

# Today's Youth - Tomorrow's Leaders

**A young person's guide to getting involved in your Parish or Town Council**

## Why get involved?

By Natasha Glendening – Member of Youth Parliament (MYP)

We're the young people of today but we are also, very importantly, the leaders of tomorrow. As soon as we turn 18 we're entitled to vote in elections, on a national and local scale and we have the power to influence policy change and change the lives of everybody living in our county. It's a daunting task, but preparation for this can begin now. As young people, we have a similar amount of influence on policy change in our local communities as an entitled voter - it's just that not everybody is aware of the opportunities available to them.

Getting involved in local representative work as a young person can be an amazing experience. You get to learn a whole range of skills such as public speaking, organisation and a deeper knowledge of our political system, among others. Additionally you also get to foster relationships with people in your local community you may have never have ever communicated with. It can be fun and is most definitely a remarkable chance to share your views on local issues with people that can really change things.

**You get to be the change that you want to see in the world!**

What you will get out of getting involved:

- Volunteering looks good on your CV and can help you get a job or a place at university
- It will help to create a better impression of young people and will challenge some of the unfair stereotypes that adults sometimes hold about us
- You get to have your say about things that you want to see happening in your local area – and to change things that you don't like
- Getting involved can help to improve your skills, knowledge and self esteem
- You can take action to make a real difference in your local community

## How can you get started?

Talk to your parents and your teachers about your local area and how decisions that affect you, your family, and your friends are made.

Decide what interests you and why/how you want to talk about it – there are lots of ways you can do this. For example, you might want to go to a meeting, make a film, or write an article for your local paper.

Contact your local councillor – your parents might know who this is or you can find details on your



local council website. Ask about what opportunities there are for you to get involved and have your say.

Don't be put off – if there aren't opportunities now, find out when there will be.

## How to lobby your Local Councillor

### Remember - they work for you!

Your local councillors were elected to represent you! It is their job to represent and respond to the concerns of their constituents - that is YOU and the people who live in the local area. But to do this effectively, they need to hear from you.

### Get in touch

Writing a personal letter is a good way to highlight an issue of concern with your local councillor. If you want something to change, write to the person with the power to do something about it. Details of how to find your local councillors and their responsibilities can be found at [www.dorsetforyou.com/384525](http://www.dorsetforyou.com/384525) or by visiting [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

Tips for writing to your councillor

- Tell them why this change affects you and those around you. Your story matters to them more than facts and figures from experts
- Ask them to explain what they plan to do about the issue or ask them to do something specific
- Ask them for a reply – make sure you include your full name and address
- If you are not happy with their answer, write back and keep going

- If they don't answer your questions, write to them again
- Be confident in putting across your case and argument

## Meet your local councillor

When you meet your local councillor make sure you clearly set out who you are, identifying yourself as a local resident.

Try to get the following points across in a clear, polite manner:

- The background to the issue - how and why it impacts on you – use examples if you can as this helps your local councillor to consider the issue in human terms
- How the issue affects your local community – again give examples
- If possible, offer an alternative solution
- Be specific – what would you like your local councillor to do to help?
- Make sure you ask them to keep you updated

## How else could you get involved?

There are many ways you could get involved and below are a few ideas to get you started...

### Set up a youth forum or youth council

Speak to your local councillor, youth worker or teacher and ask them for help to set up a youth forum. Your town or parish youth council could be





run regularly alongside normal council meetings and you might be given various powers – such as influence or responsibility for deciding how council money is spent on different things such as parks.

Your youth forum or council would normally be set up to have a formal structure with a constitution and young people taking on clear roles as part of the group. With a formal structure your group would also be able to apply for external grants to spend on projects such as events and play equipment.

### **Ask your council if young people can attend their meetings as Youth Advisors**

Young people are able to attend regular council meetings or could be part of smaller committees to advise on particular areas of the councils work.

### **Ask to shadow your local councillor**

You could join together with a small group of friends and ask your local councillor if you can find out more about what they do by joining them during some of their duties as a councillor or by organising a visit for you, for instance to the local village hall, to find out more about how their work on the council impacts on your life.

### **Produce a report on your local area/ start a campaign**

You could get together with some friends and write a report about your local area perhaps highlighting some of the things you like and some of the things you would like to see changed. Perhaps you could make a short film. This could be given to your local

council to help them make decisions.

If there is an issue which really concerns you then you could start a petition and ask other people to sign it. You could present that to your local council.

### **Local projects**

Is there something you would really like to see happening in your area? Perhaps you would like to get more play equipment or a youth shelter. If you form a group you could start fundraising and ask the council to support you too.

## **What does my parish/town actually do?**

### **What is the parish or town Council?**

The parish, town or community council is sometimes known as the local council. Local councils work throughout the UK to provide services at a local level and work closely with communities to help improve their well-being.

Local councillors are elected for four years at a time in the same way as for other councils such as county councils or district councils.

By-elections may be held to fill vacancies occurring between elections. Each year the councillors choose a chairman from amongst their number. In town councils he/she is usually called town mayor.





## What powers have parish councils to do things for their areas?

Parish councils have more formal powers to do things than is often realised. Many provide and look after community facilities such as play areas, skate parks, playing fields, village greens, allotments and even swimming pools as well as halls and meeting places. They have the power to maintain rights of way (footpaths, bridleways, cycle paths and the like) and provide things like bus shelters, litter bins and public seats. They can undertake or assist with village surveys. They also support community safety schemes, community transport initiatives, tourism, festivals and celebrations and youth projects. Some councils have money that they can award to local community groups/projects to run activities or projects that benefit the local community.

## How do they do it?

The parish council can do these things by actually providing them itself or by helping someone else financially (such as a community group, volunteer or a charity) to do it for them. Remember also that parish councillors are volunteers themselves!

## What else is important?

Parish councils have now been devolved more responsibilities and become more important. Also their role has increased as district and county councils have had to reduce services and staff because of the economic downturn. At the same time parish and town councils have been given the opportunity by the recent Localism Act to take on much stronger and wider powers.

The parish councillors know the village or town and can work with the community to spend the communities money on things that the community want. The parish or town council will also represent village or town views to other authorities like

the district council, the county council, health authorities and to government departments. They are entitled to be consulted on planning applications and are often asked to give their opinion on things like schools and roads.

## How can I find out more about my local council?

Many have a website where they publicise local events, venues and information on local clubs and societies as well as information on the councillors and what has occurred at parish council meetings.

Local councils also allow the public to attend council meetings as observers and are obliged to organise at least one local residents meeting each year which all local electors may attend to raise issues of local concern.

***“You get the power to cross a box and cast your ballot when you’re 18. However, just because you’re younger it doesn’t mean that you don’t have a voice or an opinion on an issue.***

***“Your voice matters regardless of your age and can be heard in your community if you just shout loud enough. By getting involved in a youth council or a shadowing project or advising your local council you can raise your voice and represent young people’s views. Young people can often feel divided from their local decision makers but truthfully it really isn’t that difficult to forge a relationship with them as they are only people too, and, when you start to speak up, you can help make sure young people’s views are taken account of. You may just be today’s youth, but but let it never be forgotten that you are also tomorrow’s leaders”. Natasha Glendening, (Member of Youth Parliament)***

