

Your Parish Council – what it can do for you... and what it can't.

The Parish Council is the first level of Local Government administration, it has limited abilities to tax and spend via the precept and there is often much misconception of its powers and responsibilities. Such misunderstanding of the role of the Parish Council (it is a corporate body, no Councillors can act individually) has grown over many years and, in today's climate of blame and absolved responsibilities by higher authorities, it has become important that residents are fully aware of what your Parish Council can do and, perhaps more importantly, what it cannot do, on your behalf.

What a Parish Council cannot do:

- Change speed limits
- Paint yellow lines
- Put in traffic calming measures or road signs
- Police inconsiderate/dangerous parking
- Fill potholes and clear drains
- Decide if a planning application is granted
- Stop housing development
- Decide where houses will be built
- Stop a resident selling their land for development
- Prevent alterations to buildings
- Pre-determine a planning consultation before it has been discussed
- Maintain Rights of Way or anything on land it doesn't own

Some of this "cannot do" list can be addressed by the Parish Council requesting improvements via established mechanisms to those higher authorities who do have the responsibility, and the funding. There is always a lengthy process to follow, forms to fill in, consultations to be held and agreement to be passed before these can be submitted. So, a Highways Improvement Plan with data and evidence regarding speeding, safety and parking problems can be submitted for consideration to the County Council. Similarly, a Neighbourhood Development Plan, if approved by residents and adopted by the Borough Council, can list preferred strategies and policies affecting development within the Parish. In both these cases Brenchley and Matfield Parish Council are working tirelessly to establish projects with the best chance of approval, so as to protect the parish from excessive development and traffic nuisance.

In terms of planning, whilst it is not a requirement of a Parish Council to comment on all planning applications, Brenchley and Matfield Parish Council do so after considerable scrutiny – there were 64 of these in 2018 alone. The Parish Council is a statutory consultee which means that the Borough Council must consider its views when deciding whether to grant planning permission. It should be borne in mind however that comments submitted by the Parish Council can be overruled, as happened on seven occasions in 2018.

There are many things that a Parish Council can do however, and residents may be surprised at how many of the "small" things that you might take for granted are achieved by the Parish Council, as well as the statutory requirements, growing all the time.

What a Parish Council can do:

- Repair assets such as streetlights, bus shelters, benches and village signs
- Mow land and trim hedges on its land
- Maintain the pond, Green and parking
- Maintain tree health
- Maintain the War Memorials
- Manage Matfield Pavilion

- Provide public conveniences
- Provide the Allotment site
- Manage the Playground and Recreation Field
- Provide an amenity vehicle and litter bin collection
- Provide green spaces such as Cinderhill, Jack Verrall Memorial Garden and Porters Wood
- Communicate information via Social Media and provide a community Website

There is a complete list of items that the Parish Council has power to spend precept money on (“Powers to Spend”), it can be found in the Parish Council section of the new community website <http://www.brenchleyandmatfield.co.uk/parish-council/documents-and-policies/>

On the website you will also find a “Report a Fault” page, this will help you to direct your complaints to the right agency, a joint effort will achieve greater things:
<http://www.brenchleyandmatfield.co.uk/parish-council/report-a-fault/>

In the coming year there will be a drive for recruitment of new Parish Councillors, elections for this being in May 2020, with information published on the role and what it entails. There are many areas where Councillors may concentrate their expertise in their work for the Parish Council including Greenways, Finance, Legal, Communications and Planning.

Brenchley and Matfield Parish Council are the only Parish Council in the Tunbridge Wells Borough that meet regularly and formally with your MP, Greg Clark. The Council do not hold back when asking Greg for support on the issues that matter to residents.

If you have any queries on this article please contact me at clerk@brenchleypc.org.uk and I will be happy to elaborate.

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Clerk and RFO to Brenchley and Matfield Parish Council