

IS A VILLAGE OR PARISH COUNCIL NECESSARY FOR BOOKHAM? WHAT RESIDENTS NEED TO CONSIDER

There has been recent discussion in the village recently on the merits or otherwise of the implementation of a Village or Parish Council. As part of this discussion the BRA think it is important for Bookham residents to be aware of the legally binding implications this brings and what the differences are between a voluntary organisation such as the BRA and a statutory organisation such as a Parish Council.

The 4th tier, or even 5th tier (if the EU is included) of public administration can take many forms, the most common being Residents Associations and Parish Councils (also known as Village Councils). In Mole Valley we have an even spread of both with Parish Councils in the rural areas and Residents Associations in the more urban areas. Many of these Residents Associations have been in existence for well over fifty years and accepted as part of the fabric of the community.

This is true of Surrey overall. Epsom and Ewell are administered by twelve independent Residents Associations who then put forward Councillors to Epsom and Ewell District Council. As with Leatherhead, Fetcham, Ashted and Bookham all these are voluntary organisations with an optional membership.

With a Parish Council, because of its ability to raise a local mandatory tax, the rules governing its conduct are complex and many, and as such incur administration charges, staff and premises' costs. This is not the case for a Residents Association and is one of the essential differences between the two.

In an area with a Parish Council in place each household has to pay a precept (local Tax). Parish Council precepts are generally much higher than RA's subscriptions. RA subscriptions measured in sums of less than 6p per week. In Bookham the subscription currently equates to 4p per week per household.

Within Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) and Surrey County Council (SCC) both types of bodies are treated equally and only at national level is there any bias towards Parish Councils. An example of this equal treatment is the SCC funded Lengthsman Scheme where both RAs and Parish Councils can apply for money for local "off highway" work. Last year Bookham RA applied for and was awarded £5,000 to maintain and clear thirty Town Paths. Only one Parish Council in Mole Valley applied. This funding of the BRA by SCC under the Lengthsman Scheme will be repeated this year.

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Another example is in the heavy rains during the winter of 2013 when Bookham RA raised £8,000 in six hours and implemented with this money a relief path in five days when the Lower Road route to the Howard of Effingham School was badly flooded and needed immediate resolution to maintain access to the school.

To those who suggest Bookham Parish Council would challenge the ambitions of the Village it is worth recalling that over the past eight years Bookham has raised more than £1,000,000 to reinvigorate and rebuild many of its community facilities. Examples being Little Bookham Village Hall; the new Scout Centre; SPACE on the Dorking Road and the Barn Hall. All have had considerable investments. The Youth Centre was taken over for its administration purposes by the Village from SCC and has invested to reinvigorate its internal features. Additionally the Baptist Church; St Nicolas Church; All Saints in Little Bookham and the Eastwick Road Church have all invested in new facilities and improvements. *This is not a track record of an unambitious community!*

Suggesting that a Parish Council should be considered to make up current perceived shortfalls in local SCC or MVDC facilities with a new organisation that will be with us forever is not proven particularly given the long history of Residents Associations.

It is worth recalling that the majority of local services associated with Councils are those enacted by MVDC (Street cleaning, waste management, recreational facilities, planning etc.) while SCC carry out the most difficult and expensive tasks such as Highways, Education and Adult Social Care all of which absorb many hundreds of millions of pounds.

The Bookhams Residents' Association are fully aware of the need for accountability and to this end it is in the process of changing its legal status, like many voluntary organisations, to that of a Company Limited by Guarantee which will allow it to continue with its existing services to the Bookham community in a manner recognised by Government.

In considering the case for a Parish Council these points need to be taken in to account when voting in any future referendum.

You can voice your opinion on the BRA Streetlife page:

www.streetlife.com/page/bookhams-residents-association/

Or e-mail:

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We will also be posting regular updates on our web site: www.bookhamresidents.org.uk

On behalf of the Bookham Residents Association Committee

May 2015