

Engaging young people at the heart of the community

Georgette McCready discovers how young people are getting involved in local politics in Chippenham



The Chippenham Youth Council took part in the town's Remembrance Day events

When young people don't have a vote, it can be a challenge for them to see how they can make a difference to the town where they live.

Now, enlightened towns such as Chippenham are engaging teenagers and harnessing their energy, ideas and talents by creating youth councils to work alongside the traditionally elected local democracy teams.

Chippenham Youth Council was set up in 2019 with the express intent of working with young people on the issues they care about. The group meets monthly at the Town Hall, with meetings carefully minuted and their decisions recorded and shared with the Town Council.

Over the years the topics tackled include: better cycling routes to Abbeyfield School; protecting the hedgehog population; the placing of CCTV cameras around town; and campaigning to get young people to recycle their vapes.

The group has run stalls at public events to promote their work and raise awareness of a number of issues before feeding their thoughts back to the Town Council and sometimes challenging decisions.

Climate change is, understandably, a big factor in discussions, after all these under 18-year-olds will be inheriting what other generations have created. And while the age range of youth councillors is generally

secondary school age, there is currently a nine-year-old member, showing that age is no barrier to affecting change in a community.

We spoke to Jasmine, the current Chair of Chippenham Youth Council about what her volunteer role has meant to her. Jasmine, who is 14, has been a youth councillor for two years.

How long do young people serve on the council, we asked her?

"There isn't particularly a strict time limit; we recommend about 11 to the age of 18 as that's when young people tend to get more busy with exams and education, but usually young people stay on the Youth Council until they feel they've done what they set out to achieve.

"When joining the Youth Council, I wanted to focus on making as many positive changes to Chippenham as possible and I feel I've accomplished many already, with many more positive things to come."

"This includes making sure young people's voices are properly heard, especially around mental health support and safe spaces for young people. I've also been really interested in helping reduce littering and especially young people using vapes and smoking methods. Since then, I've helped run workshops, made posters and joined talks about how to reduce young people smoking or vaping.

"I've felt that the Town Council genuinely listens to us. Being able to raise issues, contribute to projects and see our ideas taken seriously has been really encouraging. Personally, it's made me feel more confident speaking up and more aware of how local democracy works. It's motivating to know that young people can shape their community, not just watch from the sidelines.

"Being a Youth Councillor has definitely opened my eyes to how important local government is, and I can definitely see myself doing something in politics when I'm older. I'm also more interested now in careers that involve leadership, community work or even politics. It's shown me that politics isn't only what you see nationally, it's about people, places and decisions that affect daily life.

"I would 100% recommend this role to other young people. It's a chance to learn skills you wouldn't get anywhere else, like public speaking, teamwork and understanding how decisions are made. It's full of such incredible experiences like meeting important people, attending important town events and just contributing to the town.

"What's more, being part of the Youth Council has boosted my confidence, teamwork, self-belief and social skills." ■

Applications to join Chippenham Youth Council are open to under 18s all the year round. You can find out more about what the council does by reading its minutes and following on Instagram and Facebook. Email: youthcouncil@chippenham.gov.uk.