



# Commission for Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Helping parish and  
town councils work  
with unitary local  
authorities

The Commission for Rural Communities acts as the advocate for England's rural communities, as an expert adviser to government, and as a watchdog to ensure that government actions, policies and programmes recognise and respond effectively to rural needs, with a particular focus on disadvantage.

It has three key functions:

**Rural advocate:**

the voice for rural people, businesses and communities

**Expert adviser:**

giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others

**Independent watchdog:**

monitoring, reporting on and seeking to mainstream rural into the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally

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## Helping parish and town councils work with unitary local authorities

This short guide has been developed to support County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) in their work to help parish and town councils (P&TCs) engage effectively with principal authorities. It follows work the Commission for Rural Communities and National Association of Local Councils (NALC) have commissioned regarding engagement with the new or planned unitary principal authorities, set up as a result of local government re-organisation this year, and builds on research with CALCs and P&TCs which have experienced such a change. Many of the lessons will also be relevant to areas with county and district structures.

It is designed as a prompt, but is not intended to be prescriptive and should always be adapted to local circumstances. CALCs will have their own priorities and may want to add items or tailor the guide to fit.

Our research has shown that the top three success factors for meaningful engagement are:

- trust;
- partnership working;
- clarity of roles.

These factors underpin the more tangible aspects of engagement between the tiers of local government, which are now set out.

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## Planning for re-organisation

Where local government re-organisation is to take place CALCs will want to think through their ambitions for the P&TC sector and consider the position they should adopt on behalf of their members.

**Re-organisation bids:** different parties (e.g. the county, certain districts) may support different re-organisation bids. Engagement can try to influence what the different bids say about the role of P&TCs.

**Mapping influence:** identifying who holds influence and power during the establishment of a new unitary can help CALCs to prioritise their relationship building and tailor messages.

**Key messages:** CALCs have a pivotal role, both to sell the P&TC sector to the shadow unitary and to sell the opportunities that arise to local P&TCs. It will help to have a few clear messages targeted at those audiences.

**Quick wins:** it may be possible to reach early commitments from the shadow unitary which demonstrate positive intent towards P&TCs. Examples could be work to develop or revise a parish charter or an agreement to meet with them all.

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## Building a working relationship

Building a strong working relationship is an important foundation for future positive engagement.

**Champions:** an important step is identifying those people involved in the unitary set up process with whom good relationships already exist or who are champions of the P&TC sector. They may be transferring staff from the existing county or districts.

**Implementation executive:** a seat on the implementation or transitional group which involves stakeholder organisations in steering the set-up of the new unitary will ensure that the P&TC sector's voice is heard during the planning and implementation phase.

**Chief executive (designate):** early discussions with the CEO for the shadow unitary authority are a chance to outline opportunities and issues for the P&TC sector, and to sow the seeds for future partnership working.

**Democratic services team:** the team which will support unitary councillors is a useful one to engage, not least to ensure that the role of P&TCs is covered within plans for induction training.

**Unitary councillors:** particularly once elections to the new unitary authority have taken place, productive relationship building between principal and P&TC councillors can start.

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## Formalising contacts

Establishing clear points of contact within the new unitary will be helpful, to manage issues arising (real or perceived) and because there may be uncertainty about where areas of work sit within the new unitary.

**Parish liaison officer or group:** it helps to have such a post or group in place early in the unitary set-up process, to provide regular channels of communication and handle issues as they occur. The post/group can also build an understanding of the P&TC sector within the unitary. They should not, however, become a gatekeeper, stifling wider contact and relationship building.

**Parish and community development group:** these groups can start to develop the scope for partnership working between the new unitary and P&TCs (and the voluntary and community sector), as well as a programme of work to take it forward.

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## Establishing communication channels

Research found that providing P&TCs with a communication flow during the transition was important, enabling them to understand the emerging unitary authority, decisions being taken and implications for their sector. CALCs could lead some of these activities or could support activities led by the (shadow) unitary authority.

**Meetings:** new (shadow) unitary officers and councillors should attend meetings with P&TCs or groups of P&TCs, to assist relationship building and provide an opportunity for questions to be raised. CALCs could organise these, which might be timed around key set-up stages or when there are specific opportunities for the P&TC sector.

**Newsletter:** a regular newsletter can provide P&TCs with up-to-date summarised information about progress with the unitary authority and ensure that everyone has access to consistent messages (which may need reinforcing through other means). It might be seen as more trusted and impartial if it comes from the CALC.

**Consultations:** the unitary authority should be encouraged to consult meaningfully with all P&TCs on significant policy developments which will affect them, such as proposals for local area committees or for a service delegation scheme. This could be mediated by the CALC.

**Intranet access:** establishing a new unitary is a chance to consider providing P&TCs with 'log in' access to information that will be held and managed on the unitary authority's intranet. This could be a real enabler for engagement, and demonstrate trust and partnership working.

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## Involvement in Local Governance

Exploiting opportunities for the P&TC sector to grow its involvement in new local governance structures could considerably increase the standing and influence of the P&TC sector. There are also some great opportunities for new unitary authorities to develop and deliver their statutory 'duty to involve'.

**Unitary authority structures and working:** it is important for CALCs (and through them P&TCs) to gain a quick and clear understanding of the organisational structure and policy decision-making processes in the new unitary.

**Area committees or forums:** all new unitary authorities appear to be establishing a structure of local committees, boards or forums to bring some of their decision-making closer to communities. A key role should be negotiated for P&TCs (or clusters of P&TCs) on such groups, as the most local tier of government.

**Working groups and committees:** there is also a case to press for the P&TC sector to have a seat on (or input to) other ad-hoc groups convened by the unitary authority e.g. topic working groups, scrutiny sub-committees.

**Strategic groups:** a 'high level' place would be appropriate for the CALC or a P&TC sector representative on the new Local Strategic Partnership. There is also a strong case for the sector having a place on the relevant delivery-oriented Local Area Agreement group.

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## Developing infrastructure and resources

CALCs and the P&TC sector generally have modest and constrained resources, so will almost certainly want to explore ways in which they can be supported to play a larger part by a new unitary, without compromising their independence.

**Office provision or co-location:** several CALCs and even larger P&TCs benefit from having office space provided by the unitary authority. As well as the cost saving, where this is co-located office space it supports understanding and relationship building.

**Staffing:** it may be possible to have a CALC post or some salaries funded by the new unitary, particularly if this is to help boost P&TC liaison. Some new clusters of P&TCs have received unitary authority funding to aid their engagement with the Local Strategic Partnership.

**Funding:** there may be scope to develop some core funding or a grants structure for P&TCs, which will help them contribute towards the unitary authority's policy priorities, as well as cementing trust and partnership working.

**IT support:** many P&TCs struggle with IT capacity and access, so there can be benefits for all if the unitary authority is able to offer things such as: a hosted website from a central portal; linked technology; technical support; training sessions; and hardware.

**Advice service:** the unitary authority might help support a single point of contact which P&TC clerks and councillors can access (online, telephone, etc). This can act as a signpost to the appropriate person within the unitary authority, the CALCs and local government Ombudsman.

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## Ensuring knowledge and skills

A lack of understanding and gaps in knowledge are often seen as a barrier to effective governance, partnership working and the local delivery of services.

**P&TC training:** the unitary authority should be encouraged to work with the CALC and County Training Partnership (CTP) to offer training sessions for P&TCs on topics that will assist partnership working and local delivery, such as budget management, health and safety, and procurement. (Other relevant courses may be available through the CALC, CTP, NALC and Society of Local Council Clerks).

**Learning within the sector:** there is a key role for a CALC to capture good practice in P&TC engagement with their new unitary and then to provide opportunities for sharing that learning amongst P&TCs e.g. arranging visits, workshops.

**Briefings for the new unitary:** it is hugely important that incoming unitary authority councillors and officers understand the role and structure of P&TCs, so they can champion successful partnership working. Induction training laid on by the unitary authority should cover P&TCs. See also the Governance Toolkit for Town & Parish Councils (April 2009). [www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Booklets\\_and\\_Resources.aspx](http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Booklets_and_Resources.aspx)

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## Managing services and taking decisions locally

The switch to a unitary authority structure offers opportunities for P&TCs to take on service delegations and devolved powers which, in turn, should make local services more responsive and enhance civic engagement.

**Parish or community led planning:** a new unitary presents an opportunity to review how town and parish planning is supported, how it informs policy priorities set by the unitary authority and its partnerships, and how the unitary authority can assist the delivery of actions identified in plans.

**Service delegations:** a new unitary authority should be encouraged to develop service delegation (and/or devolution) schemes, so a range of local services can be managed and delivered by P&TCs, where they wish to

and are ready to do so. These schemes should have clear guidance, yet be flexible and straightforward. Delegations will need to show that they are council tax neutral, unless a P&TC chooses to invest more in a particular service. See also the guidance note on Service Delegations to Parish and Town Councils (May 2009), which is available to download from the CRC website ([www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications)).

**Asset transfer:** a new unitary should be encouraged to consider making available for transfer of ownership to P&TCs (or local trusts) those assets which would be better owned by communities or which are associated with the delivery of devolved services. Advice and help is additionally available from the Asset Transfer Unit (<http://atu.org.uk>).

**Clustered working:** P&TCs should be made aware of the pros (and cons) of clustered or collaborative working, since it can support engagement with a unitary authority, through shared resources, extra capacity to manage services and more leverage with policy makers. See also the guidance note on Clustering by Parish and Town Councils (May 2009), which is available to download from the CRC website ([www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications)).

**Parishes charter:** local government re-organisation is an opportunity to develop a parishes charter or review an existing one, as an over-arching document which sets out the aims and expectations for partnership working between the unitary authority and the local P&TC sector.

These lessons have been specifically captured from our engagement with the County Association of Local Councils collective experience of local government re-organisation. But the principles of effective engagement and positive working relationships are equally as valuable to two tiers areas.

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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:

- Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

**The National Association of Local Councils** is the only body in the country specialising full-time in the work of local councils. It works to protect and advance the rights and interests of member councils with the Government, the main political opposition parties, Parliament, in the local and national press, and in liaison with other bodies such as the Local Government Association, the Audit Commission and the Standards Board.

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