

Don't squash the frogs

"The frogs?" The armed police officer looked bemused. "What do you mean 'don't squash the frogs'?"

The member of the public who had raised the froggy issue was persistent: "Your vehicles have been squelching frogs on the road. Can't you drive smaller vehicles?"

The officer looked momentarily as though he could not make up his mind whether to shoot or placate. Fortunately he chose the latter and apologised on behalf of the Ministry of Defence police for crushing the village frogs, but said that sadly they did not have any smaller vehicles.

Like frogs parish councils are strange creatures. I don't of course mean that parish councillors are strange creatures – at least not the ones I share a table with every month. Despite their name (and the episodes of *The Vicar of Dibley*) parish councils have nothing to do with the church. Quite the reverse. They were created in 1895 specifically to take authority for running village matters away from the church.

Parish councils are the lowest rung on the ladder of local government. There are about 10,000 of them up and down the country – almost as many as there are firms of solicitors. If the fears about our profession are realised when alternative business structures come on stream, the number of solicitors' firms will fall dramatically but parish councils will go on for ever. Indeed they are on the increase. There are 200 more local councils than there were ten years ago, and the National Association of Local Councils encourages the creation of more – especially in urban areas with its 'power to the people' campaign.

For some reason, parish councils are often home to inflated egos. There is one parish council in Norfolk where the chair of the council sits on a raised dais and wears a chain of office (at our council meetings we roll up in jeans and the chair is in shirt sleeves).

I spent several years being the clerk to a village parish council at a salary of £100 a year which worked out at about 25 pence an hour for my efforts. During that time I saw off two chairmen, the first of whom famously told me "I am the chairman of the parish council, and what I say here goes." I resigned, he went, and then I unresigned. The second chairman would ring me late at night after becoming well oiled with the best Chateau Lafite and torment me in exactly the same way that our cats torment the mice they catch.

I resigned again and the parish council disposed of him too.

Parish councils also carry long memories. Feuds of this generation originated in the century before last when Mr Crabapple had an interesting tryst with Mrs Barleymow behind several stacks of hay, or Ezekiel failed to buy his round at the Lamb and Whistle when it was his turn. The vitriol makes the disputes between the Montagues and Capulets seem like afternoon tea with the vicar.



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When things get too bad there is a facility in these parts called running to teacher. In official parlance it is a referral to the standards committee. This covers the complete range of local authority transgression from corruption downwards, but our standards committee spends a disproportionate amount of time handling the equivalent of a playground fight – allegations that X failed to treat Y with due respect. Hours then have to be spent on investigation, interviewing witnesses and writing up notes before we solemnly pronounce on the issue that unless X kisses and makes up with Y we will... well it will be a damned bad show if he doesn't.

Local councillors are volunteers and if you push them too hard they will resign, so there is not a lot that can be done to punish transgressors except to encourage them to be nice to each other and let the bygones of the last century be bygone this century.

Button bother

So much for the downside. We live on the Norfolk coast. From time to time the North Sea pays a visit. This happened at my first meeting of the council. The parish councillors were sitting at tables at the top end of the room and members of public were at the back.

There had been a flood the previous week. Several homes had had some flood damage, including the home of one councillor. There was particular unhappiness because the flood sirens (installed after the 1953 floods) had not been sounded at any time and – on top of that – a sophisticated system of phoning, emailing and texting, introduced by the Environment Agency for those who had

registered, did not work either. No warning had come through.

The representatives of the police did not know who presses the button to sound the alarms. Nobody knew. Somebody had heard that they decided to silence the alarms because they did not want to spread panic (countered by someone else who pointed out that only the previous week there had been a full-scale exercise at the gas terminal which was accompanied by a cacophony of alarms which rent the air for an hour or more). Then a voice at the back suggested that the button was pressed in London, but by whom no one knew. So there was then debate about what to do about it, and a resolution was passed to write to our local MP.

It was exactly the sort of thing that parish councils are good for. We can be a focal point for village concerns and enthusiasm. We are currently engaged in projects to facilitate a bmx track, provide a base for a parent and toddler group and even adopt a telephone kiosk.

Even though parish councils have little power and a tiny budget – our entire budget is not much more than the annual minimum wage for one person – we can make quite lot of noise on behalf of our village to try to make sure that the voice of its inhabitants is heard. And that means that we are continuing to press for flood alarms (curiously the county authority seems suddenly more receptive to such things following the Japanese tsunami) and to fight for the rights of our frogs.

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