



# Commission for Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

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Guidance note:

Clustering by parish  
and town councils

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This guidance note was written for the Commission for Rural Communities and National Association of Local Councils by Brian Wilson Associates, with David Atkinson Consulting and Ellie Stoneley.

The authors would like to thank Jane Strange, the project manager at the Commission for Rural Communities, and Justin Griggs and Chris Borg at the National Association of Local Councils, for their helpful steers and advice. Sincere thanks also go to the people in County Associations of Local Councils and in principal authorities who gave their time and knowledge, especially Dave Francis at Northumberland Association of Local Councils, Susi Goncu and Kirsten Francis at Northumberland Council, Jackie Weaver at Cheshire Association of Local Councils and Ken Ivett at Cheshire West and Chester Council.

April 2009

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## Introduction

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### What is this guidance for?

This guidance primarily focuses on how to develop clustering arrangements as a means of securing effective engagement with the new unitary authorities that have resulted from local government reorganisation.

The guidance contained will be highly relevant in areas where new unitary principal authorities are still at the planning or consultation stage and it will be of interest in all areas where clustering arrangements are developing.

There is a wide range of clustering approaches. Outlining a single model or producing a “how to” guide would not therefore be realistic. Rather, this guidance sets out some broad principles that apply to the majority of the approaches. These are further illustrated by clustering examples outlined in annex 3.

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### Who is the guidance for?

The principal audiences for this guidance are County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) who are advising, supporting and guiding parish and town councils in the development of clustering approaches together with the parish and town councils (P&TCs) who are actively involved in setting up or planning clustering and collaborative working. The guidance should also prove to be a reference and awareness raising tool for principal local authorities.

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### Why now?

P&TC clustering is not a new topic. The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) produced two influential reports in 2006, one looking at the policy implications of clustering<sup>1</sup>, and one looking at the practical issues of clustering and partnership working<sup>2</sup>. Since then, the impetus behind Local Area Agreements as a means of delivering services by principal authorities, as well as engaging local people in designing services and in active citizenship, has inspired a new wave of clustering initiatives.

The need for guidance on clustering was also identified in recent research for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)<sup>3</sup>. This research found that clustering could be used as a mechanism by P&TCs to help develop better engagement with the nine new unitary authorities which replaced two-tier governance in seven counties in 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Local Government Information Unit (2006): *Parish and Town Council Clustering* [www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Local Government Information Unit (2006): *Joining Forces – How Parish and Town Councils Can Do More in Partnership* [www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk)

<sup>3</sup> CRC (2009): *Securing effective engagement for parish and town councils* [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

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## Background and context

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### What is clustering?

The dictionary definition of clustering is:

*“a group of similar things positioned or occurring closely together”.*

The clustering we see, in the context of P&TCs' work, has not been defined precisely. It has been widely used to describe partnership, joint working, co-operation and local forum development. The term in this document is taken to mean the many ways P&TCs can increase their effectiveness and meet their objectives through collaborative, joint working and partnership arrangements.

A cluster of P&TCs does not mean that the individual P&TCs which form the cluster disappear, although that can sometimes ultimately be so (if the parish boundaries are re-defined).

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### Why does it matter?

Clustering has been a feature of P&TC working for some time. Perhaps its most significant relevance is in its potential for enhancing their capacity. By achieving this, many other things become possible. The LGIU reports considered that through clustering, a range of activities could be enhanced, including:

- collaboration in service delivery and resource sharing;
- banding together to lobby a principal authority or other agency; and
- networking through, for example, attending CALC training seminars.

To this list, we can also add sharing of experience and knowledge and greater engagement with local people.

A key finding of the LGIU work was that surprisingly few P&TCs engaged in any form of clustering or collaboration. The report sought to address the barriers to clustering approaches in an effort to help increase the number of successful clusters.

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### What is happening now?

Recent national policy development is providing new opportunities for P&TCs to engage with both local communities and other tiers of government. The two main community-focused policy objectives of recent years can be summarised as encouraging active and empowered communities, on the one hand, and passing responsibility for service delivery down to more local levels, on the other.

P&TCs are well positioned to play an important role in these aspirations. The Local Government Act 2000 enshrines a community leadership role for principal authorities in law; this has recently been extended to P&TCs, giving them the power to promote the well-being of their area. This responsibility also comes with a statutory duty to both involve representatives of local people and co-operate with partner organisations.

From the principal authority perspective, there is a duty on them to co-operate with partner organisations, to develop services and to inform, consult and involve local people in the work that councils undertake.

These processes are generating a renewed interest in P&TCs clustering or collaboration, so they can engage more effectively with principal authority key delivery and decision making structures. Such structures are more often than not linked to Local Strategic Partnerships.

The emergence of new unitary authorities in 2009 in seven counties places a sharper focus on clustering as a means of more effective engagement for P&TCs. The Carnegie Commission's Rural Action Research Programme has embarked upon research to explore the potential of individual P&TCs to cluster collaboratively to gain a greater voice with principal authorities. Their research brief says that,

***“Never has this been more critical than when a three tier system of councils is reorganised, with a new unitary authority being formed”.***<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Carnegie Commission Clustering Research due to be published in 2009  
[www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk)

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## Characteristics

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### What motivates clustering?

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In practice there are a wide range of drivers that stimulate clustering, co-operation and collaboration. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify two underlying processes that are motivating a new wave of clustering amongst P&TCs. These can be broadly summarised as:

- bottom up clustering, where P&TCs come together under their own volition to achieve better results for local communities. These can be inspired by, amongst other things service delivery, economies of scale (including sharing of clerks), resources and raising awareness of issues between councils and with an external audience. These aspirations are often the product of parish planning and parish appraisal exercises which can act as a catalyst for clustering;
- top down clustering, where policies and governance structures being established by principal authorities (in particular) encourage P&TCs to work together – often with partners and stakeholders beyond their sector – to engage effectively with those policies and structures. This is most often linked to the Local Strategic Partnerships of principal authorities.

The LGIU reports would seem to confirm this view, stating:

***“In many of the examples of clustering found, but by no means all, partnerships between local councils were initiated by District or County Ward Councillors. On the other hand, Forums like the Northern Fringe and the Atlantic Partnership appear to have sprung up without the assistance of ward councillors”.***

However, it goes on to say that:

***“Further, where principal authority councillors have been involved in parish partnerships, the intervention has not always been helpful”.***

This bottom up/top down distinction is a generalisation and there are shades of grey in between. Many clusters show elements of both and the most proactive clusters develop and change over time in response to local circumstances. Yet the distinction is useful because it describes the context within which clusters are now developing. Significantly, the core objectives of being heard and speaking with a louder voice is a clear link between the two.

Looking at bottom up or community/parish council inspired clustering, the LGIU report emphasised the importance of resource implications and capacity issues as a motivator. The variation in the resources available to P&TCs means that larger town councils are able to generate income from various assets whereas, for the majority of smaller parishes, the precept is the sole source of income and expenditure.

*“Many are able to employ a clerk for a few hours a week, but many do not have offices or access to modern IT equipment.”*

This is a particularly significant capacity constraint for very small local councils,

*“where a population of 2,500 people is indicated as a minimum threshold below which viability as an active Quality Council is jeopardised”.*

In identifying top down or government and principal authority led clustering, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the recently created new unitary principal authorities in a number of English counties. In the new landscape of engagement and participation many of these unitaries are developing local area forums, committees or other participative structures (often linked to their Local Strategic Partnership) with which P&TCs need to find ways to engage. This presents an incentive for P&TCs to cluster together. A significant feature of this approach is that other local stakeholders are usually involved as well. P&TC representatives can act as hosts of the structures and therefore lead them, but there is often also a role for voluntary and community organisations, such as development trusts, Councils for Voluntary Service (CVSs) or their consortia.

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## **What do clusters look like?**

Beyond the common thread of acting as a voice for local communities, clustering arrangements on the ground display a very wide range of characteristics. These include:

- Form: various models exist, including: hub and spoke, where a market town or primary service centre might form the hub of surrounding P&TCs; and groupings of broadly similar sized, often rural parishes where capacity and economies of scale can be gained from sharing some functions, such as the parish clerk. Other models see the emergence of a development trust, where the impetus for grouping can be around regeneration or community and social enterprise;
- Commonality between members: usually the links between the individual parishes are paramount. These can be because of geography and geographic proximity to each other or communities of interest, such as a local secondary school serving several parishes;
- Purpose: this can vary a lot. Objectives for the cluster can cover streamlined administration, policy development, better representation or democratic inclusion, service or programme delivery and many more; and
- Organisation: varying from simple informal arrangements, through sharing of clerks or other resources, to formal structures with joint governing constitutions and codes of conduct.

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## Benefits and challenges

The benefits and challenges are described in terms of the impact of clustering on each of three stakeholders.

### Parish and Town Councils

Benefits for P&TCs commonly include:

- **Capacity** – economies of scale can be derived from sharing key functions. This is particularly important for small, predominantly rural, parishes where sharing clerks can be the difference which makes a council viable;
- **A louder voice on common issues** – either as a geographic community or a community of interest they can lobby for change or influence on issues such as planning, education provision and highways;
- **Addressing area-wide issues** – some issues of local interest impact on more than one parish, such as public transport. Clustering can provide a means of tackling these issues in a co-ordinated way;
- **Better representation and influence** – it is easier to gain a seat at the table with other tiers of government on their committees or groups, including the Local Strategic Partnership;
- **Gaining service delegations** – smaller parishes, in particular, may be able to gain a service delegation from the principal authority as part of a cluster, which they would not have gained alone;
- **Funding leverage** – clustering enables more effective engagement with funded initiatives and projects, such as the former Leader Plus programme and the current Collaboration Benefits programme;
- **Networking and exchanging ideas** – it can lead to mutual learning and support through exchange of information and an understanding that the solution rests in working together; and
- **Training** – clustering can be a vehicle for P&TCs to identify and organise their own training requirements.

The most important challenges are:

- **Fear of loss of identity** – this is identified as an important barrier because it precludes seeking solutions to other difficulties which are practical in nature, such as the additional drain on time. It is most acute among smaller parishes that fear being swallowed up by larger entities;

- **Conflicts of Interest** – difficulties that arise when councils of different sizes and resource bases seek to co-operate. The LGIU state that:

*“Co-operation with a town, from the parish’s perspective, could mean a progressive surrender of control to an administration focused on the town’s needs and somewhat inattentive to the needs of rural villages. There are also conflicts of interest within ostensibly similar rural communities that arise over, e.g. planning issues where parishes try to push development into a neighbouring parish”;*

- **Pressure on councillor and officer time** – running, organising and managing a cluster takes up valuable councillor and officer time which may feel like a diversion from their core business focused on their own parish;
- **Apportioning costs and contributions** - many P&TCs are reluctant to pay for any project or service outside their own boundaries. In addition, to make projects work, there are resource implications, as well as funding requirements of the secretariat function;
- **Geography and capacity** – interlinked factors of geography and capacity are barriers to developing capacity. Small populations can limit P&TC capacity, whilst bigger distances between neighbouring P&TCs in sparsely populated areas can make it logistically harder for them to co-operate and reduce their perception of commonality; and
- **Representation on clusters from wider stakeholders** – some clusters do not want representation or decision-making responsibilities on the cluster from others sectors, such as voluntary or community organisations.

## **CALCs**

Benefits for CALCs can include:

- **A stronger collective voice** is created for P&TC governance within their county;
- **A strengthened network** of P&TC infrastructure develops across the county;
- **An enhanced lobbying and influencing** position builds at regional and national levels, based on lessons and experience emerging from the clustering work.

Challenges can include:

- **Capacity** - being able to provide appropriate and timely advice, guidance and support within existing CALC staffing and budget limitations;

- **Identity** - ensuring that the top-down clustering processes are not wholly owned by the principal authority and there is a strong input and identity on cluster development, objectives and outcomes from the P&TC sector; and
- **Inclusivity** – encouraging the development of clusters and collaborative working between P&TCs that are also representative of the wider community and involve stakeholders from other sectors in a meaningful way.

### **Principal Authorities**

Benefits for principal authorities can include:

- **Economies of scale** – officers and members from the principal authority and representatives from other agencies are able to discuss issues with several parishes at once; and
- **Better engagement** – clustering offers a better chance for principal authorities to engage with communities and empower them at a relatively local scale, through representative and participative groups about the decisions that affect them. Clustered P&TCs may prove better able to help deliver various principal authority policy goals;

Challenges can include:

- **Ensuring inclusivity** – encouraging the development of balanced clusters that draw in stakeholders from across all aspects of the community; and
- **Capacity** – support and guidance is needed from principal authorities to establish clusters.

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## Setting up and managing a cluster

There are a number of factors which P&TCs should think through when considering and developing a clustering or collaborative arrangement.

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### Parish and Town Councils

As identified earlier, clustering and collaborative working arrangements take a wide variety of forms and structures. The points set out here are intended to comprise a set of key principles (rather than a step-by-step guide) to underpin the development of cluster development, collaborative working and other forms of association or federation. They are:

#### Clarity of purpose

The key determinant of a cluster approach is often a result of function over form i.e. meeting defined objectives is the priority and how they are to be achieved dictates what the cluster will look and feel like. Clustering cannot be seen as an end result in itself and will not be appropriate in all circumstances. Being clear, at the outset, about the reasons for clustering is crucial.

#### Adding value

Working collectively and collaboratively needs to demonstrate fundamentally that it adds value. The end result should be demonstrably over and above what individual P&TCs could achieve by themselves.

#### Determining priorities

Establishing the priorities of the cluster will be a key function. Indeed, determining local priorities can often be a reason for councils to cluster in the first place. For instance, research<sup>5</sup> has found that the process of developing a parish plan is empowering in itself and that value is derived from the communities coming together to set out their vision and ways of achieving it.

#### Independence

Clustering is not about formal merging or takeovers. It is important to note that the cluster does not replace the core business of individual P&TCs. This means that P&TCs who belong to a cluster continue to fulfil their individual existing statutory obligations in respect of elections, the precept, decision-taking, code of governance and other responsibilities. Where P&TCs are considering the need to merge these functions, there are a range of legal issues that need to be taken into consideration – see below.

<sup>5</sup> Countryside Agency (2005) Parish Plans: Guidance for parish and town councils

## **Deciding the right model**

No single clustering model can be promoted. By their nature, clusters will need to be responsive to their local circumstances, environment and prevailing conditions in order to meet their objectives. In all cases, an assessment of the benefits and risks and a business plan will be required.

## **Membership**

Membership will be determined by the objectives and aspirations of the cluster. For instance, issues covering more than one parish, such as public transport, will draw a membership from a defined geographic area; councils seeking to share parish clerks will be constrained by capacity issues; forums seeking to engage with principal authority structures will need to consider broader representation from the community, including voluntary and community sector organisations.

## **Leadership**

P&TCs will need to consider the most appropriate means of leading the cluster. The most successful clusters have adopted a leadership model that enhances stability of the grouping, raises its profile and gives it an authoritative voice. The leadership role is not just about ensuring that the business of the cluster is delivered in an efficient and accountable manner; it is often also about championing the cluster itself and its reason for being.

Chairs or leaders of clusters will often also hold an elected position with one of the member P&TCs, though the role should be seen as discrete from the responsibilities of the individual member. The most effective models also see a permanent secretariat or other support function for the leadership and governance role, though clearly there is a resource implication associated with this. Crucially, in even the most informal arrangements, clusters have found that a permanent chair who takes on the role for a specified period has been the most effective arrangement, rather than alternating or sharing the role between each of the members at meetings. The length of the term and conditions governing the appointment should be addressed in the constitution.

## **Constitution and governance**

The level of governance required by a clustering approach will be dependent upon the model adopted. Many forums and clusters established as part of an engagement process with the principal authority's Local Strategic Partnership will require formal constitutions and governance arrangements, which will identify key roles and responsibilities of the partners as well as relationships to other tiers of government. This is particularly important in new unitary principal authority areas. Indeed some principal authorities are producing guidance and templates for the constitution of such clusters.

Even informal clustering arrangements will require a memorandum of understanding and codes of conduct or protocols to ensure that the way things will work is understood and to ensure that any disagreements can be dealt with effectively.

Key issues that a constitution of governance document should include are:

- Purpose and objectives of the cluster – the reasons for coming together;
- Membership – including a geographic description of the area or defining characteristics, if appropriate;
- Representation and voting of members – this will vary dependent upon the purpose and objectives;
- Leadership arrangements;
- Attendance by and role of non-members - including from other tiers of government and the wider community, if they are not full members;
- Meeting arrangements – how often, where, etc;
- Support and/or secretariat arrangements for the cluster;
- Finance – how the cluster will be funded;
- Accountabilities and conduct of members whilst representing the cluster; and
- Future plans to review the constitution and working arrangements.

### **Legal implications**

There is no one single piece of legislation that governs clustering because of the wide variety of forms that exist. However, the development of some formal clustering or collaborative working approaches can mean they are subject to certain statutory processes. Two examples include:

- Grouping orders may be required when a cluster or collaborative working arrangement ultimately results in the formal grouping of the parishes, whereby a new parish is created as the legal entity and the former parishes are subsumed within it (often as wards). At this point, the grouping ceases to be a cluster in the sense used in this guidance. Separate detailed guidance on grouping orders should be sought from CALCs or principal authorities; and
- Where a formal joint committee is formed between P&TCs to undertake a specific set of functions or responsibilities in relation to the management or development of land or property. Joint Committees can also include representatives from principal authorities.

Beneath this there are a range of other statutory conditions that are likely to be required as part of setting up and managing a cluster, such as health and safety, employment law, risk management and financial accountability.

### **Involving local people**

The stimulus for many clusters has come from a shared vision and a desire to make local improvements. Parish planning has particularly been cited as a driver for some collaborative working between councils. Whilst some informal approaches are unlikely to benefit from the direct involvement of local residents (e.g. parish clerk sharing), local people should be encouraged to participate in clustering plans wherever appropriate. Once established there may also be opportunities to promote the decisions, actions and achievements of the cluster widely in order to engage local people in its issues and activities.

### **Budget and resource implications**

Funding to support clustering arrangements such as secretariat and support functions, expenses and project costs, is most likely to be found from within the member P&TCs. In theory, clustering should generate some savings, as resources or activities are shared between P&TCs.

There are some programme resources available to support collaborative working, usually linked with the voluntary and community sector, such as the Collaborative Benefits programme. In some cases principal authorities may agree to contribute to costs, where the cluster is linked directly to engagement with the Local Strategic Partnership. On the other hand, the desire to access funding and resourcing is often a reason for clusters to come together in the first place. Clusters have accessed programmes such as Leader Plus and Vital Villages.

Clusters should also consider the scope for taking on delegations for service delivery and the associated budgets from the principal authority.

### **Best practice and guidance**

Identifying existing local good practice or guidance available from other councils will be invaluable in establishing new arrangements. CALCs should be approached as a potential source of or signposting to local experiences.

### **Review and evaluation**

Clustering arrangements should be monitored and reviewed regularly to assess progress against objectives, to identify achievements and areas for development, and to plan their future activity. Local circumstances and context will move on and clustering arrangements may find that, having taken stock, they need to adapt their current model.

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## The role of CALCs and principal authorities

There are various things which CALCs and principal authorities can do to assist the formation of affective and appropriate clusters.

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### CALCs

#### **Promotion and raising awareness**

CALCs have a clear role in promoting the benefits and advantages of clustering, so that other P&TCs are able to consider setting up their own arrangements.

#### **Collect and promote good practice**

CALCS are in a very good position to be able to build up a bank of good local practice, case studies and experience of the clustering arrangements already in existence across the county. This should be promoted as a valuable resource for other P&TCs considering clustering and collaborative working approaches.

#### **Guidance and support**

CALC expertise around the legal implications of clustering – particularly where grouping orders may be necessary or considered – will be vital in ensuring clusters and collaborative working is developed on a sound basis, with clear responsibilities and decision making structures.

#### **Links with the principal authority**

CALCs are in a key position to help ensure that P&TCs have a full and active role in the wider community empowerment agenda of principal authorities. The P&TC sector will need to play a key part or drive some of the processes e.g. community forums and committees, so they do not become simply top down initiatives.

#### **Promotion of training and quality standards**

The Quality Parish Scheme should be promoted widely, together with other training initiatives, as a means of raising the quality standard of P&TCs and equipping officers and councillors with the skills that will help them establish successful clustering arrangements.

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## **Principal Authorities**

### **Promotion and raising awareness**

Principal authorities also have a role in promoting the benefits and advantages of clustering, so that P&TCs are able to consider setting up their own arrangements.

### **Disseminate good practice**

Local authorities can signpost to CALCs and others, or provide direct information about good practice, case studies and guidance to P&TCs considering clustering and collaborative working approaches.

### **Guidance**

Clear guidance should be made available to CALCs and to P&TCs on aspects of the principal authority's work to engage and empower local communities where clustering and collaborative working can play a part. It may be that principal authorities see clusters as having an enhanced role e.g. if they are more willing to delegate services to clustered P&TCs. They may also be able to offer advice on cluster constitutions, legalities and the like.

### **Promotion of training and quality standards**

The Quality Parish Scheme should be promoted widely by principal authorities in conjunction with CALCs, together with other training initiatives, as a means of raising the quality standard of P&TCs and equipping officers and councillors with the skills that will help them to establish successful clustering arrangements.

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## Conclusion

Clustering, collaboration and co-operation between P&TCs is not new but is increasingly popular. There is a particular driver for clustering in areas which have undergone local government reorganisation and which now have unitary principal authorities.

Clustering is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It allows P&TCs to add value to their role and deliver outcomes that would not be possible if working in isolation or, at least, not to the same extent. By sharing resources, experience, skills and expertise, P&TCs can:

- increase their influence over decisions that affect their communities;
- attract more responsibilities such as delegated services;
- lever in funding and resources through external programmes;
- achieve economies of scale (which assist the viability of individual councils); and
- act as a strong voice for local communities.

There are a range of motivations which underpin cluster development. Some of these can be grouped as top down processes inspired by national and local government; others are bottom up clustering and collaboration arrangements that come directly from P&TCs.

On this evidence, there is no one neat model or a preferred model of clustering - but neither does there need to be. Local arrangements generally depend on the main objective(s) for which the cluster was established. The common element is P&TCs working more closely together – sometimes in partnership with other community stakeholders – to get things done effectively.

Nevertheless there are some common issues, challenges and opportunities around clustering, which this guidance note attempts to list and clarify.

CALCs and principal authorities have a key part to play, to encourage and support the development of effective clustering and joint working arrangements among P&TCs in their area.

# A1

## **Annex 1: Community Forums in Northumberland**

Northumberland County Council had been exploring its relationship with P&TCs and local communities as part of its Local Strategic Partnership development for some years. It initially explored how to develop groupings of P&TCs and other local stakeholders, to achieve better results for the county as part of its work in 2005 to delineate natural communities<sup>6</sup>.

This agenda has gathered pace since, driven by the emergence of Northumberland as a unitary principal authority and to progress made by the Northumberland Strategic Partnership (the LSP). Northumberland is now setting up 27 Community Forums as part of its initiative to develop community leadership and localism across the county. The aims are to encourage everyone who lives or works locally to offer their ideas and solutions to local problems and to work together to address them.

Community Forums are seen as fundamental to the Council's approach of getting citizen engagement to shape the places in which they live and work. The network of democratic P&TCs is described as vital to the effective working of the Community Forums. Within all of this, an independent and diverse voluntary and community sector is also regarded as an essential component.

Community Forums will bring local issues from a wider area together, to provide the critical mass that is needed to influence change effectively. At the same time, they will seek to ensure that the characteristics of different parts of Northumberland, below community area level are well reflected. The host arrangements are agreed locally and P&TCs are well placed to host the Forums and facilitate their development.

Northumberland Council has produced a range of documents to help the successful establishment of the Forums. These range from a statement about how community leadership fits into the Council's overarching policies<sup>7</sup>, such as the Local Strategic Partnership, through to practical guidance and templates for governance arrangements for the Forums<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Northumberland County Council (2005):  
*Working at the right level as naturally defined by  
our communities - A discussion paper*

<sup>7</sup> Northumberland County Council (2009):  
*Briefing Paper - Community Leadership*

<sup>8</sup> Northumberland County Council (2009):  
*Draft Community Forum Protocol*

# A2

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## **Annex 2: Further information**

Commission for Rural Communities  
[www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

Communities and Local Government  
[www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
[www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)

The Improvement and Development Agency  
[www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)

Local Government Information Unit  
[www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk)

National Association of Local Councils  
[www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk)

Society of Local Council Clerks  
[www.slcc.gov.uk](http://www.slcc.gov.uk)

The Standards Board for England  
[www.standardsboard.gov.uk](http://www.standardsboard.gov.uk)

# A3

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## **Annex 3: Parish and town council clustering: good practice notes**

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### **Overview**

Clustering has been a feature of parish and town council working for some time. Perhaps its most attractive feature is its potential to enhance the capacity of town and parish councils. By achieving this, other things become possible.

Research has shown that parish and town councils can cluster together for a variety of reasons – for joint service delivery, to share resources or seek new funding, to influence a principal authority or other agency, to share practice, expertise and skills, and to engage better with local people.

Clustering has been given new impetus by national and local government which wants to see more services delegated to local levels and to encourage local people to be active within their community (involved in decision making).

The establishment of new unitary principal authorities in seven English counties in April 2009, with the prospect of further unitaries in due course, has given a sharper focus to how parish and town councils (P&TCs) can work together more closely and effectively.

There are two main drivers for clustering and collaboration of P&TCs:

- top down, where government-inspired policy changes encourage clustering to work alongside local governance structures, such as area boards, committees and forums (which in turn link with Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements);
- bottom up, where parish and town councils decide to come together to make better use of their limited resources and capacity.

This guidance illustrates two differing examples of successful clustering arrangements. Poringland Parish Council cluster in Norfolk is an example of the bottom up approach, where councils face capacity challenges and are acting together to meet some identified needs. East Tynedale Community Forum in Northumberland, on the other hand, illustrates how a cluster which originated for essentially the same reasons has grown and established more formal links with other tiers of government.

### **Context**

Poringland is situated five miles south east of Norwich. The 2001 Census recorded 3,261 residents living in the area which comprises over 600 hectares. Prior to the Second World War, Poringland consisted mainly of farmers, market gardeners and people working on the land. The area has developed since then and the village now mainly houses people who work in Norwich and the adjacent area, in a wide variety of occupations including professional, clerical, retail and manual work.

Poringland is the largest village in the surrounding area and acts as a service centre for many of them. The recently built Community Centre is a valuable resource, hosting parish council meetings and meetings of the local council cluster, as well as a wide range of social and leisure events, activities and clubs.

The cluster is drawn from six local parish and town councils (P&TCs) centred on Poringland. The other members are Stoke Holy Cross, Caistor St. Edmund, Framingham Earl, Framingham Pigot, and Bixley. These are sparsely populated, characteristically rural parishes of small villages, hamlets and isolated farms, effectively bounded to the east and west by the busy A146 Norwich-Lowestoft and A140 Norwich-Ipswich roads.

The cluster sits within South Norfolk District Council, one of seven districts in the County. This structure is being reviewed by the Boundary Committee for England and it has recently published two options for new unitary arrangements in Norfolk. These are:

- a single unitary authority for Norfolk; and
- a two unitary pattern featuring one authority for Norwich (on expanded city boundaries) and one for the rest of Norfolk.

These proposals are currently out for limited consultation.

The importance of the clustered group in this time of change was underlined by Councillor Hewer, Chair of the group, who said:

***“We are part of a very successful strategic partnership working with other local parishes and it is extremely important that whatever changes are made we keep together as a group.”***

### **Implementation**

#### **Expectations**

The initial catalyst for the development of a cluster in this part of rural Norfolk came from working on a parish plan in 2002. The plan proved to be a tremendous asset in identifying local needs. But the process of coming together to design and write the plan proved to be an equally important outcome of the process. It was characterised by enthusiastic and inclusive community participation.

From that initial work grew the impetus for four local councils to work together more formally on cross-parish issues and aspirations identified in the plan. Subsequently, the cluster grew to work with a fifth and now a sixth local council. It is known as the Six Strategic Group.

The driver for clustering was the belief that local councils with shared concerns could be more effective if working together. In the words of Caroline Milton, Poringland's parish clerk, the clustering would give the individual members:

***“...more weight on certain issues of common interest. People will listen more and the cluster will have an impact.”***

Those issues are principally identified in the parish plan and include local highway issues, traffic problems and local public transport and school travel plans. There has been a recent focus on reducing speeding through the parishes.

### **What has been done?**

The cluster has been working together for eight years. It is a cluster inspired by the councils themselves, drawn from a motivation to raise awareness of local issues and to influence decisions that affect local communities. This has shaped the approach taken to the cluster development.

Representatives of the clustered parishes meet quarterly at the Community Centre in Poringland. There is a dedicated secretary working across the cluster which is seen as an important part of making the group work. Member councils make a contribution from their own resources to support this post and any other secretariat functions. At the moment, funds are being used to pay the secretary from the balance of the Parish Plan account.

The group is chaired by the current Chair of Poringland Parish Council. Initially, the Chair alternated for each meeting but as the cluster has developed, having a regular Chair has helped with the stability of the group. The cluster has no statutory decision making authority in its own right. This was not considered necessary to meet the objectives of the cluster and so decision-making remains with individual member councils. However, a mini-constitution has been agreed which helps to guide the group's ways of working, governance, terms of reference and protocols.

### **Impact**

The Six Strategic Group has been seen a success on many levels. Three areas stand out:

- A key achievement has been to engage more effectively with the district council. In this sense, an aspiration of the group to be heard is being fulfilled. Recent examples include meetings with a highways official to have a discussion about road use that impacts on the whole cluster; and with the head teacher of the local school to discuss their travel to school plans. The school draws its pupils from across all members of the group. It is unlikely that this engagement would have happened without the collective voice;

- The strength of that collective voice is another success of the grouping. Experience, knowledge and views are shared openly across the membership in a way that allows more effective engagement with other bodies. This does not mean that there is always agreement. Indeed, the constitution allows for action to go ahead even if only two or three members are in favour. For instance the parishes of Poringland and Stoke Holy Cross are working together to develop a Community Speed Watch Scheme. The other members are not involved but the proposal has benefitted from an open discussion on the subject where each member's perspective was better understood. Actions are taken on a democratic basis;
- Engagement features strongly in the success of the group. Another aspect of this is the interest that has been generated in the local communities. The work of the group is promoted in a quarterly parish newsletter. Over time, the public meetings have attracted an increasing number of people from the community who are interested in the discussions. As a consequence, the business that the meetings address is also growing. Although this engagement with the community was not necessarily a key driver for the cluster, it is now seen as one of the most significant benefits and strengthens the cluster's ability to represent the members of their parishes.

Other features have contributed to the success of the cluster so far:

- the value of the parish planning process as a catalyst for collaborative working;
- a high quality community centre owned by Poringland Council in which to meet and act as a focal point; and
- clear, obvious geographic links between the members.

But the group has faced challenges too:

- Capacity – servicing the group has been a constant pressure. The initial system for circulating the chair and secretariat functions around the members proved to be too disjointed and time consuming. The move to a regular chair and a dedicated secretary has helped significantly. Nevertheless, the growing profile and activity of the cluster presents its own problems in terms of the amount of the time required to deal with business now before the group; and
- Lack of guidance and good practice - the cluster has had to learn how to develop, grow and manage without clear guidance from elsewhere. Architects of the grouping were unable to locate appropriate or relevant guidance that might have helped with progress. Even though there was anecdotal awareness of other councils locally who had tried similar arrangements, none of them responded when they were approached by the Poringland cluster for lessons or advice.

### **Sustainability**

There has been no formal evaluation of the group. The cluster works on a voluntary and self-regulatory basis and reviews its own progress and development as part of regular business. This underpins the success of the arrangement. As Caroline Milton says:

*“People simply wouldn’t turn up if they didn’t think it was useful.”*

The cluster is ambitious for its own development and can see that collaborative working of this nature could achieve many benefits for the local community. However, this is unlikely to mean an expansion of the current membership which seems to reflect the local geography and community of interests effectively.

But the group is also an advocate for clustering approaches more generally and would like to see more and better collaborative working across the county and beyond, particularly for small rural councils like their own.

### Context

East Tynedale is located in Northumberland and comprises the settlements in the valley of the river Tyne from Hexham to the border with Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead. It is a predominantly rural area of small towns and villages with an economy based on agriculture and clerical and professional jobs. There is a high degree of commuting into the Newcastle-Gateshead conurbation. Tourism also features strongly in the area. Corbridge roman town in close by and the Hadrian's Wall national trail runs to the north of the valley.

Embryonic clustering and collaborative working go back as far as 2003 and a grouping known as the East Tynedale Parish Councils Forum operated until March 2009 with as many as 18 members. The parishes were part of Tynedale District Council until that point and the cluster has now been reconstituted as the East Tynedale Community Forum within the new unitary council area of Northumberland.

### Implementation

#### Expectations

Clustering arrangements in this part of Northumberland have their roots in a number of motivations from different directions. In 1999 the local Tynedale District Council created the Tynedale Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). East Tynedale had a representative on the partnership, who needed to feed back to all the parish councils in the area. However, there was no infrastructure to enable this to happen and it became a struggle both to communicate decisions, actions and discussion back to councils and to receive views to take to the LSP.

At the same time, a number of individual parishes were putting together Parish Appraisals and Parish Plans. The plan for Bywell Parish Council had 70 actions alone. Most of these were local in terms of implementation but a number required collaboration with neighbouring parishes on issues that cut across parish boundaries. Examples included:

- economic development;
- the environment;
- roads;
- rights of way;
- health; and
- public transport.

Adrian Hinchcliffe, Parish Clerk at the time, was aware of the potential of the plans when he said:

***“There was no parish cluster, but it was noted in my mind that there needed to be one for this purpose.”***

During 2003, following a number of meetings between local parishes to talk about issues such as rural transport, the potential of the grouping began to be recognised as a means of:

- discussing issues common to all or some;
- act as a lobbying body;
- focus on cross-border issues; and
- take forward parish plan commitments.

The Eastern Tynedale and Western Castle Morpeth Parish Councils Forum was eventually constituted to,

***“bring together the wider community in East Tynedale to share local knowledge and concerns, identify shared issues and priorities, make appropriate representations, work together towards identified goals and form a key link with Northumberland County Council and other services.”***

#### **What has been done?**

Initially 14 parish councils agreed to join the forum but this later increased to 18, with one town council also joining. By 2007 all parish councils in the area were members.

Meetings were quarterly and generally attended by around 10 to 12 parish councils. There were no membership fees as such. It ran under the auspices of a volunteer joint chair and secretary. Resources, nevertheless, were an issue, as was time. An example of what this meant is again highlighted by Adrian Hinchcliffe:

***“Communications (agendas, minutes, etc) were circulated by e-mail. If councils did not have e-mail, then they had to send me some stamped addressed envelopes.”***

The Forum progressed on this basis until 2007 when a grant was awarded to appoint a professional clerk on a contractual basis.

The last two years have been dominated by the preparation for the creation of the Northumberland unitary principal authority and the demise of the districts. As part of these changes, the new unitary wanted to create local groupings. This has created much debate - some good, some bad - but significantly, the Forum remained at the heart of those discussions.

The end result is the creation of community forums which will be a link to the Area Partnership (the successor to the Local Strategic Partnership in Northumberland). The existing Parish Councils Forum has been able to put together proposals for how it wishes to operate in the area and from April 2009 it has been reconstituted as the East Tynedale Community Forum. The core of the Forum is drawn from parish councils who were members of the old Parish Councils Forum but it will be supplemented with representation from the wider community, including voluntary and community organisations and officers from the unitary council.

In essence, the new constitution retains many of the things that initially brought the forum together but with a clearer commitment to seek the involvement of community groups, community organisations, businesses, other bodies and residents, to promote effective partnership working between all interests. The Forum also has an aspiration to strengthen the local role of P&TCs to enable common issues, needs and aspirations to be pursued.

The Forum will look to the Northumberland Council for some resources to meet its running costs, such as the employment of a professional clerk, administrative costs, publicity, communications, the hire of venues for meetings and refreshments.

### **Impact**

The Forum has had a broad remit and has been effective in a range of direct impacts for the local community:

- Clustering has enabled the parishes to work in ways that would not have been possible in isolation. It has been able to discuss and make recommendations or decisions on a wide range of issues. These include a focus on rural transport at different scales, such as managing traffic speed, use and status of quiet lanes, research into transport movements across the Tyne bridges into the area, and the local transport plan. Beyond transport, the forum has addressed:
  - local health provision, particularly in relation to Hexham Hospital;
  - funding for parish councils and community groups;
  - wind farm applications;
  - local planning proposals with implications for a wide area;
  - a proposed pop concert which would impact on several parish areas; and
  - local government reorganisation in Northumberland;
- The Forum helps local parish councils to keep in touch and learn from each other; and
- There has also been an opportunity to share costs on some local services or amenities, such as children's play park maintenance.

The Forum has always aspired to be more than a talking shop. On several occasions it has lobbied on and taken a stance on issues, including submitting views on the Regional Spatial Strategy (the regional planning document).

Nevertheless, there are always tensions and challenges:

- A constant pressure has been the need to service the forum on a small budget and from limited capacity. This led to the application for a professional clerk to manage this process more effectively; and
- The creation of Northumberland unitary council has caused many parish councillors in Northumberland to fear their position would be weakened by the emergence of community forums and particularly the involvement of members from outside the parish sector. The counter-argument is that the new structures will give greater support to parish councils, who will continue as the experts on their own patch.

## **Sustainability**

One of the strengths of the Tynedale grouping has been its ability to grow and adapt to local circumstances. The constitution is reviewed annually and amended as necessary.

The success of the Forum can sometimes be seen in simple measures, such as the fact that members continue to attend and have expressed their opinion that it is a worthwhile – although voluntary – endeavour.

Now established as a community forum, the group has remained true to its origins and presents an opportunity to give a better service to residents and parish councils, linked more closely to other tiers of governance in Northumberland. Adrian Hinchcliffe considers that this is an important progression and comments that:

*“...each area has developed their ‘Community Forum’ in a way which they are comfortable with. In East Tynedale we are at the forefront in this and it is down to having had the benefit of working together as a cluster of Parish Councils”.*

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## Who we are

The **Commission for Rural Communities** provides well-informed, independent advice to Government to ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. In doing this, it acts as

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- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
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