



Commission for Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Good beginnings:
securing effective
engagement for town
and parish councils

Updated Executive
Summary

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Introduction

Rural areas are home to nine and a half million people – that's 20 per cent of the English population. Rural England, often with three tiers of local government, has more than its fair share of local councillors – over 70,000 parish and town councillors and about 20,000 district, county and unitary authority councillors.

The Government has initiated an ambitious array of policies to deliver its local devolution commitments. Communities and Local Government is promoting new, more participative approaches to local democracy such as participatory budgeting and public petitions. For the first time the Government is extending the power of well-being to the parish and town council sector and is encouraging the creation of parish councils in London. The ongoing sub-national review, which includes the end of regional assemblies, the transfer of regional planning responsibilities to regional development agencies and new local authority Leaders Boards, is also a key part of this complex mix. Parish and town councils have a valuable part to play in this challenging agenda.

The Commission for Rural Communities' (CRC) recent Participation inquiry¹ found that unitary local government should strengthen and clarify local democracy and local accountability, helping rural local government to punch its weight with city regions and regional bodies. The inquiry recommended a structure of powerful new unitary authorities serving their communities and working closely with a renewed structure of empowered and influential parish and town councils.

In April 2009 nine new shire unitary local authorities were created in the county areas of Bedfordshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire and Wiltshire. Three further county areas – Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk – await decisions about becoming unitary local authorities

¹ The CRC's full report 'Participation inquiry: strengthening the role of local councillors', CRC 55, 2008 can be found at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

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The project

In 2008 the CRC, with the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), commissioned a project to support parish and town councils (P&TCs) and their County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) to engage effectively with new unitary councils. Phase one was research to find out the extent to which CALCs and P&TCs were managing to engage with the unitaries being established. It comprised a literature review, interviews with CALCs and a small survey of P&TCs. Phase two produced both technical guidance and good practice case study material on two specific topics - service delegations to P&TCs and clustering by P&TCs - together with a checklist on how to engage and a national seminar for CALCs to share good practice and begin considering how to build on the results so far.

The project was undertaken by consultants Brian Wilson, David Atkinson, Ellie Stoneley and Jacqui Cuff.

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Findings

This section draws out the main findings of the project in terms of:

- relationships;
- processes; and
- structures.

The full research can be found on the CRC website www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Relationships

The experience of CALCs engaging in the nine new unitary structures is broadly positive. In five of the areas, CALC engagement with the shadow councils has been good in terms of:

- its extent;
- the involvement in formal structures; and
- the ability to influence.

This is largely in areas where the unitary set up process has been moving ahead quickly and smoothly. Conversely, as would be expected, where set up has been problematic or slower, CALC engagement and influence with the shadow councils has, thus far, been harder to achieve.

Parish liaison groups have been developed in the East Riding of Yorkshire. They have taken some time to become effective but they have been gaining in influence and are now useful sounding boards. They also offer an important opportunity to develop personal working relationships.

The shadow council in Herefordshire appointed a **parish liaison officer** who provided a way into the organisation and acted as a signpost for the P&TC sector. The initiative also made sure there was a good flow of information about the reorganisation process.

In West Berkshire, a **parish planning lead officer** is employed for four days a week by the Rural Community Council and one day a week by the unitary authority. The post is joint-funded by West Berkshire Partnership and a major local employer.

The survey found that most P&TCs felt they had too little engagement with their shadow unitary authorities and a large majority want more engagement with their new authority than they had previously with existing districts and counties.

CALCs were keen to influence their new unitaries and most were optimistic about the opportunities for developing engagement with the new councils. However, there were perceived barriers including:

- new unitaries not always recognising the potential of P&TCs;
- a lack of capacity within CALCs; and
- the varied level of ambition amongst P&TCs.

Existing **good relationships** between the CALC and district councils are a sound foundation for the future for Central Bedfordshire.

Cheshire provides funding for one full time **development officer** to work on promoting the Quality Scheme and parishing of un-parished areas.

Cornwall's shadow unitary has established a **Parish Council Liaison Team**, who have been engaging with the CALC, keeping them informed of progress.

Processes

For CALCs in areas with pre 2009 unitaries there are many examples of positive engagement around processes and much can be learned from their experiences.

A **delegation of services protocol** in Herefordshire ensures P&TCs with an interest think through all the relevant questions. It also means the unitary receives applications in a common format. Delegations come with equipment and are backed up with training.

On the Isle of Wight a **portal website** contains information on all the P&TCs and has links to their websites. It also contains an interactive discussion forum for P&TCs to post material and debate issues.

West Berkshire's approach to **parish planning** received a Beacon Award. A parish planning officer acts for communities, encouraging and supporting parish plan development, and a community planning officer in West Berkshire council manages that end of the process. A £60,000 annual **capital fund** is available to progress actions within adopted parish plans.

However, in the main the good engagement practice that currently exists in unitary areas has developed over the years and was not instantly created during the shadow period or immediately after.

Our findings highlight a range of tangible ways of working and positive engagement between the P&TC sector and the then shadow unitary councils, including:

- the development of parish charters; and
- the creation of new P&TCs in previously un-parished areas.

Bids in favour of restructuring principal local authorities made considerable play of the fact that new unitaries would bring better community engagement. If they are to deliver on that, the new councils stand to gain significantly by partnership working with P&TCs.

Lack of time and financial resources within CALCs and individual P&TCs were seen as barriers to better engagement. A poor understanding of unitary council roles and structures was also seen as an issue. So, improving information flows and training opportunities, both for the P&TC clerks and for incoming unitary officers, was seen as important.

The CALC contributed to the consultation on developing County Durham's **Area Action Partnerships**.

Cheshire CALC has run **introduction events** for the new chief executives and leaders of the shadow councils to meet the parish councils and enabling the parishes to ask initial questions on the arrangements for local working.

The shadow authorities in Cheshire have worked with the CALC in the production of an **issues log** which maps the current partnership/funding arrangements between the parishes and the County and District Councils and has indicated that, at least for the next 12 months, they will honour those arrangements.

Shropshire CALC has run a series of unitary **preparation events** – one in each current district area – and is planning more.

The shadow council in Wiltshire asked for expressions of interest about some **service delegations**.

Structures

Creating a unitary structure of local government does not automatically make engagement easier for the P&TCs sector, particularly where the CALC covers more than one unitary area. Whilst good practice in engagement is not specific to unitary local government structures, it may result from an associated set of simpler processes. There may also be a correlation with the period of transformational change during and after reorganisation.

CALCs in shire areas which had become unitary prior to 2009 generally found it easier to engage with a unitary council. The relationship was clearer and there was not the risk of being bounced between county and district.

Of course, good engagement practice is not automatically assured and is not limited to unitary council structures, but it may be helped along by the re-organisation process and the simpler governance structures that result.

In all the areas going unitary in 2009 there were plans to establish area committees or forums as governance structures, some linked to Local Strategic Partnerships. The role of these varied from place to place, but they will be a key means for P&TCs to engage.

A **Joint Committee** was set up in Herefordshire during the shadow period where the county, districts and P&TCs met regularly to discuss the re-organisation and sort out future working arrangements.

Herefordshire's six market towns formed the **Market Towns Forum** as a place to discuss issues of common interest with the unitary council. The Forum is linked to the CALC who can act for it on unresolved issues.

Joint working between parishes in West Berkshire is under consideration with the aim of helping the smallest parishes who have not yet begun the parish planning process. **Clustering** is also being considered where there are common interests or geographically linked issues in parish plans, e.g. the setting up of a rural business forum or the development of a new cycle path.

A **parish and community development team** on the Isle of Wight has been developed with two full-time and two part-time staff. The team is jointly funded by the unitary council, CALC and Society of Local Council Clerks. The team manages Silverline, an advice and training service for parish and town councils. They are either able to deal with queries themselves or can signpost P&TCs to the right person within the unitary council.

A **Parish Task Group** meets quarterly on the Isle of Wight and tackles major projects (e.g. developing the parish charter) as well as having a scrutiny role. Membership comprises representatives from the parish and community development team, the CALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks.

A **stakeholder sounding board** was established in Central Bedfordshire and a **stakeholder newsletter** produced and circulated to all the P&TCs.

Community networks and community forums are planned in Central Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Northumberland and Shropshire which will include P&TCs.

The CALC is directly involved with three of County Durham's **Joint implementation Team's** six work streams – environment and delegated services; area action partnerships; and legal. Furthermore, the CALC in County Durham has created a co-ordination group with 14 of the parish clerks, who form a joint view on key issues and have a mandate for negotiation.

The P&TC sector has member representation on the Shropshire **Implementation Executive** and sits on various sub-committees.

Pilot area boards have been set up in Wiltshire which are in contact with their local P&TCs. These area boards have run **road shows** about the unitary for their P&TCs.

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Technical Guidance

The findings of the research concluded that P&TCs would welcome some guidance and good practice around two key areas of successful engagement with local authorities. As a result, this section sets out some brief guidance, firstly on achieving service delegations, and secondly on successful clustering.

Service delegations

Services often work best when they are designed, managed and delivered at the most local level possible, where they can readily be attuned to local circumstances and priorities. Many unitaries (and other principal councils) therefore develop schemes to delegate some services to P&TCs, where they wish to take them on.

There are different degrees of delegation:

- Operational tasking – where a P&TC simply monitors and directs the service delivery;
- Service delivery – where a P&TC contracts to deliver the service to a given standard for an agreed sum, but the principal council retains ultimate responsibility;
- Service responsibility – with some services it is possible for the principal council to cease having an interest and to hand all responsibility over to a P&TC.

Most principal council services can be delegated to P&TCs; they have concurrent legal powers. By far the most common delegations relate to local environmental maintenance services, which may be best suited to smaller parishes as well as being relevant in larger parishes.

Each principal authority operates its own criteria for agreeing delegation applications, but a common feature is that they must improve the service and at no extra cost. Although P&TCs may lack economies of scale, they can often save costs e.g. on overheads, using lower specified equipment and reducing downtime.

Taking on a service delegation can be a large step for a small parish, as it assumes new responsibilities, accountabilities and risks. Delegation schemes should therefore be clear, flexible and supportive, that is:

- clear about how the scheme operates and its scope;
- flexible in allowing P&TCs to start at a time and delegation level they are comfortable with; and
- supportive with training and advice to help P&TCs build their skills and capacity.

Burgess Hill Town Council, in West Sussex, delivers a range of county and district services through its Mobile Maintenance Teams, who are also contracted to service three smaller neighbouring parishes. They provide a highly responsive and visible presence.

Chetton and neighbouring parishes, in Shropshire, employ two 'lengthsmen' to undertake highways environmental maintenance. They know all the local ditches and drains, and which are most liable to flood. They also report other issues to the principal council.

Clustering and joint working

P&TCs sometimes group together to increase their influence, their capacity or to achieve economies of scale. Local government restructuring is providing more opportunities for effective clustering.

Those clustering arrangements can take many forms, not least in terms of their purpose, size and formality. Broadly speaking, some P&TCs decide to come together to achieve things (bottom up), while others are brought together by governance processes such as principal council local area forums (top down). The latter may involve others like the voluntary sector.

Things that can dissuade P&TCs from clustering include the risk of losing individual identity, the organisational effort, apportioning costs between group members, disagreements on policy issues and rurality (if parishes cover large sparse areas).

There are, however, many advantages. These include the sharing of resources, achieving economies of scale, having a louder voice, gaining capacity to engage and building capacity to take on (delegated) services.

Clustering is a means to an end, not an end in itself. A cluster therefore needs to be clear about its purpose and ambitions. This should determine the form that it takes. At the very least a cluster will require a memorandum of understanding and protocol. Those created to provide area governance, engaging with a Local Strategic Partnership, will need a formal constitution.

Clusters must find an appropriate leadership model. The role often goes to an elected member from one of the P&TCs, though leading a cluster means that person adopting a rather different approach. Length of term and conditions of appointment should appear in a constitution, and alternating the chair from meeting to meeting is best avoided. Most effective clusters have a permanent secretariat to provide governance and to support the leader.

Clustering does not imply the formal merger of P&TCs or a takeover. Individual P&TCs need to continue with their core business and fulfil obligations such as holding elections, holding council meetings and operating the code of conduct.

Six parishes, centred on **Poringland** in Norfolk, came together to work on common transport concerns identified by their parish plans. This 'Six Strategic Group' has been working with the highways department and two parishes are developing a speed watch scheme.

East Tynedale Community Forum, in Northumberland, has adapted over time and has had as many as 18 P&TC members. It will now act as the area's link with the Local Strategic Partnership and its membership has been supplemented from beyond the P&TC sector.

With both service delegations and clustering CALCs can play important roles, raising P&TC awareness and promoting opportunities, signposting them to support and good local practice, influencing and facilitating policy discussions with the principal council.

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Priorities for the future

Our findings suggest that most P&TCs are keen for more information about the new unitary authorities and for clarity about their structure and processes. Subsequently, they are keen to engage with the new structures on a range of topics including:

- service delegations – particularly true of the larger town councils but not limited to them;
- establishing strong communications channels – including helping the unitary authorities to deliver their 'duty to involve';
- area forums or committees or boards;
- local planning decisions;
- crime and policing;
- the environment; and
- transport.

CALCs and P&TCs are keen, during this change process, to see some learning and practice captured and shared. Those CALCs where engagement with the shadow unitary is proving harder to achieve are particularly keen to benefit from some short term support.

Longer term support is also a requirement both for CALCs in the current round of unitary areas and for those CALCs in areas potentially subject to future unitary reorganisation.

In recognition of this, we have worked with NALC to deliver specific support to the sector through the promotion of the outputs of this project, including:

- technical guidance on key issues;
- good practice guides; and
- networking events for CALCs, P&TCs and unitary authorities to share good practice.

We hope this will continue to build on the good beginnings captured in this summary. For further information, please contact www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk or www.nalc.gov.uk.

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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.

**Commission for
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Cheltenham Office

John Dower House Crescent Place
Cheltenham Glos. GL50 3RA

Telephone 01242 521381

Facsimile 01242 584270

Email info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk

www ruralcommunities.gov.uk