

Local Governance

The Parish Council has nine members, elected every four years - as at 30 November 2007 there were only seven in post. In the May elections of that year members were returned unopposed.

While the responsibilities and budget of the Parish Council are very limited it nevertheless plays a vital role in liaising with the Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council over the provision of the services for which they are responsible in Thurnham, especially over such issues as planning, transport and police. The Parish Council also plays an important role in undertaking work to improve the appearance of the parish such as tree planting, raising the profile of Thurnham locally, an area in which the last Council was especially active, and in forming the first line of contact with local government on issues of key concern to the community.

Of those responding to the questionnaire only 15% had ever attended a meeting of the Council. This is a not uncommon problem for parish councils. However, when issues of key concern to people, such as the current proposals by Kent International Gateway, large numbers turn up to voice their concerns and to press members to take action.

Of those who attend meetings 66% considered that the Council's discussions did reflect local concerns. Only 16% of respondents said that there were issues they would have liked to raise with the Parish Council but did not do so because they were unsure how to do this or who to contact.

Some people are put off attending by the length of meetings, the apparently cumbersome bureaucracy and procedures that Parish Councils have to observe, and the inevitably limited opportunity for a dialogue to take place between members and the public, although the changes made by the current Chairman to allow members of the public to raise matters of concern at the start of meetings rather than the end are much appreciated.

Inevitably the format and pressure of business at Parish Council meetings makes it difficult for members and the public to engage in a lengthy exchange of views. Accordingly, we recommend two measures which we



believe would help to forge a closer relationship between councillors and their electorate which will be especially important as both gear up to fight the proposals for the road and rail interchange.

We recommend that:

- **At least once a year the Council should hold an open day at the Marriott Tudor Park Hotel to provide a forum at which the Council can explain its work, policies and initiatives to electors and to provide an opportunity for the public to raise issues of concern to them.**

- **Once a year during the summer months the Council should provide an open surgery for residents at the ransom strip at Bearsted Park where the bulk of the population of the parish live.**

Both of these initiatives would provide valuable opportunities to forge closer links between electors and elected and provide for a more open democracy.

Dissemination of Parish Council information

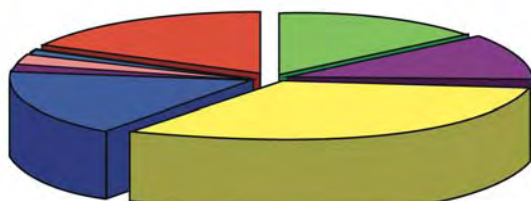
Six per cent of those who responded thought the Parish Council publicized its activities and decisions very well, and 44% reasonably well. Twenty per cent thought the Council did poorly in this respect and 31% did not know.

"Improve feeling of identification with the community by more frequent information about local issues allowing time for a response, thereby empowering the community."

Thurnham resident

As the above diagram opposite shows, residents obtain information about the parish from a variety of different sources. Eighteen per cent of those who responded to the questionnaire said they obtained information by word of mouth, 17% said they found the Kent Messenger a useful source of material; 14% read material on the notice board and 12% looked to

Sources of information about events in Thurnham



- Notice board (14%)
- Parish Magazine (12%)
- Downs Mail (34%)
- Kent Messenger (17%)
- Post Office (1%)
- Library (3%)
- Parish Council Website (1%)
- Word of Mouth (18%)

the Parish Magazine to keep them updated on events.

Three per cent gained information at the public library, just over 1% from the Post Office and only just under 1% from the parish web site.

Far and away the most important source of

information was the Downs Mail which was read by 34% of people in Thurnham.

None of these figures stand in isolation. No household responding to the questionnaire relied on only one source of information. Many drew their knowledge of what was going on in Thurnham from three or four of the above sources.

We very much welcome the introduction of the Council Newsletter which is delivered to every household in the parish at regular intervals.

We recommend that the Parish Council should:

- Do more to improve and expand the web site and to keep it up to date. At present the site is often far behind the game in terms of informing the public about what is going on. We recognize the difficulties the Council has experienced in this, but with a high proportion of residents connected to the internet and major planning issues confronting the Council both now and in the future, we believe that such investment would pay dividends many times over.

- We also recommend that the Council should do more to improve the appearance of the notice boards in the parish. Material is often scrappily presented and poorly pinned up. A little more time given over to this activity would encourage more people to look at the boards.

