

Past, Present and Future of Your Parish Council

The Parish:

There are two sorts of parishes whose boundaries do not always coincide. These are

- a) Ecclesiastical parishes centred on an Anglican church with a parochial church council, and
- b) Civil parishes, which are part of local administration and the subject of this article.

A civil parish is an independent local democratic unit for villages, smaller towns and suburbs of urban areas. Each parish has a Parish (or Town) Meeting, and where the electorate exceeds 200, has a Parish or Town Council. Parish and Town Councils are the first tier of local government and deliver services at a community level. In our district there is a three-tiered structure of local government - Parish Council ↔ Dover District Council ↔ Kent County Council. Parish councils are statutory bodies with a number of formal powers. Members are elected for a term of four years and are unpaid. The council is funded principally by an annual precept. Income and expenditure for the next financial year is calculated in the form of estimates. The net amount (the precept) is added to the council tax, collected by the district council and paid to the parish council. A parish council can apply for other funding such as grant and funding awards, but it cannot receive funds direct from central government. Parish councils have the power to improve the quality of community life by spending sums of money on things which, in their opinion, are in the interests of the parish or its inhabitants. The council accounts are audited every year by an internal auditor and by the Audit Commission.

History:

Parish councils were constituted by the Local Government Act 1894, and themselves constituted a major break with very old-established tradition, a large part of the powers and duties allocated to them having for centuries before been exercised by the annual Vestry Meeting and the Churchwardens. The first meeting of Sibertswold Parish Council took place in our village school on 13th December 1894, The Parish Council of Sibertswold continued up to 1963. On 1st April of that year, the hitherto separate parishes of Sibertswold and Coldred were combined as Shepherdswell with Coldred with nine councillors for Shepherdswell Ward and three councillors for Coldred Ward. The last election in this parish was in 2006. Vacancies occurring between elections are filled by a by-election (if requested by the electorate) or by co-option. Each year the councillors choose a chairman and vice-chairman from amongst their number. A clerk is appointed by the council to be the Proper Officer and the Responsible Finance Officer.

Who controls the Parish Council?

You do! You elect its members every four years and you are invited to attend the Annual Parish Meeting on 15th April at 8:00pm in the Village Hall and say what you think. Members of the public are also welcome to attend the monthly council meetings, and participate in the public session. The public session generally includes 'Partners and Communities Together' (PACT) where you can meet the neighbourhood policing team and have a say on how our neighbourhood is policed. Our district councillor and county councillors may also attend monthly meetings of the parish council and are available for comments and may provide reports of their work. The parish council publishes its agendas and minutes on the parish notice boards (i.e. Shepherdswell Post Office and Coldred bus shelter) and on its web site.

Parish Plan: *'If you do not know where you are going, how will you know when you've arrived?'*

Shepherdswell with Coldred Parish Council always welcomes further information regarding local needs and ambitions. Such information could be provided by a Parish Plan for Shepherdswell and Coldred. The Parish Plan is produced with the support of the parish council but would be primarily put together by an independent group of parishioners using grant funding and voluntary work. A Parish Plan sets out how community action can help prioritise resources and influence policies, decisions and the actions of others. Parish Plans involve the whole community and are based on information provided by community surveys (questionnaires) and research. Parish Plans lay out a shared vision over the next 10 years or so and contain evidence based action plans for achieving this vision. It is up to the community to define the issues to be tackled by their Plan. **Our local Rural Community Council 'Action with Communities in Rural Kent' (ACRK) is making a presentation regarding Parish Plans at our Annual Parish Meeting on 15th April at 8:00pm in the Village Hall. All parishioners are invited.** Further information may be obtained from <http://www.ruralkent.org.uk> or from the Parish Clerk parish.clerk@hotmail.co.uk