

A Guide to Thornham Parish Council

This document is intended primarily to assist people who are considering standing for the role of a parish councillor in Thornham or who have just taken up that role. It is not meant to be a comprehensive guide rather just a basic outline of organisation and practice and a signpost to wider reading and further information.

The Role of a Parish Council

The role of a parish council is to represent the interests of the whole community. It is a part of local government supporting the democratic process. Local councils provide a focus for the community to identify concerns and projects, and endeavour to solve them locally for themselves.

Parish Councils are responsible for managing their own budgets. They are financed through the precept, an amount of money calculated as an estimate for the coming financial year and collected as part of your Council Tax. This money is used to improve facilities and services for local people.

The parish council is a corporate body, it makes its decisions in public meetings. No one councillor, whatever their position or experience, can make a decision on behalf of the council nor should attempt to do so. TPC has the facility to make decisions outside of meetings via electronic communication and has adopted a protocol to manage this. Decisions made by this means are formally reported and noted at the next parish council meeting. Virtual meetings have been enabled to allow councils to function

Organisation and Structure

Parish Council elections are held on a four- year cycle. The next full election will be in May 2023. There are seven councillors for Thornham and the parish is one ward only. All councillors are volunteers and there is no payment for the work undertaken. Council are assisted by a Clerk. At present the Clerk works for 5 hours per week for TPC, although overtime is both permissible and sometimes necessary. The Clerk is also known in some documents as the 'Proper Officer'. In Thornham, as in many smaller councils, the Clerk also acts as the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO).

Every year at the Annual Parish Council meeting councillors elect a Chair, a Vice Chair and three members of a Finance and Staffing Committee. Council meetings are held monthly, with the exception of August, usually on the second Wednesday of the month. There are occasions when an extra-ordinary meeting is called to discuss an urgent and important issue. Meetings are generally held in public, though in particular circumstances press and public can be excluded. The Borough and County Councillors for our area are invited to attend meetings and do so regularly. You will receive a summons to attend the meeting with the agenda plus associated paperwork. Post the meeting you will receive draft minutes.

Being a parish councillor is hard work and no one standing for council should be under any illusions on this. The workload is much greater than attending one meeting per month for possibly two hours. Thornham councillors all have agreed additional roles they fulfil for council. There is a substantial volume of reading and communication. It is practically impossible to be an effective councillor without access to e-mail, the internet and electronic communication. This is even more true at the time of writing due to the Covid 19 crisis and the consequent changes in procedure.

Working Matters

The powers and duties of councils are clearly explained in a useful guide 'The Good Councillors Guide 2019', a copy of this is provided by the Clerk to new councillors and is essential reading and useful reference material.

The work and practice of a council is regulated by a number of key documents, it helps to become familiar with these. Some of their content is statutory ie it is the law of the land and must be followed, other parts are considered 'good practice' and are recommended actions. Council can tailor some parts of these documents to suit local needs. Standing Orders regulate how the council operates in general terms; Financial Regulations obviously control all of a council's financial processes. Additionally, councillors are required to sign and obey a Code of Conduct and Declaration of Interests. There are also a number of council policies on a range of issues which councillors should recognise.

This is a substantial volume of reading and it takes time to understand but help is at hand. The Clerk and your fellow councillors will explain, answer questions and guide you through your induction. There are very helpful courses for new (and experienced councillors) run by support bodies eg Norfolk Parish Training and Support (NPTS) and Norfolk Association of Local Councils (NALC). There is also a wide range of courses and conferences on very specific issues and some half-yearly updates on the continual changes impacting on PC's. These are also opportunities to share practice with fellow councillors from across the county. The Clerk keeps councillors informed of these. All councillors partake in training, this is seen as essential. There is a budget to pay for this from council funds. Once a member of council you will be given a formal e-mail address and your council correspondence will come via this e-mail. You are also likely to find that parishioners will communicate with you on the street, by phone call, e-mail or sometimes a traditional letter.

TPC recognises the importance of working with other groups and organisations within and outside of Thornham. There has been a change in culture from central government since 2011 which now encourages co-operation and contact. Thus, TPC engages with architects, developers, village organisations such as PCC, TUC and TVHPF. Looking outside we have worked with Gayton and Dersingham PC's; we share in the Saxon Shore Parish Forum; we work with and make use of NPTS, NALC, KLWNBC, NCC and of course Boro' and County Councillors. All with the aim of looking after the interests of the parishioners of Thornham.

