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JUNE 2016

LGC'S SPECIAL REPORT ON TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS, SUPPORTED BY





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Introduction

Parish and town councils are a vital part of local government and communities, says National Association of Local Councils chairman **KEN BROWSE**



Welcome to the LGC local councils special report, in partnership with the National Association of Local Councils. The purpose of this supplement is to shine a spotlight on the work of local (parish and town) councils and to highlight once again how they are a vital part of local government and communities.

In this report, we have demonstrated the value that local councils can add to an area's prosperity. In an era where decentralisation is the driving force, NALC believes that only 'double devolution' – where power is moved from Westminster to principal authorities, and from there spread to local councils – truly brings services closer to the public we serve.

The features within this report make an undeniable case for greater parish involvement in services delivery. Our exclusive survey with LGC shows, not surprisingly, that one of the main challenges to progress for local councils centres around capacity and resources. But maybe surprisingly to some, the survey reflects the transformative nature of these councils, with more and more of them than previously thought engaging in health, boosting the local economy, housing and social care issues.

Sevenoaks Town Council, for instance, is transforming the town with a new focus on local economic development:



now operating a theatre, cinema, orbital bus service, four markets and even regenerating a railway station.

Many councils are becoming innovative in supporting business, community resilience and wellbeing. You

can delve into this supplement to find out more about: Feock Parish Council's local volunteer transport scheme; Oswestry Town Council's largest volunteer CCTV system in the country; Stone Town Council's use of digital communications

and neighbourhood planning; and Frome Town Council's rethink of local democracy, which has rejuvenated neighbourhood governance in the area. More and more councils are being set up, as shown in this special edition in features on Sutton Coldfield and Queen's Park.

To support these initiatives, the workforce within local councils is radically improving for the better. Interestingly, devolution has not just led to services moving between tiers of local government but people more and more moving from principal (county, district, unitary and borough) councils to local councils.

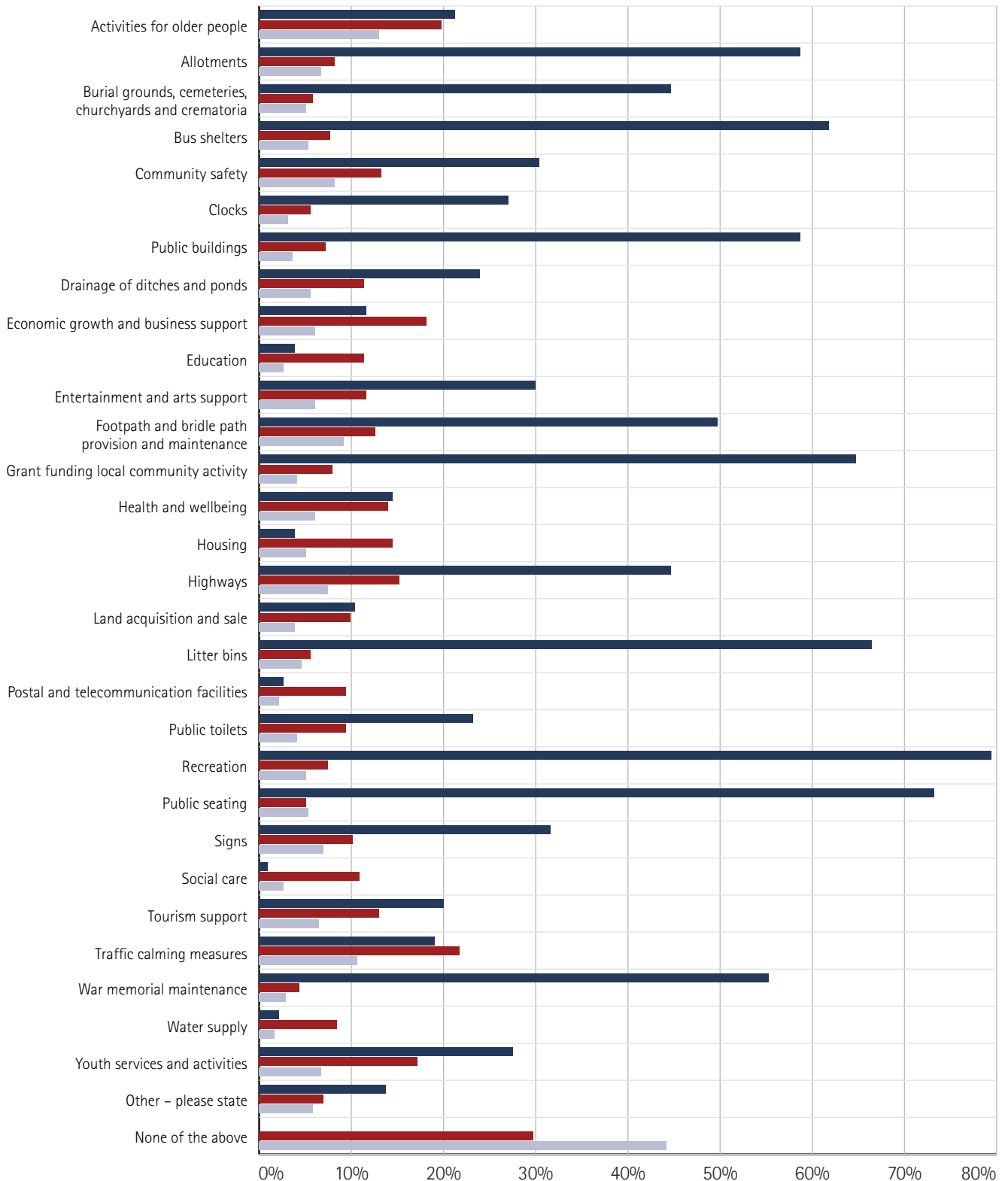
A huge amount of development and progress with local councils would not be possible without the support of their principal council partners. We encourage all principal councils to look at their local councils as providing solutions to local community problems.

We would be delighted to discuss the issues featured in this report with delegates at the Local Government Association annual conference from 5-7 July, where we will be on exhibition stand W4. We are also hosting a fringe meeting at the conference on 6 July in the Purbeck Bar, at the Bournemouth International Centre, from 6pm onwards.

For more information on the value of parish and local councils visit www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/devolution

Which services do parish councils provide?

■ Currently provided
■ Would like to provide
■ Have capacity to provide



At your service

LGC research reveals a complex picture of local council services. **RACHEL DALTON** reports

LGC's research on the services town and parish councils currently provide, and the services they aspire to deliver, provides a comprehensive picture of local councils' role – and some surprising results.

The chart opposite shows the sheer breadth of services that local councils deliver and the extent to which their provision is widespread among towns and parishes.

The results of the survey, which attracted responses from 414 clerks and deputy clerks, show that the top 10 services local councils provide (or help the principal authority to provide) were: recreation grounds; public seating; litter bins; grant funding for community activities; bus shelters; public buildings; allotments; war memorial maintenance; footpath and bridle path maintenance; and maintenance of burial grounds, cemeteries, churchyards and crematoria.

However, significant minorities of town and parish councils were involved in providing 'big ticket' services that are usually within the remit of their principal authorities. Just under 15% said they deliver or help to deliver health and wellbeing services, while around 12% said they are involved in economic growth. Around four in 10 said they provided housing services while just under 1% were involved in social care provision.

The survey also hinted at

strong ambition among parish and town councils to take on more and greater provision. When asked which services they would like to deliver that they did not currently provide, 70% of respondents named at least one additional service that their council would like to add to its remit.

Notably, again, there were small but significant pockets of enthusiasm for becoming involved in aspects of some of the biggest services provided by principal authorities. Just under one fifth wanted a role in economic growth; around 15% wanted to provide health and wellbeing and housing services; and just over 10% wanted to take part in social care provision.

The top 10 services the respondents would like to add to their remit were: traffic calming measures; activities for older people; economic growth; youth services; highways; housing; health and wellbeing; community safety; tourism support and footpath and bridle path maintenance.

Constraints

Desire to provide more services than they did was clear among 70% of respondents, but capacity and resources were large barriers to them doing so. Four in 10 respondents said they did not have the capacity to provide or help to provide any more services at all. Almost 70% said lack of funding was a barrier to service delivery and 66% cited lack of capacity, including time and experience within the

council, as a block to more provision.

For some, staffing was an issue. Of the councils represented in the survey, 80% had no more than five members of staff and 37% employed less than one full-time equivalent employee.

One respondent to the survey said: "Parish council members are volunteers, and do not have the capacity, experience or more importantly funding to carry out more services than they currently do."

However, it is not just a question of time and money. One third of respondents said their principal authority was reluctant to devolve services to local level, and about one fifth of respondents said government legislation prevents them from delivering the services they would like to. Aside from this, respondents cited "resistance from twin-hatted councillors" and "lack of interest from councillors" as barriers.

Business rates

Given the funding pressures many parish council clerks said they felt, it comes as no surprise that three quarters of respondents said town and parish councils should

receive a proportion of business rates.


"If we have to put up with businesses in the village and the disruption they cause, then we should be allowed to benefit from some of the funds raised through business rates," said one respondent.


However, not everyone was convinced. Another participant said: "The assumption is that we could make better use of the money than the principal authorities. Possibly yes but the answer for many councils would be certainly not."

A further respondent did not believe any tiers of local government would benefit from full business rate retention, least not town and parish councils. They said: "The retention of business rates is irrelevant in most areas because very few parts of the country have sufficient income from business rates to make up for the loss of the revenue support grant; this includes the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Liverpool City Region.

"It is therefore a fallacy to be under the impression that local areas would be better off by keeping their business rates. Most would be worse off."

Devolution

Although LGC's survey did not ask specific questions about the wider devolution agenda and how it may affect town and parish councils, the issue was clearly on participants' minds; several used the 

 The survey hinted at strong ambition among parish and town councils to take on more and greater provision

COMMENT

NICK GOLDING
Editor, LGC



Parishes offer a crucial tier of local democracy

So much of the current devolution debate has centred on councils grouping together or indeed merging to form ever larger units of 'local' government. Only by doing this will councils be offered extra powers.

Greater Manchester, the poster boy of devolution, has a total population of nearly three million, for instance. There is some irony that in many cases services are being centralised further from people's homes in order for devolution to occur.

The devolution of power from principal authorities to more localised but nevertheless representative and democratic bodies has been the dog that has not barked so far in the current debate. While there are many good reasons why large scale is required to tackle elements of service improvement or economic growth, there are conversely reasons why only a small scale will tackle the feelings of alienation and marginalisation that devolution is supposed to remedy.

LGC's survey into the attitudes of local and parish councils reveals the extent to which the more localised bodies are already delivering a large array of services. And they also reveal a desire among local councils to increase their role in order to provide a tailored and localised means of meeting the needs of their local population.

Principal authorities have frequently passed powers down to service users, for instance in the case of users taking on the running of libraries or community centres that would otherwise have fallen victim to budget cuts. Alternatively, the government says it has been

“Local or parish councils offer a small-scale, localised means of running services which stays true to the principles of representative democracy

seeking a more tailored provision of education by encouraging schools to become academies, while free schools, are set up by parents and bypass councils which formerly took a leading role over the sector's governance.

There is a place for users, or the families of users or self-governing bodies taking on responsibility for services. However, it can be hard to prove that services are not being put into the hands of an unrepresentative clique.

Local or parish councils offer a small-scale, localised means of running services which stays true to the principles of representative democracy. They see easily identifiable local people, generally heavily steeped in their communities, winning a mandate to govern.

Our survey shows that the parishes are generally up for the challenge of extending their role. We know that principal authorities need radical new solutions to provide high-quality services more cheaply. And we know that significant segments of the population feel alienated by existing political structures. We may just find that the coming years are characterised by a growing boldness and extension of this crucial lower tier of local democracy.

survey to make their views on the topic known.

Many saw the devolution of services from their principal authorities to parish and town councils as an opportunity.

However, some were frustrated by the lack of consistency in approaches in different areas.

“One district in our area is actively trying to devolve services and is engaging with the parish and town councils to do so. My district council is ‘circling the wagons’ and does not want to consider devolving anything. They treat us like they are the ‘grown-ups,’” said one participant.

Others were keen to take on powers and responsibilities devolved from principal authorities as the latter took on powers from central government, but stressed that the process must be managed properly so that ‘double devolution’ did not become ‘double dumping’.

“We need an effective dialogue with principal authorities and must make our position known at an early stage of devolution,” said one respondent.

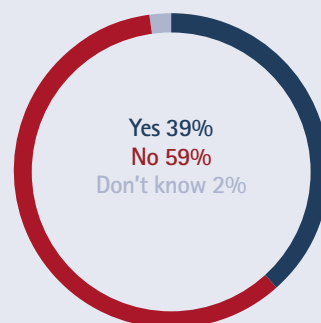
“Parishes will not be able to pick up the pieces from further budget and service cuts. Parishes are left trying to assist the communities they serve when cuts are made as we are closest to the community.

“We need to make a stand and say we will only be able to plug the gaps with multi-level, true devolution of powers and budgets.”

Some feared the wide-ranging powers of metro-mayors would damage town and parish councils' ability to influence policy-making in their communities' best interests.

“With metropolitan mayors, the ability for the grassroots-level [government] to influence and assist in maintaining the needs of the community

Has your council led a neighbourhood plan?



would be lost,” they said.

“Devolved powers to parish and town councils will help to offset the remote decision-making but funding and resources need to follow the service.”

As with any discussions of devolution, some comments veered onto the topic of reorganisation.

One commenter proposed radical change to the town and parish tier: “In order for the sector to be truly valuable it needs to be restructured through a programme of consolidation,” they said.

“It could be possible to create a local government environment where the strategic and statutory services are delivered by new unitaries and discretionary and quality-of-life services are delivered by a new, consolidated town and parish sector that would benefit from increases capacity and economies of scale.”

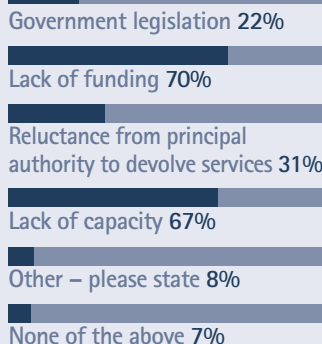
Neighbourhood planning

While 39% of respondents said their parish or town council had led a neighbourhood plan, 59% said they had not.

Recent, separate LGC research revealed that fewer than one in 10 neighbourhood plans that had been approved were from places in the most deprived third of areas classified under the government's Indices of Deprivation.

Clive Betts (Lab), chair of the Commons' communities

Which of the following barriers to delivering services has your council experienced?



and local government committee, has suggested that the process of a neighbourhood plan is prohibitively expensive for some places.

This tallies with some of the comments LGC's survey respondents made.

One said: "We have yet to be convinced of the benefit and cost of a neighbourhood plan, which is not really relevant to an up-to-date parish for an area with little development opportunity."

Another added: "We are looking into a neighbourhood plan at the moment but believe for them to be effective we will need to spend quite a bit of money as well as finding a body of volunteers to lead it; this will prove very difficult."

Several said that they had developed parish plans, which will feed into a neighbourhood plan eventually, but that this work was in its infancy.

Jonathan Owen, chief executive of the National Association of Local Councils, said parish and town councils were leading the uptake of neighbourhood planning and that this would increase in time.

"There are about 1,600 plans being developed, 90% of those by parishes," said Mr Owen. "My experience is that as people see the benefits and appreciate how easy it is, there will be a lot more."

COMMENT

LINDA LARTER
Town clerk,
Sevenoaks Town Council



The case for business rates for parishes

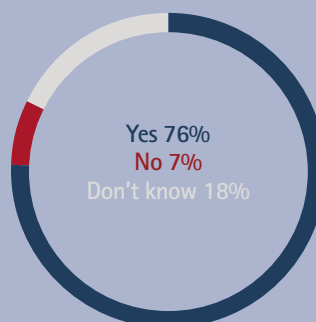
All tiers of councils are subject to considerable economic pressures; town and parish councils because the principle authorities are delivering less in communities. Local councils are left to take on those services or see them lost. These facilities are often those that support the day-to-day wellbeing for local residents, such as public toilets, parks and leisure facilities and bus services.

Town and parish councils are increasingly involved in economic development. For Sevenoaks Town Council, examples of this include running a theatre and commercial cinema, attracting 300,000 visitors per year; developing a bus service linking a National Trust property to the town centre, and an orbital town centre bus extending to neighbourhood villages; regeneration of the train station; and building a new conference centre.

However, town and parish councils' funding mechanisms have not changed; 100% of funding comes from local taxpayers. They do not receive government grants or any income from business rates.

Very few town and parish councils want government grants, which would come with regulations. Their spending is not capped, however, and this freedom is significant in terms of councils' ability to respond to communities' needs. In 2016-17, Sevenoaks Town Council raised its precept by 19%. The move attracted just one letter of complaint.

Do you believe that town and parish councils should be allowed to retain some of the business rates raised in their areas?



Sevenoaks Town Council strongly believes that town and parish councils should receive a percentage of business rates, because the council increasingly provides services to support the town's economic development.

Most local businesses assume the town council receives a proportion of the business rates, and they want to see some of their business rates spent in the locality. A return of a proportion of the business rates could be earmarked for economic development. The town council could easily provide a clear audit trail of the share of the rates spent locally, and spend the funds in relation to its economic development strategy in consultation with the local community, including businesses.

Town and parish councils are having assets devolved to them and want to keep vital facilities available to the community; receiving a proportion of business rates can make this economically viable. The government is reviewing this matter in relation to the provision of public toilets but there are many other local facilities that must be considered.

In raising this matter the response is that the government and principal authorities need the revenue. However, this is a flawed argument as the town or parish council will either spend large amounts of public taxpayer money on implementing an alternative delivery organisation, such as a charity, or will not provide the facility.



Salisbury's influence is

REG WILLIAMS says Salisbury City Council's success rests on ambition, imagination and relationships



Salisbury, Wiltshire is the epitome of all things quintessentially English, with the tallest spire in England atop the world renowned Salisbury Cathedral, home to the finest copy of one of only four remaining original versions of the Magna Carta and positioned at the confluence of five rivers.

It is a beautiful city that has an appeal and a charm all of its own. What more could it possibly need to improve and keep it moving forwards?

Well: a forward thinking and ambitious parish council would be a very good start and that is what it has in Salisbury City Council.

Created in 2009 as part of a local government restructure in Wiltshire, which saw four district councils as well as the then Wiltshire CC abolished, it immediately became one of the largest parish councils in the country, and possibly the largest by turnover and breadth of services provided. Employing more than 60 members of staff and with a turnover just over £4m per annum, it is a body which carries great influence locally as well as having a scale that truly enables it to influence, take on, manage and maintain local services and initiatives which the principal authority increasingly struggles to provide.

With operating freedoms to which the principal authority does not have

access, such as the general power of competence and an ability to raise funding totally free of central government influence, Salisbury City Council has invested heavily in those services for which it is responsible.

More than £2.6m has been spent on refurbishing and modernising the Salisbury Crematorium; £2.2m on completely refurbishing the Grade II-listed Guildhall; more than £1m invested in the renovation of three local parks; and more than £300,000 on play areas and street sport areas. That's just a small snapshot of the capital investment undertaken by the council in the past six years.

Add to this an enormous expansion of its events programme. This included reintroducing the Salisbury Carnival; expanding the Armed Forces Day event; growing the St George's day celebrations; partnering with Wiltshire Council to provide a stunning free music and celebration of Wiltshire event as one of the Olympic torch overnight stops in 2012; and expanding markets provision to complement the twice-weekly charter market to including foodie Fridays, vintage, artisan, international, French and teen markets.

We also have an extensive grant scheme in place, giving core revenue support to the likes of the Salisbury Arts Centre, the Playhouse, the Salisbury International Arts



Festival and Salisbury Museum, as well as providing use of our football and cricket pitches at no cost. Local clubs housed in council-owned buildings do not pay a rental and then there is access to more than £50,000 worth of smaller grants to which local clubs, associations and event

organisers can apply. This gives a flavour of what a proactive parish council can do, supported by forward thinking and ambitious elected members.

The cost to the residents of the city for this service? Just £2.02 per week per household at Band D; can anybody

plainly felt

“There has never been a more timely or pertinent moment for parish councils to step up and truly influence the towns and cities they represent

genuinely say that a charge at that level does not represent quite excellent value for money, in an age when costs are coming under increasing scrutiny?

And what of the future? Large and some small and medium-sized parish councils are going to increasingly come to the fore as budgets and funding are squeezed yet further at principal authority level. Armed with the general power of competence, the only limits faced by eligible parish councils are their imaginations and the desire and aspirations of their elected members.

Circumstances mean that there has never been a more timely or pertinent moment for parish councils to step up and truly influence the towns and cities they represent. In Salisbury, the city council is leading on a programme of devolution of further services and assets from Wiltshire Council which, if agreed, will add up to a significant increase in its turnover and size. But – and this is the crux of the issue – it will give the city council genuine local

influence and control over those services that are at the forefront of public services in the city and in which, for perfectly understandable reasons, Wiltshire Council no longer invests to the extent that local residents wish.

Of course like any public authority, it is essential to form lasting and productive partnerships with other public services and providers, and in Salisbury this is headed by the council's relationship with the Salisbury Business Improvement District among many others. Together with the BID, we have launched a number of initiatives and projects that may not have been feasible if left to one or the other organisations.

Finally, and despite a number of differences on occasions, it has proven to be highly beneficial to both parties, I believe, to have a professional, proactive and mutually respectful relationship with the principal authority, Wiltshire Council, and this has been borne out of relations built between both officers and elected members at all levels.

The future for those progressive parish councils, especially the largest ones, is full of opportunities that they must grasp with both hands if our towns and cities are to fulfil their undoubted potential.

Reg Williams is city clerk at Salisbury City Council

COMMENT

COLIN COPUS

Professor of local politics and director, Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University



Keeping the local in local government

Central and local government's obsession with increasing the size of local government means many councils have lost their roots in real communities of place.

Much of the local government landscape is dotted with large and anonymous entities. That is where parish government comes into its own. Parish and town councils do something of which we are near to losing sight in England: provide identifiable communities – not shaped places, but long standing geographical settlements – with an elected layer of government to represent their interests.

With so many competing large public and private sector bodies creating chaotic networks of decision-makers that create public policy, spend public money and affect very communities, the role of parish councils in giving voice to those communities becomes ever more vital.

Schools, police, health and transport bodies, voluntary organisations and individuals willing to volunteer for local projects can all look to the parish as an electorally legitimised body to bring these disparate networks together. Indeed, such community rebuilding can be a focal point of parish plans that set out a vision for the development and cohesion of the community. Linked to that is the parish role in the neighbourhood planning process under the Localism Act 2011, where parishes can lead the process of deciding the physical development of their area.

Parish and town councils are the building blocks of local government and democracy. Even those areas that lack them tend to create sub-council structures to reflect communities within their boundaries. They also seem to be immune from the upheavals of local government reorganisation. While it is difficult to generalise about almost 9,000 parish and town councils, one thing is sure: parish government gives communities the opportunity to control their future.

Parish and town council government must be more forthright in demanding a place at the table when devolution deals are shaped. It will be parish-level government that will have to make these new entities cognisant of the importance of real places.

The following suggestions would help strengthen town and parish government:

- Challenge the constitutional status of parish and town councils in relation to principal authorities and central government
- Avoid joining parishes together – protect territorial integrity and community identity
- Seek innovative, new and bolder taxation powers
- Demand a more flexible framework within which to cooperate with other public and private sector bodies
- Demand powers over other public and private bodies within the parish or town boundary
- Get bold on political structures – push for directly elected town and parish mayors
- Take lessons from the powers of local government overseas

Local empowerment

New ways of working are bringing decisions closer to residents and delivering for communities, says County Councils Network chairman **PAUL CARTER**



By its very nature, devolution should be localist. This extends well beyond pulling down powers and budgets from central government control, to ensuring they are meaningfully embedded in communities, delivering more effective and efficient use of public resources.

The localism agenda, and now the devolution agenda, have helped form new ways of working between counties, town and parish councils, bringing decisions closer to residents. There are countless new examples of how this

collaboration and innovation is delivering for communities (see the case studies below). Many counties have set up locality governance arrangements, featuring key representatives from parish and town councils.

This has empowered them to help provide highways support, health and wellbeing, skills and community services, and oversee important community assets.

Partners in Suffolk, for example, have come together to increase apprenticeship numbers and attract investment in the town of

Haverhill. In Shropshire, local communities are supported to produce Place Plans, which form a fundamental part of the local plan and planning applications, giving them the ability to directly influence future development and infrastructure in their areas.

Counties are also providing training and support to local councils to build capacity and ensure the smooth transition of services. Cornwall Council has a team dedicated to designing this devolution with parishes and towns (see page 14), and provides legal,

financial and operational advice to make services sustainable.

We must also take into account the stark reality of increasing demand set against decreasing budgets. Counties have the largest and fastest-growing elderly population and look after two thirds of England's maintained roads, and yet receive less funding than other parts of the country. These robust partnerships between counties, parishes and towns offer real of hope in finding innovative ways to continue services that are otherwise at risk.

CASE STUDIES

Wiltshire

Funding to help a campaign to get long-awaited play area over the line, a vital grant to help preserve an under-threat bowls club and money towards the upkeep of a valuable community car park: these are just three examples of how local decisions are being taken at the heart of the community in Wiltshire.

Wiltshire Council has set up 18 'area boards' to devolve powers and a total budget of £2.4m to local communities. Local councillors as well as parish councillors, and other stakeholders sit on these committees, making decisions over local funding, highways, health and addressing local priorities through a unique evidence-led community planning process – giving planning in Wiltshire a very bottom-up feel.

This year, £600,000 is devolved to fund local transport schemes, which means the likes of new zebra crossings, speed calming measures and traffic lights are prioritised and invested in. Parish and town councils are at

the heart of this new approach.

The groups also allow for applications for assets held by the authority to be transferred to the local community. Each area board also has its own website, newsletter and social media, to keep residents informed.

The county has worked closely with parish and town councils to develop this way of working, to truly empower local councils.

Buckinghamshire

In Buckinghamshire, the county council and local councils have actually developed and signed tangible devolution deals to transfer services to communities.

Senior councillors acknowledge that in many instances local councils are best placed to deliver localised services, and this has seen 82 towns and parishes carrying out highways and transport functions. These include grass-cutting, sign replacement and hedge-trimming.

Where there has been an appetite for the

community to take over landmarks – such as the Brill windmill – the county has been willing to engage with local councils to hand over these prized assets to them.

Each area of the county also has its own local area forum, which sets out priorities and needs, which is especially crucial to ensure the right infrastructure is in place for major developments, as well as providing funding for community projects.

The county council is shortly going to launch its own programme to provide parish councils with expert independent support to develop business planning and grow their capacity.

This culture of collaborative working has had a positive impact on national policy. Recently, the county council included evidence from town and parish councils in its response to the government's select committee on the consequences of Hs2 on local communities, which resulted in the agreement of mitigation measures for the county.

A developing role

NALC's **CHARLOTTE EISENHART** examines the role of the parish clerk as a local government career move



To work in a town or parish (local) council has always been an incredible juggling act.

In many cases the clerk is the only member of office staff in the council so they will be involved in every part of the council's activities. They must be up to speed on the council's legal responsibilities, financial management, managing services, communicating with the public, working with volunteers, updating the website, commenting on planning applications, producing a local newsletter, supporting meetings of the council, managing any other staff – the list goes on.

And all to be delivered on a tight budget; the majority of councils in England have turnover of less than £25,000.

While the clerk's role is rich in history, it is modernising and professionalising at a very fast rate. Local councils are growing fast and delivering a wider range of services than they ever have done before. This has affected all parts of the workforce. Anecdotal evidence suggests the workforce is growing (though there is no national data on which we can draw) and the demands are growing too.

We should remember that this affects more than just office staff. Even managing facilities and outside spaces is moving from the 'village handyman' approach to managing a portfolio of assets

held by the council, organising a calendar of events, advising the council on opportunities to improve community relations through how outside spaces are managed.

But it is the role of clerk that has changed the most dramatically in the past few years. Linda Roberts is clerk at Calne Town Council and has worked there for 18 years.

"When I first started at the council there was still quite an old fashioned approach to working, very 'municipal,'" says Ms Roberts.

"It was very small, with outdated technology, using old equipment that was well passed its sell-by date. The town council was almost invisible to the community."

But since then Calne Town Council has grown, due in part to the growth of the town through a surge in housebuilding in the 1990s and 2000s. The council now raises a total annual precept of £1.1m. As an indication of its changing role, the council is considering how it could use a plot of land it owns to run a low-cost housing scheme to include part-buy, part-rent, affordable rent and first time buyer properties.

Ms Roberts explains: "From six staff previously, we are now at the grand total of 29. We have grown a series of huge events, and really get down and involved with the community. We use a collaborative approach, working with the public, private and voluntary sectors

to bring about a very exciting transformation of the town centre. I am negotiating on land and buildings with potential and interested developers; it's very exciting."

It is not just large town councils where these changes are seen. Sarah Jeffries is the clerk to three small parish councils in Wiltshire. "The role has become more diverse. The council has more powers to act and there is more opportunity to better the local community. I see smaller parish councils taking on more and more services, such as street lighting and volunteer-led initiatives. If you look at other countries around the world, parishes can do much more and better," she says.

Interestingly, devolution has not just led to services moving between the tiers of local government. More and more people moving from principal councils, some through TUPE as services are transferred, but also more and more vacancies are being filled from officers from across local government. For example, Hester Hunt, the new clerk at Penzance Town Council, brings 35 years of experience from district and county councils.

"Penzance Town Council is taking on an ambitious programme of devolved services from Cornwall Council," says Ms Hunt.

"My experience in this area helps me see the opportunities and pitfalls. The

biggest challenge has been to learn the 'clerking' side of the job while dealing with the first phase of a devolution programme and making the town council fit for purpose with a governance and staff review."

Does Ms Hunt think there will be increased interest in town and parish roles from officers in other tiers of local government? "I think principal council officers will want to move into parish or town council roles," she says.

"The job is full of variety and you get real enjoyment seeing a project move forward because of community involvement and partnership working. But they mustn't expect an easy ride! The work is challenging with new responsibilities being added to existing responsibilities on a regular basis. Plus you don't have all of the back-room services such as legal or HR, which are a phone call away in a big organisation like a county council."

This is a view that chimes with many other clerks' opinions.

As Ms Roberts says: "The parish or town clerk role, as a career, is treated like a closely guarded secret. I love it and thoroughly recommend it, but we need to get the message out there that that it is a challenging and rewarding career option."

Charlotte Eisenhart is improvement and development manager, NALC

The new breed of pa

NICK RANDLE explores the potential in Sutton Coldfield, while on the opposite page **SUSANNA RUSTIN** shares eight lessons from Queen's Park Community Council

Once essentially a rural phenomenon, town, parish and community councils have now truly arrived as a component of the local government solution in metropolitan areas. This follows the creation in May of Sutton Coldfield Town Council. It was born on a wave of fervour following a community governance review and local referendum in which almost 70% of those voting supported the creation of a town council and were prepared to pay for it. Sutton Coldfield has become at a stroke the largest town council, by population served, within England and Wales.

This council is the latest expression of an evolution of local councils that accelerated following the 2011 Localism Act. The true potential in the provisions of the act are still being explored across the sector but Sutton Coldfield could provide a testbed for innovation and new ways of doing things.

The fact there is no strong tradition of town and parish councils within Birmingham has meant the city council, which had initial responsibility for setting up the town council, was rather feeling its way in the run-up to election day. Some preparations were made but, one would hope, if other local councils are created here in future, there will be more detailed business planning in the run-up and some earlier investments made for putting infrastructure in place. To the city council's credit however,



Charlotte Hodivala is the first mayor of Sutton Coldfield since 1974

and despite being initially opposed to the town council's creation, once a decision was made to do so it showed itself keen to see the initiative succeed. This was symbolised in a touching ceremony before the election where the city council formally returned the town mayor's regalia put into storage when Sutton Coldfield BC was abolished in 1974.

Local councils at this level have a range of powers but very few duties, which means no two are identical. Generally each council exercises the powers relevant for its area, often filling the gaps in principal council provision. The current pressure on funding within principal councils means, however, the gaps are widening and the quantity and quality of the required filler is increasing. A number of services such as libraries, which were not operated before at this level, are now falling within their potential remit. Sutton Coldfield Town Council is

undertaking a series of council-wide workshops during the summer to train new councillors, to consider the posture the council should adopt and particularly to decide how and where it should dance with the city council to shape and improve services.

While politics is not a particular feature of the town and parish council sector, Sutton Coldfield has been immediately buffeted by strong political crosscurrents. Birmingham City Council, with which co-operation will be key for the fledgling town council's success, is Labour-controlled. There is a vibrant independent voice within the town that drove the creation of the town council. Following the election in May, however, the town council reflected the predominantly Conservative leanings of Sutton Coldfield and 18 of the 24 new councillors are Conservative. There has been considerable discussion about how those realities must be managed so that they do not impede the

council in delivering its potential. This was even expressed by the local MP Andrew Mitchell (Con), who in addressing the council's first meeting of electors, called on it to find a collaborative way of working on behalf of the community.

Sutton Coldfield Town Council arrives at a time when local government is changing and there are new powers that have yet to be fully explored. If this council does not have the will, ability and environment in which to innovate then none does.

The first two years will be crucial. There will be further elections in 2018, at which time the community will have an opportunity to judge the new council's performance. By then there will need to be some tangible outcomes that demonstrate the quality of life in Sutton Coldfield has and will be improved as a result of the council's creation and the improvements are worth the additional council tax. In order to get to that position, the councillors will need to work collaboratively, sort out the working relationship with the city council and have a clear, proactive and focused strategy to engender the changes that the community has called for.

Time will tell whether these challenges can be met but there is no lack of will or enthusiasm to embrace the task.

Nick Randle is interim town clerk, Sutton Coldfield Town Council

ish council

LESSONS IN SETTING UP A NEW COUNCIL

Queen's Park Community Council was the first community council in London, coming into existence after the May 2014 elections.

Having campaigned for the creation of the council, and now as a councillor myself, here are my eight lessons in setting up a new local council.

1. It can be done

When a group of residents, myself among them, began the campaign to set up a parish council in Queen's Park, a densely populated ward on the western edge of the city of Westminster in London, I'm not sure we really believed it would ever happen. It did, in part because despite the new council's tax-raising powers, there was never any significant opposition. The first dozen councillors were elected in 2014, less than four years after the possibility was floated.

2. The experience of setting up a council is worthwhile

I read recently that everyone should get a taste of life as a waiter. I think everyone should get a taste of life as a canvasser and campaigner. I had delivered flyers and been a local election candidate for the Green Party before I became involved in the Queen's Park council campaign, so I wasn't a novice. But truly there is nothing like going up to every front door in your neighbourhood, whether to ring on the bell or post a leaflet, to give you a thorough feel for the area and the people who live in it. I'm not starry-eyed about elections but I do think local people knocking on local doors and talking to the people behind them is a good thing.

3. Politics matters

In England, about half of all parish councils including most of the biggest ones are run along party political lines. The rest are run by independents of various kinds. Whether the

new parish you are hoping to create will be political or not is one of the most important questions you will answer. How you answer it will depend on who is leading the campaign for the council, and what the attitude of local politicians is. In Queen's Park, our three Labour city councillors left us to get on with it, and when the elections were held in 2014 there was not a single candidate from a political party on the ballot paper.

4. Minor parties can be useful

Running a council as 12 independent individuals is difficult. With the benefit of hindsight, I would argue strongly that forming a 'minor party' – an entity registered with the Electoral Commission and eligible to fight elections only at parish level – is the best way to ensure discipline and coherence. Not everyone has to agree about everything but it now seems to me that a party name and a process of candidate selection would be valuable.

5. Uncapped precept: better services

With local authority cuts set to continue, and non-statutory services such as parks and children's services taking the brunt, a parish council can be a vital line of defence for a community that feels threatened. Parish precept is uncapped, meaning that unlike council tax it can be put up as much as councillors think is necessary, and it is all collected and spent locally. So if council taxpayers in a civil parish believe higher bills are a price worth paying for extra funding for local services, the parish council provides a mechanism whereby they can collectively make that choice.

6. Find firm backers

If a political party isn't backing a campaign for a new council, the campaigners will need some other source of practical and

moral support. Both in the course of collecting the signatures on the petition, and in any votes that follow, there are logistics to worry about: meetings, posters, local press, photocopying. There is also morale. The National Association of Local Councils is extremely supportive of campaigns for new councils, especially in areas such as London where they have not previously existed. But the process is intensive and requires local backers too. In Queen's Park we were supported by a charity, the Paddington Development Trust. In Sutton Coldfield, where a new town council was elected this year, the campaigners had the support of a long-established residents' association.

7. Training is essential

The campaign is the easy bit. The momentum and sheer novelty of campaigning to create a new tier of local government keeps everyone ticking over. But it turns out that 12 novice councillors and a novice clerk don't automatically understand how it all works once it gets going. Given that the councillors are volunteers, some of whom have full-time jobs, organising training in Queen's Park was not straightforward. But depending on who your councillors are, and what skills and experience they have, going without may not be an option.

8. Staff make all the difference

The clerk and other staff are crucial. This feels almost too obvious to point out but finding qualified people in an unparished area such as London is virtually impossible. Without the right people to deliver your policies, a new council will achieve little.

Susanna Rustin is an independent councillor on Queen's Park Community Council

Successful subsidia

ROB ANDREW explains how work with parishes is essential to Cornwall's devolution model

The principles of localism and devolution are the cornerstones of Cornwall Council's strategy and council plan.

We believe devolution, at its most worthwhile, is about finding the best long-term local custodians of an asset or service valued by the local community. This vision is shared by the Cornwall Association of Local Councils, which represents more than 80% of the 213 town and parish councils in the county.

Cornwall's ambitious local devolution programme gives communities the opportunity to shape their areas, safeguard services and assets, and make improvements that sometimes only local knowledge can provide. Communities across Cornwall have different needs and they can often deliver services that are more flexible to meet local need, more efficiently and economically.

In 2013, budget pressures grew and we had to tighten our spending even more. We recognised that funding for community-based services would reduce or could even end. To mitigate the impact this would have, we established a concentrated devolution programme. Added to this, the devolution deal for Cornwall, signed in July 2015, was underpinned by the principle of double devolution. As John Pollard (Ind), leader of Cornwall Council, says: "As greater powers are passed from Whitehall to Cornwall Council

then it is only right that further powers and influence are passed from Cornwall Council to local communities."

In 2014, the council adopted a devolution framework that offers local communities the opportunity to take on services where they can deliver them better or safeguard them.

Communities can choose their level of involvement, from influencing how services are delivered by the council or its contractor, to taking on full responsibility for managing assets or delivering a service.

This framework sets out the options for the appropriate level of community involvement in services:

Option 1: Influencing and monitoring local service delivery – communities can influence services such as street cleansing

Option 2: Joint delivery/ service enhancement – communities can enhance services supplied by Cornwall Council, eg parking enforcement, environmental maintenance

Option 3: Agency agreements, management agreements, licenses and sponsorship – communities can undertake (and enhance if they wish) mandatory services provided by the council, eg verge cutting, maintenance of public rights of way

Option 4: Delegation of service delivery – communities can take on responsibility for delivery of local services and shape delivery to meet local need, eg environmental

CASE STUDY

St Day clock and war memorial

In 2015-16, Cornwall Council transferred the freehold of the St Day clock and war memorial, a much-loved local heritage asset, to the parish council. The asset needed a significant injection of resources to improve its structural condition. The parish led works that amounted to £100,000 of investment to restore the site. This was partly funded by Cornwall Council and the parish, together with external grant sources. This has led to an ongoing community project with local events, the local school creating animations and parishioners forming a choir that is now being sustained, with the clock once again performing its role as the heart of the village. The project won second place in the national Love Where You Live competition run by Locality. View a short video of the project's story at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKshlzYLSz0



maintenance, public real, maritime facilities

Option 5: Transfer of a service – communities can take on assets and delivery of non-mandatory services that would otherwise cease or be reduced, eg public conveniences, public open spaces

Option 6: Exclusions – strategic services that cannot be devolved for a variety of reasons – eg winter maintenance

As the programme developed it became clear that in addition to developing the devolution framework, with more than 50 separate projects being worked on at any particular time, clear project management and governance processes needed to be established. This included putting in place:

- A devolution board

comprising corporate directors and cabinet members who meet monthly to give strategic direction, set policy and oversee the programme. In the first 12 months, polices were set on a wide variety of topics including property valuations and whole-life financial modelling

- Dedicated devolution team and wider virtual team of officers to provide technical and professional support, eg legal, HR and property. The team meets fortnightly as the strategic devolution group
- Four-stage development/ approval process
- Philosophy of total place packages
- Monthly reporting framework
- Dedicated website giving summary progress, brief details of all projects and technical guidance and checklists on

operational matters, eg operating a car park, together with management topics, eg health and safety

- Training and support programme for local council clerks and councillors, and community groups

In addition to the framework we have established a number of key principles:

- Local solution – where possible looking for simple solutions, considering agency agreements/licenses or a 'total place' option for larger projects
- Ownership – presumption that freehold is the starting point for transfer to a local council, but leasehold is preferred for other types of 'semi-commercial' organisations; we have recognised that sports grounds need careful consideration
- Car park – once transferred, car parks are removed from Cornwall Council's order and need local orders; a local levy can be introduced, which is an agreed increase in charges above what the council plans, to raise local income to support a local service
- Waste – our current waste contract runs until 2020, making it difficult to remove collection sites, and we seek to recharge as part of negotiations
- Site valuations – leasehold/freehold transfers require valuations and some packages have 40-plus sites to be considered.

As our work programme is progressing, we are working

together to develop and clarify policies and procedure including TUPE and pensions, insurance, VAT and the general power of competence.

To date, more than 60 new devolution projects have been successfully established, on top of the 165 agency agreements that are in place with town and parish councils. In addition to securing services that may have ceased or been significantly reduced, many have been enhanced, and they are being delivered with great effectiveness and local pride.

As Jeremy Rowe (Lib Dem), the cabinet member for localism, puts it: "Our ambition is to ensure that by 2018, every one of the 213 local councils in Cornwall that wants to be involved in taking on a greater role in future service delivery is able to do so. We recognise that many local councils are prioritising developing a neighbourhood plan; however, if they want to embrace devolution, we will enable them."

We also want to expand the traditional community-based services that might be considered to include youth work and services for elderly and isolated people. We recognise the work we are doing – in particular the scope and value of some of the bigger projects – is breaking new ground in the UK and we are committed to sharing our work.

Rob Andrew is assistant head of communities and devolution, Cornwall Council

COMMENT NALC LEGAL TEAM

Devolving powers to local councils

NALC's legal team provides a guide to transferring powers

The reality of the budgetary constraints affecting local government is that principal authorities have to make hard choices about how and where to spend their money.

They will inevitably have to prioritise those services they are obliged to provide, for example, social care, and may no longer be able to fund services they have provided on a discretionary basis, such as libraries.

Parish councils can step in but they need help. Here is our seven-step guide to taking on new responsibilities.

Will the principal authority provide the funding?

If not, is it something the local community want and how will the parish council fund the service? Is it in their residents' best interests to take on an unfunded service, even if a council wishes to save or preserve it? Is there anything the principal council can do to help find alternative funding?

Have the principal council and the parish agreed the basis on which the service can be legally transferred?

For example, a parish council has the power to run a leisure centre but not to run a library service without the principal authority delegating it to the parish council.

Are there the requisite levels of expertise and staff resources within the council to take on the service?

How could the principal authority help, with training, secondment, or consultancy support, for example?

Will staff be transferred to the parish council as a result of the transfer of the service?

If so, there may be transfer of undertakings (TUPE) implications and legal advice may be needed.

If the service involves property, for example, libraries or public toilets, will the building be transferred to the parish council?

There may be legal implications and the councils should work together to address them.

Work together on a written agreement, eg a service level agreement

The local and principal councils should create an agreement setting out all of the details of the function and the transfer. It is clearly desirable to set out the details of the service to be devolved and what the parish council is taking on

Bringing in third parties

Is there scope for the councils to look at working with other local authorities or local voluntary groups?

These issues are complex and will need time and possibly help to address. Given the positive returns for all, this should be seen as an invest to save initiative.

Innovation at a local

RACHEL DALTON reports on four pioneering town and parish councils

Although local councils are in some ways constrained by the funding pressures that affect all of local government, several are breaking the mould in service delivery. Using local knowledge, thanks to their closeness to their residents, the ability to raise a precept without central government limits and modern technology, some parish and town councils are finding new ways to solve age-old problems.

Below, LGC has gathered four case studies of town and parish council innovation.

Frome Town Council

Frome Town Council in Somerset is controlled unanimously by Independents for Frome.

Town clerk Paul Wynn says the independent councillors, who gained control after Labour and Liberal Democrat administrations, employ a philosophy called “flat-pack democracy”.

“They put across a very effective communication plan, saying town councils shouldn’t be run on party political basis and that they would only stand for town councils [rather than for the town and principal authorities],” says Mr Wynn.

“They really did throw everything out – the existing committee structures, ‘kowitzing’ to district or county councils – and fought hard for the principal authority to consider Frome



Being free of party political ties has helped Frome Town Council deliver the things most important to residents

as an important part of town, not one of the parishes of Mendip,” Mr Wynn explains.

“That was a sock to the traditional approach of running parishes, in which they were the poor relation councils where you had double- or triple-hatted councillors who considered their parishes as an add-on.”

Being free of party political ties with the two upper tiers

“The council now will fund projects that it wants to do. [Our councillors] are not just there on a Tory, Labour or Lib Dem ticket to make up the numbers

of local government has helped Frome to deliver the things most important to its residents, Mr Wynn says.

“The council now will fund projects that it wants to do. [Our councillors] are not just there on a Tory, Labour or Lib Dem ticket to make up the numbers; they want Frome to change for the better.”

Frome’s marketplace is a case in point. Many residents were unhappy about the levels of traffic running through the marketplace, which they felt was not pedestrian-friendly.

“[The road] cuts our prime shopping street in half and it is difficult to get from one end to the other. It was the product of a county that didn’t listen to the needs of

people in the area; [the county] needed to move the traffic,” says Mr Wynn.

“Changing roads and car parks haven’t traditionally been the preserve of the town council. So we said ‘OK, county council, we want to work with you to make these improvements’. For the first couple of years [the county] thought we were a joke but they weren’t able or willing to put any money into the scheme.”

Frome engaged consultants to design a new layout for the marketplace to solve the traffic problem, based on consultation and engagement with the public. It used an increase to its precept and external funding to pay for the work. Next, it proposed to

level



Frome has worked to improve traffic in its marketplace



Frome is bringing together the town's business community with a series of business breakfasts

Mendip DC that Frome would acquire a 99-year lease on the area of the marketplace that it proposes to pedestrianise. The district has rejected the application but Frome has appealed the decision, and Mr Wynn is “very confident that the decision will go our way”.

“The independent councillors haven’t got a history of working in a certain way between the three tiers of local government,” says Mr Wynn.

“There isn’t the old boy network where [councillors at district or county level] say, ‘listen old chap, could you stop this?’ That has annoyed the district and county councils as this is their responsibility, but because we have the general power of competence, we have said ‘if you’re not going to do it, we will do it ourselves.’”

Mr Wynn says building trust between the public and the council, through extensive engagement, has allowed Frome to hand several projects and services to the community itself.

“We doubled the size of our community grants budget to a tenth of the precept; £100,000 per year,” says Mr Wynn, adding that the council has also employed an officer to help the community with applications for funding.

The council also has plans to involve residents more in budgeting for the services it delivers itself, demonstrating clearly how their choices will affect the level of precept charged. ▶



Feock in Cornwall faced challenges in ensuring elderly residents in the rural village could travel around

◉ “The most important thing here is building community resilience,” Mr Wynn adds. “That’s reinventing what being a good neighbour is; your neighbours need your support to live a happy life. The financial shock that came eight years ago didn’t impact on Frome in the way that it did with all public services; neighbours and community groups are very active in helping each other out.”

Oswestry Town Council
Oswestry Town Council in Shropshire has invested in new technology to run its closed circuit television system to save on future running costs, and uses local volunteers to monitor the footage, in the largest volunteer project of its kind.

Town clerk David Preston says: “[The old CCTV system] was getting outdated. It was expensive to run as we were working on fibre-optics. There was new technology that could deliver it cheaper.”

Rather than connecting the camera system via fibre-optics, Oswestry decided to upgrade to a system that relied on Wi-Fi broadband, Mr Preston says. It used a grant from the county Police and Crime Commissioner, obtained in 2014, of £69,000 to pay for the upgrade.

“Our running costs under the old system were in the region of £20,000 per year. By going to digital wireless, we’ve reduced cost to £2,500 per year,” he says.

The system is now cost-neutral, Mr Preston says, because Oswestry charges another council £2,500 to monitor five cameras in its neighbouring parish.

Since the original CCTV system was set up in 1999, it has been monitored by volunteers. Mr Preston says the volunteers, who monitor the cameras via a control room in the local police station, go through rigorous preparation to ensure the system is run responsibly.

“We have nearly 30

volunteers. They go through strict training by the police in terms of data protection and health and safety, and become registered as police volunteers. They are also Disclosure and Barring Service-checked.”

Volunteers come from all walks of life, he adds: “We’ve got a gentleman who is 96; he is our oldest volunteer. It’s all members of society; mothers who come and do some work while their children are at school, retired police officers.”

The volunteers are co-ordinated by a paid member of staff to ensure that everything runs smoothly, Mr Preston says.

“It’s a system I have been really proud of,” he adds.

Feock Parish Council
Feock in Cornwall faced challenges in ensuring that elderly residents in the rural village could travel around the area and were not isolated from contact with neighbours and friends.

Parish clerk Debra Roberts

says that when Cornwall Council’s dial-a-ride minibus scheme for elderly residents ended due to a lack of funding, it fell to the parish to provide a solution.

“We had some funding from Locality [the network of community-led organisations] to look at replacing the scheme,” says Ms Roberts.

“We employed a project officer to go out and talk to different groups. Lots of people said they wanted a minibus but that wasn’t going to work as they were all travelling at different times, so we came up with the idea of a volunteer transport scheme, where people ring in and book with us, and we co-ordinate volunteers to go and pick them up. We ask them for a voluntary donation, and we reimburse the drivers for their mileage.”

The service runs around 16 trips per week for 30 residents, and links with the two general practitioners in the area, as a number of the trips are to bring residents to and from



Oswestry's closed circuit television system

appointments with their doctors.

“A couple of residents have dementia and get easily confused, so the doctors arrange the transport for them,” says Ms Roberts.

“We have 10 drivers, and often the same ones do the same trips. People were sceptical and nervous about the scheme to start with but as they get to know the drivers and chat to them and use the scheme more and more.”

This gradual build-up of trust between the volunteer drivers and the service users adds a social element to the practical advantages of the scheme, Ms Roberts says.

“People say to the drivers, ‘I haven’t spoken to anyone for days,’” she says. The service is not only available for essential travel to medical appointments, but also for leisure trips that can help to reduce damaging isolation in elderly residents.

“We contact them and say, would you like to get out and about, visit the garden centre

for a coffee, or go to the National Trust site?” Ms Roberts adds.

Stone Parish Council

Stone Parish Council in Kent was “possibly the first parish council on Facebook”, says parish clerk Jennie Thomas.

The council’s use of social media and other digital technology has helped it to meet the needs of its residents more efficiently than before, and to modernise its engagement with and accountability to citizens.

Ms Thomas explains: “We adopted Facebook in 2009 and soon after that Twitter, and we have been using them actively since then.”

Stone sought to overcome the nervousness that surrounds social media and digital technology use within local government more widely.

Ms Thomas says: “There seems to be quite a lot of indecisiveness about how these channels can be used, and all the pitfalls like who can post, what tone of voice you

should take, what content you post. We early on sought to establish a minimum basic level of digital competence within the councils’ workforce.”

The parish does not just use social media to broadcast messages, Ms Thomas adds.

“The social media channels and software for communications that we use mean we can benefit from analytics to look at what things people are interested in and looking for more information about,” she says.

Actual interaction with the public, responding to comments on social media, are a core part of Stone’s strategy, says Ms Thomas: “We don’t shy away from criticism on social media; we use it as an opportunity to explain our decisions and leave that online for people to refer to.”

Stone’s focus is not just on social media but on using technology in all areas of its delivery. Its ground maintenance team, for instance, uses a tablet to

record the results of its playground inspections and upload them automatically to the council’s cloud storage, rather than via paper forms. Similarly, all agendas, minutes and reports for elected members are provided via tablet; it no longer provides paper bundles for councillors.

Ms Thomas adds: “We try to automate as many of our functions as possible. In line with the spending reductions in local government, we have looked at how we can use equipment and software.

“The beauty of parish and town councils is that we’re not really tied into long software contracts with specific providers, which are inflexible. Within the last couple of years we’ve replaced every piece of software that we use with something that has more functionality. Although there is a transition phase, our teams are small so we can implement them quite quickly.”

One example of this, says Ms Thomas, is how Stone updated its accounting software to automate various processes, which meant that a member of staff whose role consisted entirely of inputting bank transaction data could be redeployed on other tasks.

The councils is also looking into achieving “a minimum digital competence across the whole parish” to ensure residents can access services digitally. It will start with research into the barriers to digital access to services, particularly among the elderly.

Ms Thomas adds: “There is a difference between doing digital and being digital, and once you embed digital across your daily operations, automatically you think about how digital can support your activity, rather than it being an add-on.”

