

What is a Parish Meeting?

The pattern of local government in England is complex, with the distribution of functions varying according to the local arrangements. Civil parishes do not exist in all areas but, where they are found, they represent the lowest tier of local government. The majority of parishes with more than 200 electors each elects a Parish Council, a statutory body with limited powers (including modest tax-raising powers).

The Local Government Act, 1972 requires that "for every parish there shall be a parish meeting for the purpose of discussing parish affairs and exercising any functions conferred on such meetings by (legislation)".

A parish meeting is a form of direct democracy (which is uncommon in the UK, where representative democracy is the norm): all local government electors of the parish are entitled to attend. It must assemble annually on some day between 1st March and 1st June, the assembly being chaired by the Chairman of the Parish Council (where such a body exists).

If the parish does not have a separate Parish Council, the first business to be transacted at its annual assembly must be the election of a chairman for the year. The parish meeting must then also assemble on at least one other occasion each year.

The parish meeting may be convened by:

- the chairman of the parish council, or
- any two parish councillors for the parish, or
- where there is no Parish Council, the chairman of the parish meeting or any person representing the parish on the District Council, or
- any six local government electors for the parish.

In a parish not having a separate Parish Council, the chairman of the parish meeting and the "proper officer" of the District Council together constitute a body corporate known as "the Parish Trustees", which must act in accordance with any directions given by the parish meeting. In such circumstances, the parish meeting effectively takes on the role of a Parish Council, albeit with more limited powers, although it may seek the grant of additional powers by the District Council. **Little Wolford Parish Meeting** falls into this category.

What are the Powers of a Parish Meeting?

In a parish without a separate Parish Council, the Parish Meeting has important representative powers that would otherwise fall to the Parish Council, including the right to be notified by the by the District or County Council of:

- all planning applications in its area
- intention to provide a burial ground in the parish
- proposals to carry out sewerage works
- footpath and bridleway (more generally, 'rights of way') surveys
- intention to make byelaws in relation to hackney carriages, music and dancing, and street naming

A Parish Council has the power to precept (tax) its residents, normally via the Council Tax levied by the corresponding District Council; however, it may do so only for expenditure relating to specific functions, powers and rights which have been conferred on it by legislation, notably the Local Government Act of 1972. A Parish Council may provide certain facilities and services itself, or it can contribute towards their provision by others. These can include:

- allotments
- support and encouragement of arts and crafts
- provision of a village hall
- recreation grounds, parks, children's play areas, playing fields and swimming baths
- cemeteries and crematoria
- maintenance of closed churchyards
- cleaning and drainage of ponds etc.
- control of litter
- public conveniences
- creation and maintenance of footpaths and bridleways
- provision of cycle and motorcycle parking
- acquisition and maintenance of rights of way
- public clocks
- war memorials
- encouragement of tourism

In a parish without a separate Parish Council, the Parish Meeting may precept its residents for some, but not all, of these purposes. Unlike a Parish Council, a Parish Meeting does not have the power to employ staff. However, Section 109 of the Local Government Act 1972 allows a Parish Meeting to request the appropriate District Council to grant it some or all of the powers of a Parish Council, including that to employ staff. Unlike a Parish Council, however, a Parish Meeting is unable to claim a refund of VAT.

L W	Little Wolford
P M	Parish Meeting

In the past, **Little Wolford Parish Meeting** had neither sought additional powers of a Parish Council nor raised a parish precept, and consequently had enjoyed only very limited powers and no income to provide any facilities or services. However, a limited range of additional powers was sought from, and granted by, Stratford-on-Avon District Council during 2012/13, and a modest precept was introduced with effect from 2013/14; this is collected on behalf of the Parish Meeting, as a component of Council Tax, by Stratford-on-Avon District Council.

The Role of a Parish Meeting in Local Planning

The Parish Meeting has a right to be informed by the County and District Councils of any planning application affecting the Parish. Although the Parish Meeting has no statutory role in the decision-making process, the planning authorities may accord more weight to the Parish Meeting's collective view than to individual comments.

*David Farman
Past Chairman, Little Wolford Parish Meeting*