



# SECTION 1

WHAT ARE LOCAL COUNCILS





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# INTRODUCTION

Parish, town, community, neighbourhood and village councils are often referred to as local councils. They are a type of local authority. Like other types of local authorities, local councils are involved in delivery of services and facilities for the public.

There are over 9,000 local councils in England. A local council enjoys a wide range of statutory powers related to the provision or support of certain services or facilities which generally benefit the residents who live in its area.

Local councils need active, interested and committed people to become councillors and get involved in their work.

This section briefly explains:

- how local councils fit into the structure of local government
- what a local council is
- examples of local council activities
- different sizes, different priorities
- the role of a local councillor
- how local councils make a difference.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

The structure of local government across England is not the same. Local councils do not exist everywhere.

### LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Local authorities are local district, borough or county councils. They cover the small or wider area that you live in and have certain statutory responsibilities which they must discharge. Local authorities have some powers which they have the discretion to exercise. For example, a local authority may have statutory powers to provide parks and sports facilities but it does not have to do so, because this is at its choice or discretion.

Local authorities are legal bodies in their own right but they are made up of councillors. It is the people elected as councillors who collectively make the most important decisions about the local authority. For example, councillors will set the council tax.

You may live in an area served by a district or borough council and a county council. The district or borough council has statutory functions which include street trading, licensing, development control, building control, environmental health, street parking, traffic regulation, housing and waste collection for its area. The county council has statutory functions in relation to the wider county area in relation to, for example, education, social services, highways and rights of way, and some planning matters.

Unlike local councils, other local authorities (such as district, borough and county councils) delegate responsibility for the discharge of most of their statutory functions to staff. They employ thousands of staff and rely on agency and contractual arrangements to fulfil their statutory responsibilities.

You may live in an area served by a unitary council (which includes a London Borough Council) which has the same functions as both a county and district or borough council, as described above

### COUNCILS

Unlike other types of local authorities, a local council has very few statutory functions or duties. A local council has the discretion to

exercise a range of statutory powers related to the provision or support of certain services or facilities which benefit its area, and/or the residents that live there.

If a local council does not already exist in the area that you live in, a petition signed by the residents in a defined geographical area lodged with the district/borough council or unitary council may result in one being established. This is explained in more detail in Section 2.

## **WHAT IS A LOCAL COUNCIL?**

A local council is a type of local authority with specific statutory functions and powers. Unlike other types of local authorities, there are relatively few statutory functions imposed on a local council. The few statutory functions are important and relate to, for example, the holding of meetings, the management of its finances and the preparation of annual accounts.

A local council employs staff, owns and manages premises, enters in contracts, and provides services.

Like other types of local authorities, a local council has obligations in the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010.

## **HOW DO LOCAL COUNCILS OPERATE?**

Most decisions about what a local council does will be taken at meetings by councillors. Some of the work of a local council is delegated to a smaller group of councillors (i.e. a committee or sub-committee) or staff.

Although the public has a right to attend meetings of a council and its committees, it is the councillors who collectively make decisions about council business and what services or facilities it provides.

But how does a council know which services to deliver or what activities to support? Usually the activities of a local council or the services and facilities that it provides are driven by the demands of the residents who live in the council's area.

If it does not already know, a local council may identify the needs of its local residents by listening and consultation. It will be up to the council to decide the priorities for action.

### **HOW ARE THEY FUNDED?**

The local council must carefully budget for the expenditure it will incur in the next financial year.

A local council may generate income from money from rents from premises that it leases or licences for use by others, or from the services or facilities it provides (e.g. sports facilities, off street car parks). It may also receive grants for certain projects.

The main source of income for a local council derives from the precept levied on the residents in its area. The precept is incorporated into a local resident's council tax bill.

### **WHERE DO YOU FIND THEM?**

Local councils can be found or established anywhere, including areas as diverse as densely populated urban developments, market towns or sparse rural areas.

### **WHAT DO THEY DO?**

Unlike other types of local authorities, local councils are not tasked with statutory responsibilities relating to the provision of housing or social care, education or waste collection. Local councils are in the fortunate position of having statutory powers which they have discretion to exercise.

Many local councils choose to get involved in a broad range of projects and activities, the purpose of which is to make the local area a better place to live. Although local councils are not formally obliged to provide many public services, Government is encouraging local councils to deliver more services and play a greater part in supporting their communities.



For example, a local council has statutory powers in relation to:

Sports facilities

Local youth projects

Litter bins

Community centres

Community transport schemes

Crime reduction measures

Festivals and fetes

Tourism activities

Allotments

Bus shelters

Off street car parks

Parks and open spaces

Neighbourhood Planning

Street lighting

Traffic calming measures

NALC's book 'Local Councils Explained 2013' provides a full explanation of the role and internal workings of a local council. Information about Local Councils Explained and how to purchase it is available from NALC's website via [http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Local\\_Councils\\_Explained.aspx3](http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Local_Councils_Explained.aspx3).

## EXAMPLES OF LOCAL COUNCIL ACTIVITIES

Local councils show a great deal of imagination in improving the area they serve. Activities range from large scale projects, like the building and running of sports and leisure facilities, to less demanding projects, such as the provision of hanging baskets or street lighting. Examples of the range of activities councils have engaged in are below.



Sevenoaks Town Council,  
KENT

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**Population** – 18,500

**Precept** – £715,000

Sevenoaks Town Council in Kent is responsible for a number of local facilities in the town. A large council with significant capacity, it is supporting local people during the recession with a job club aimed at providing an opportunity for people to meet, exchange ideas and get advice on careers, training, benefits and setting up businesses. The council also took steps to save the local Stag Theatre and Cinema, which it felt was crucial to the long term economic sustainability of the town.

The venue went into receivership for the second time in two years in 2008, with many considering it financially unviable and considering the redevelopment value of the land it stood on. In partnership with the local community, local business and the local media, the council put in a bid to run the venue and successfully secured a 25-year lease in 2009.

Since then, the Theatre has gone from strength to strength, not only hosting a wide range of events and performances, but creating 20 full time jobs in Sevenoaks. The Stag now welcomes more than 25,000 people every month and more than 40,000 people a month log on to the website.

## YOUTH SERVICES

Local councils do a great deal to ensure that young people are both engaged and listened to. Many local councils now support youth councils made up of young people from the local area, in some cases devolving a budget to their youth council to spend as they see fit. Local councils also support young people through youth clubs, the provision of skate parks and entertainment facilities.



**Population** – 9,925

**Precept** – £352,000

In Iver there are a number of factors that limit the number of activities young people can engage in, and in recent years the parish had seen an increase in incidents of anti-social behaviour and criminal damage by young people. A number of local young people were on the streets during the evening with little to do and the council was prompted to consider how it could better provide for the needs of young people in the parish.

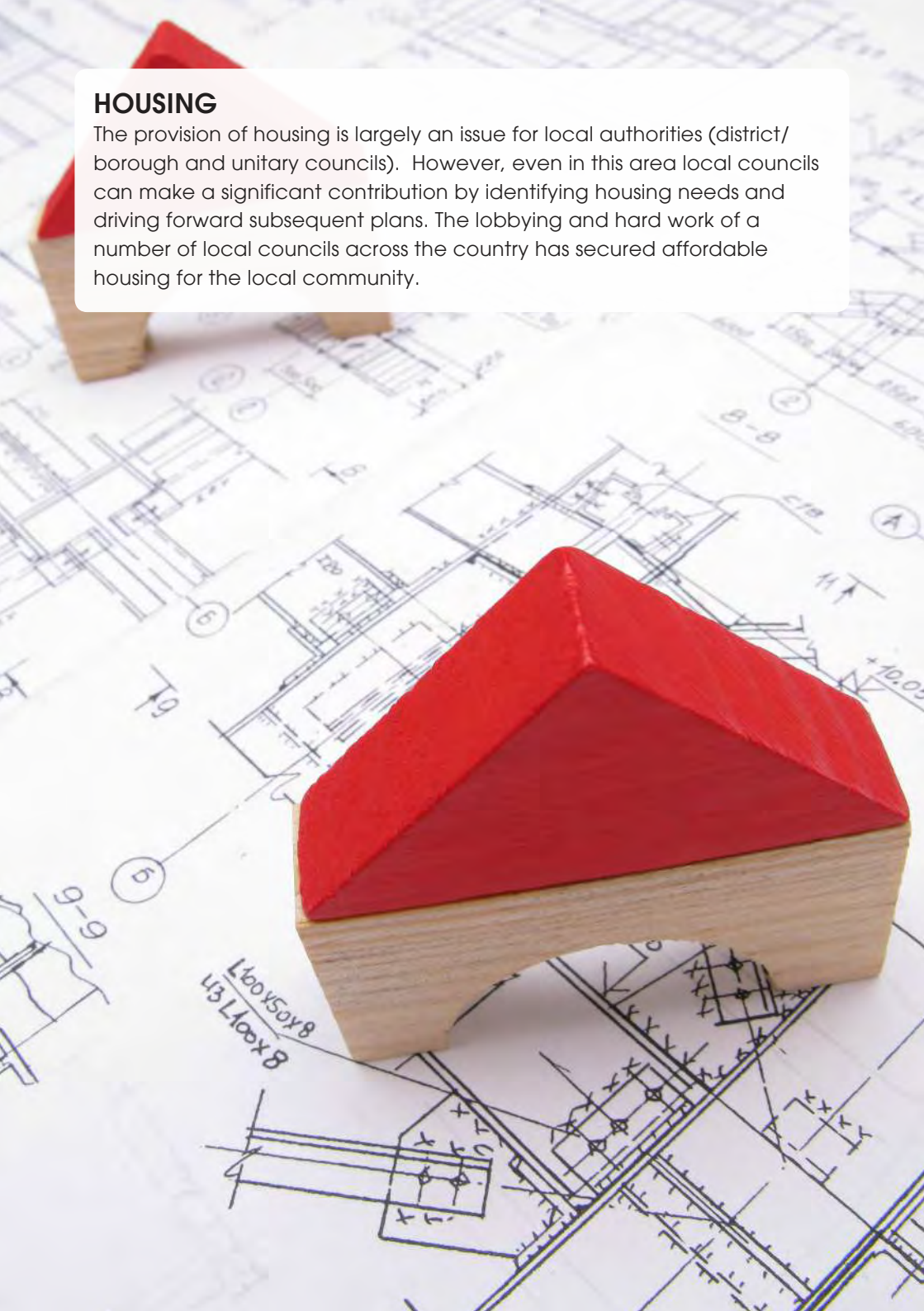
The parish council works with a local charity, Iver Educational Trust, to employ its own street based youth worker within the parish. The local authorities (district and county councils) are now both working with the parish council to enhance youth services in Iver.

Initially the youth worker took to the streets in an effort to build a relationship with young people in the area. This gave young people the opportunity to articulate their needs, and concerns and feel more a part of the community. The role has developed over time and activities are now provided during school holidays. To help tackle the problem of graffiti, the youth worker works with young people on arts projects. Another positive aspect of the project was that a group of young people who were concerned that they were being treated as though they were anti-social, came forward and asked to organise a clean-up day. This was facilitated by the parish council and saw the young people cleaning graffiti, painting walls and litter picking.

This project has reduced instances of anti-social behaviour and has made the council better aware of issues that affect young people.

## HOUSING

The provision of housing is largely an issue for local authorities (district/ borough and unitary councils). However, even in this area local councils can make a significant contribution by identifying housing needs and driving forward subsequent plans. The lobbying and hard work of a number of local councils across the country has secured affordable housing for the local community.



**Population** – 940

**Precept** – £6,000

Lighthorne Heath Parish Council lies to the south of Warwick and Leamington Spa and was formed in 2003. Lighthorne Heath is considered to be an area of relatively high deprivation and is around eight miles from the nearest town or shopping centre.

The area inherited an old shop and post office that had become very run down. There was also a doctor's surgery that was closed down in 2005. There are a number of large families in social housing but the largest size of social house had only three bedrooms meaning that many families were living in overcrowded conditions.

A parish plan was produced which identified that a new shop, a doctor's surgery and additional housing were priority issues.

Working with the local authority and a housing association, land was identified for the new buildings that the community wanted. The consultations, planning and lobbying resulted in a new doctor's surgery adapted from two new bungalows, a new shop and a new post office. New social housing was also built, one five-bedroom house, two four-bedroom houses, four bungalows and 15 three-bedroom houses.

## THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

The state of the local environment can affect us all where it is not adequately looked after. Local councils do a great deal to ensure that the local area is made more pleasant. Local councils often maintain hanging baskets, a simple idea but one that brings colour and beauty to a local area.





**Population** – 15,000

**Precept** – £400,000

Great Baddow Parish Council consulted with local residents prior to and during the millennium year, which identified a number of local projects for Noakes Place, an area of parkland at the centre of Great Baddow. One of the projects identified was the establishment of a Sensory Garden, which had a great deal of support from local residents. After completing a number of other projects that had been identified, work on the Garden was started in 2006.

The idea behind the Sensory Garden was that it would be an area of pathways, seating, trellis and raised beds with planting. The planting was specially chosen for colour, smell and texture that could be enjoyed by people with sensory deprivations. The raised beds would mean that the area would be accessible to those with physical disabilities.

A number of members of Great Baddow Horticultural Society gave their time and services free of charge to draw up detailed plans of the hard landscaping required and detailed plans of the type of planting needed. The council was successful in securing a grant from the local authority, Essex County Council, and invested its own money in the initiative. The Garden was officially opened in October 2007.

**Population** – 4,166

**Precept** – £171,463

Redbourn Parish Council has recently planted a community orchard. The trees were sponsored by members of the public and the council hopes that local people will pick the produce once the trees bear fruit. The local council has worked with Redbourn in Bloom to improve the village, gaining Silver Gilt awards, and recently opened the Cumberland Garden (using investment from a local housing development) off the high street where fruit trees were planted in the garden. A large compost bin was built in the garden to take the garden's refuse and plant debris from village planting schemes. Water butts have also been placed in various buildings around the village and the hanging baskets are watered with 'grey' water.

The plants in Cumberland Garden continue to mature and the garden is well used by the community as it serves as a link from the high street to the health centre and is a quiet retreat from the busy high street. The local council has also installed a path that gives access for the disabled from the high street to the community orchard and the Nickey Line (a pedestrian/cycle path on a disused railway line). As well as giving access to the disabled it is also used by cyclists travelling along the Nickey Line to work in Redbourn.

## **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 (PCSO). PCSOs are a visible presence helping communities to feel more secure. Other local councils have installed their own street lighting and a small number of local councils even fund CCTV in their local area. All of these measures can help a community feel more secure.



## COMMUNITY AND ART CENTRES

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



**Population** – circa 25,000

**Precept** – £382,300

Between 1995 and 1996, East Grinstead Town Council built the Chequer Mead Community Arts Centre at a cost of £2.41m. The building was funded primarily by the local council, but funding was also drawn from the Arts Council Lottery Fund and the local authority, Mid Sussex District Council. This was a significant undertaking for a local council and at the time it was the largest capital project, in funding terms, developed by any local council in England or Wales.

The centre comprises a 340-seat theatre, a dedicated art and exhibitions gallery, a studio workshop, three meeting rooms, a restaurant/cafe/bar and the usual backstage accommodation. The centre has built a first-class reputation for itself as a venue with a wide educational remit and hosts high-class community and professional performing and visual arts events. Chequer Mead is run as a charity and East Grinstead Town Council continues its role as trustee.

## TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE

Local councils are playing their part in taking measures to help tackle climate change. Local councils are using their communications channels to provide communities with advice about the simple measures we can all take. Local councils are also involved in more significant projects, often working with partners from the local area, such as environmental groups or other local authorities.



**Population** – 25,000

**Precept** – £122,000

Kirkburton Parish Council in Yorkshire takes its environmental responsibilities very seriously and was the first local council to utilise new legislation in the Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Act 2006. Its Environment Plan covers biodiversity, heritage, climate change and appearance and its aim is to support the development of facilities, and community life in the parish council area in environmentally sustainable ways. The plan covers a significant number of local issues and a great deal of progress has already been made.

One of the key elements in the plan is to provide funds for the installation of renewable technology and energy conservation measures in community buildings. The purpose of this is to ensure that a greater proportion of a building's total energy use is served by micro generation and also demonstrates even greater energy savings, reduced CO2 emissions and lower fuel bills. The efforts of the local council were rewarded when they won the Best Region Award at the British Renewable Energy Awards in 2008.

## LOCAL COUNCILS –DIFFERENT SIZES, DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

Local councils represent urban and rural areas which may be densely or sparsely populated. For example, Weston-super-Mare Town Council in North Somerset represents over 70,000 residents, while Hutton-le-Hole Parish Council in North Yorkshire serves an area with around 200 residents. However, what they have in common is they deliver facilities and services which benefit the area.

The annual budgets of local councils can range from just a few hundred pounds to several million pounds. But even a limited budget does not stop an committed local council making a big difference to the local area. A council with a more limited budget can still be a vital focal point for the community and can provide it with a stronger voice in articulating its needs to partners such as other types of local authority.

Local councils can be found all over England, from some of our biggest cities, such as Birmingham Newcastle and London, to rural villages and market towns.

The following examples show that councils of all sizes are making a difference in their local communities.



**Population** – 240

**Precept** – £5,000

Ufton is a small village located at the top of a hill on the A425 in Warwickshire. Due to the size of the community there are few amenities and its location means it is not within safe walking or cycling distance of any nearby town. Despite its small size, the parish council works hard to ensure a sense of community and a feeling of inclusion. As the number of young people in the village has grown over the last decade, the council undertook a survey of local young people to find out what their needs were. Young people identified the prohibitive cost of travel, which they felt was leaving them socially isolated. The council responded by securing local funding and having negotiated with Stagecoach was able to provide 13 families with four one-week tickets for use over the summer holidays. Undertaking this scheme also provided the council with an opportunity to promote further links with local young people, and by talking and listening to local young people during the survey valuable relationships were made. These initiatives have helped to foster a real sense of community and inclusion.

Langwathby Parish Council

**CUMBRIA**

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**Population** – 750

**Precept** – £10,000

Langwathby Parish Council comprises the two villages of Edenhall and Langwathby, which are located a few miles north of Penrith. Following a housing survey, which the council undertook in 2002, meetings were held with the local authority and Eden Housing Association to press the case for additional affordable housing in Langwathby. Eden Housing took up the proposal and worked with the parish council to take the scheme forward. The scheme was completed two years ago, providing 13 homes for local people, some shared ownership and some rented

## WHAT IS 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. Councillors collectively decide and prioritise the nature of the activities that their council will undertake, including determining the annual precept (tax) and how facilities and services will be provided. They have collective responsibility for ensuring that the council is adequately resourced to deliver the facilities and services it has agreed to provide. They also have collective responsibility for ensuring that the council's financial management is sound.

### **A local councillor is expected to:**

- attend and participate at council meetings
- raise matters to be duly considered and decided at council meetings
- represent his or her council externally
- it is important to remember that the job of the council is to represent the interests of the whole community. Understanding the needs of different groups in the community (such as young and elderly people) is an important part of the role of councillor. Occasionally there will be a conflict of interest requiring sensitive judgement; for example, dog owners, parents of young children and walkers might disagree about use of the village green owned by the council. Making difficult decisions, in an open and reasoned way, is something that local councils need to do well
- although some councillors who, for example, represent a ward may also choose to represent the interests of individual residents, this activity is independent of the council.

### **Councillors should:**

- attend meetings when summoned to do so
- consider, in advance of the meeting, the agenda and any related documents
- take part in meetings and consider all the relevant facts and issues on matters which require a decision, including the views of others expressed at the meeting

- take part in voting and respect decisions made by the majority of those present and voting
- represent the whole electorate, and not just those who voted for them.

NALC's booklet, *It takes all sorts*, provides the personal experiences of a number of councillors from across the country. They talk about their pride in their local area and the achievements of their local council, and explain why they first became councillors. The booklet is available to download at NALC's website via [www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk).

The role of the clerk is to assist the council with the discharge of its statutory function or duties and the exercise of its statutory powers. The clerk plays an essential role in helping councillors implement their decisions. More information is available in Section 2.

## HOW LOCAL COUNCILS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A local council can be a key partner in assessing the needs of its community and the provision of services to meet those needs. The case studies in this booklet show how local councils can make a real difference for the communities they represent.

Below is a brief overview of the many possible benefits of local councils:

- A local council has statutory powers which, if exercised, benefit its area or residents
- Their councillors have a local connection to the area
- Money raised is spent locally to address the priorities of the local council's area and residents
- A local council may provide support to voluntary bodies
- Local councils may have access to grants to support the work they do
- The work of the local council is driven by committed councillors and delivered or supported by its staff.