

We all expect public services to be designed and delivered in ways that meet our needs and expectations. Quite right too – after all, we are paying for them!

But often the public bodies that provide those services can seem very remote and beyond our influence. Even local Councils, which are the closest part of the public sector, can appear to be a bit of a closed book. For many people, the election ballot box is the only say they have and that only comes round every few years.

We have been working hard in the Borough Council to find ways of getting closer to the community we serve so that we understand better what is really important to people and to give them a real say in how things are run. Of course, the ballot box remains the bedrock of our democratic society, but here are just a few other ways in which you can have real influence.

Let's start with the 'Your Borough Your Say' event in the Market Place on Wednesday 28 October. There will be a range of stands, competitions, freebies and activities to show you how to get involved in shaping public services and in volunteering. Please come along and have a look.

If you are a Council house tenant then you could get involved in one of the tenant groups that helps to decide how we manage our housing estates – or you might even want to stand for election to the Community Housing Board as one of the three tenant representatives.

If you live in central and south Yarmouth, Cobholm/Southtown or the Magdalen/Shrublands area, then you could get involved with your Neighbourhood Management Board. This would give you the chance to influence local policing and environmental services like street cleansing and grass cutting. Or you could get involved in activities to promote healthy living, tackle worklessness and build stronger communities.

How about becoming a member of the Norfolk Citizen's Panel and tell us your thoughts on some of the key issues that shape our policies and services. Three times a year you will be sent a questionnaire to complete. It's quite straight forward and we really do take the survey findings seriously.

For those of you that live outside the urban areas of Yarmouth and Gorleston, you could get involved with your Parish Council. Its meetings are held in public and the agenda will be about things that directly affect the area you live in, such as planning applications. You might even decide to stand for election as a Parish Councillor.

Borough Council meetings are nearly all held in public. While you can read about the high profile stuff in the Mercury, you might want to try seeing it for yourself once in a while. The agendas are all on our website (www.great-yarmouth.gov.uk) along with a wealth of information about the Council and its services. In fact, you might want to spend a while just surfing our website – it will give you a pretty good feel for who we are and what we do.

Lastly, let's not forget the poor old ballot box. Turn-out at local elections has declined in recent years and I often hear people saying 'what's the point – they're all the same!' As someone who has worked for elected Councillors for most of his working life, I can tell you that while they are almost invariably sincere and well meaning, they are definitely not all the same. Your vote does make a difference – please use it!