circuit television systems, as well as those services similar to smaller Parish Councils such as maintaining closed Church of England churchyards, providing halls and allotments

Despite being strictly audited each year, Parish Councils are the least bureaucratic and the cheapest kind of local authority in existence.

### What can they do?

As Parish Councils were created in law, they can only act within the law by exercising their powers and functions which have been conferred on them by Statutes (i.e. Acts of Parliament). Provided that the law allows, they are able to do anything in their area to support their local communities.

The range of powers available to Parish Councils continues to change; the Government's commitment to localism and devolution ensures that more opportunities are available to local councils than ever before. Local councils are playing a key part improving services by bringing them closer and making them more responsive to local communities. Already local council responsibilities are many and varied, including (not a comprehensive list) the purchase of land and buildings, providing and maintaining village greens, the provision of recreational facilities, crime prevention measures and traffic calming. In future these responsibilities will be far greater.

Local councils have many powers if they choose to use them. It is how and which of these powers that councillors decide to use, that makes a vibrant forward thinking Parish Council and can bring positive benefits to communities. The basic responsibility of local councils is to make the lives of their local communities more comfortable by representing the whole electorate within the parish, delivering or co-ordinating services to meet local needs and striving to improve quality of life in the parish. Local councils can also comment on planning applications and be represented at public enquiries.

Town and Parish Councils raise their income through a variety of sources but for many it is through a small percentage of the Council Tax bill paid by local householders. There is currently no limit to the amount a local council can raise in this way and some raise further income from services they provide. local council budgets are a tiny part of the whole Council Tax and local councils do not receive any Government funding or income from business rates.

Whatever the make up of your council, it embodies the representation of people's hopes and concerns for ensuring that local services are provided efficiently and effectively for the benefit of community wellbeing. A well informed council is aware of what its community needs and strives to provide this through team work, accessing grant funding, representation at other meetings and lobbying appropriate bodies.

Town and Parish Councils have a duty to appoint or employ a Clerk to record and carry out the council's decisions. Depending on their size and the services provided, they may employ staff for the benefit of the community. All councils must meet at least four times a year (although most meet more often) and their meetings must be open to the public, although for certain restricted items of confidentiality they may occasionally exclude the public.

A local council *is* the collective voice of its community.