

Have you considered becoming a Parish Councillor?

Parish Councillors have an opportunity to make a real difference to their community, at a small cost in time and effort. Have *you* considered becoming a Parish Councillor? It may be easier and more rewarding than you think. But what is involved? Here is some background information you might find interesting.

What is a parish council?

Parish councils are the elected first layer of local government and, as such, are closest to the electors. The next levels are the borough and county councils. Parish councils are funded by a precept raised as part of the Council Tax and take responsibility for a range of local matters and community needs, such as allotments, playgrounds and the maintenance of local facilities under the Council's control including common land, ponds and bus shelters. Beyond this, they identify, support and manage local project initiatives and can fund grants to local organisations such as youth clubs and charities. Parish councils are consulted by the Borough council over matters such as planning applications in the parish.



Annual assembly gathering

Wonersh Parish Council is composed of three wards, each a village in the parish. Wonersh and Shamley Green have 4 councillors each and Blackheath has one. The councillors need to be 18 or over and are elected by the public to serve a four-year term. Wonersh Parish Council is non-political and its councillors represent their wards rather than any organisation. While the next elections to the Council are in 2011, there are many aspects of the Council work you can get involved in now.

What does a parish council do?

A parish council is a channel for the expression of local views to influence local policy, and acts as a local sounding board. The council comments on planning applications for developments within the parish, or occasionally beyond when it is considered that these may impact on the parish, for example by generating traffic through the parish villages. The councillors know their parish and the concerns of local residents and are able to use this know-how in responding to the applications.

Parish councils have legal responsibilities to fulfil. Council meetings are held in public and need to be properly convened and run, Health & Safety issues require compliance, accounts need to be maintained in proper order. Wonersh Parish Council holds meetings once every month except in August and December. Some of the work of the Council is divided among committees such as Risk Assessment and Audit and Planning; councillors are nominated to one or more of these as appropriate. Additionally, there are working parties formed to research and progress one-off projects such as traffic calming, carbon neutral and website development initiatives.



Solar-powered footpath light

A key objective of the Council is to widen contact with the local community. While funds are limited, the Council can respond to requests of support from local organisations. Each year the Council also promotes local projects which it manages and completes itself. Recent projects in Wonersh Parish have included the improvements to Gerald's Wood, speed reduction on parish roads and traffic calming in the villages, repair of bus shelters, restoration of local ponds, providing discrete, solar-powered footpath lighting, promoting low-energy usage in the parish, maintaining playgrounds, grass cutting, litter picking and improving youth facilities.

Encouraging youth involvement in local affairs is a topic councillors feel strongly about, and Wonersh Parish Council is keen to facilitate new initiatives in this area. Such projects are perhaps where the council can most directly contribute to the community. They provide both parish councillors and residents with the opportunity to identify and submit ideas that will benefit the electors.

Wonersh Parish Council is in process of working towards achieving quality status and is updating its process to the necessary standards.

What does a parish councillor do?

Councillors represent the electors in their parish ward. They are accessible to residents to listen to their concerns and to deal with them or to pass them for action to the appropriate authorities directly or via the Parish Clerk. Councillors may represent the Council on local bodies and in meetings with other authorities. They help formulate responses to county or national consultations when relevant local issues are involved such as the last consultation over post office closures, following which Wonersh Parish was delighted to retain the post offices in its wards.



Speed watch volunteers

Councillors can provide leadership on local initiatives. In Wonersh, councillors and residents put together the Village Design Statement which identifies the key features that characterise the Parish and sets out how change can be managed to maintain the distinctiveness of the area. The document serves as a guide for planning applications as well as a reference for the Borough Council on the Parish's views. Another example was the Parish Plan, developed through village appraisals, which highlighted what each village values and the key issues it faces. Needless to say, traffic figured high! Councillors are involved in the Shamley Green Speed Watch scheme, and are working on traffic issues within Wonersh.

The championing of local projects and providing leadership over local issues is an important, and rewarding, aspect of a councillor's role. Persistence in dealing with the authorities and utilities is an essential virtue. This was amply demonstrated in getting the speed limits on either side of Wonersh and Shamley Green lowered.

In everything they do, councillors need to bring integrity and common sense to their approach and look for viable, pragmatic outcomes that can be achieved.

All this work involves time, of course. Meetings have to be attended. Planning applications and other documents have to be reviewed. The work load varies, but an average weekly estimate of 3–5 hours would be reasonable. In return is the immense satisfaction of putting something back into the community.

Councillors have substantial support in performing their duties. First of all there is the Parish Clerk. This is a paid position, and provides an experienced person to look after the administration of the council as well as to be on hand to offer advice and guidance to the councillors. Training is available to the new councillor which is of high quality and covers all aspects of the role. The Council acts very much as a team and fellow councillors are always there to support each other. Help is also available from organisations such as SCAPTC (Surrey County Association of Parish and Town Councils).

Interested?

If you would like to find out more about being a Wonersh parish councillor and learn how you might get involved in parish activities now, contact any of the current councillors or the clerk at clerk@wonershparish.org or at the Parish office in the Wonersh sports pavilion any Thursday afternoon. You can also visit the parish website at www.wonershparish.org and meet and spend time with councillors to find out in more detail what they do and what attracted them to the role. You will be very welcome.