

Item 3

Examples and Case Studies on Shared Services

Smaller Councils Committee – 27 January 2015

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1. Buckinghamshire County Council - a new 'clusters' initiative

Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) is proposing to give parish councils greater powers as part of a new 'clusters' initiative it plans to implement.

The parish council clusters – of between five and 20 authorities – would manage services in each parish, rather than through the county council.

BCC has been working with 23 town and parish councils for several years to support them to take on a range of services. According to the local authority, the main benefits of devolution are that it builds local ownership and enables parishes to take control over how services are delivered. It is now seeking to roll out the programme.

As well as taking control of services, BCC has set aside a budget of £900,000 in scope for 2015-16 for the services, and £700,000 in the following three years – with each town and parish council receiving a budget from this money each year.

Click <http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/devolution/> to learn more about the devolution plans.

Cllr Ken Browse, chair of NALC said: "Parish and town councils know their places better than anyone and it's good to see Buckinghamshire county council looking to work closer with them.

"Clustering and service delegation were two models of how councils can work together to deliver local services which we highlighted in our the Modelling Devolution Report

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=7b3c2eda-617d-48bb-a104-f5c919e94dc1&groupId=10180 we published with LGA (Local Government Association) last year."

2. Joint Working Examples of Lincolnshire County Council & Saltfleetby Parish Council Liaison

Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) operate a scheme whereby Parish Councils can elect to take over the cutting and maintenance of Parish Paths within its village with the basis of the scheme being to encourage councils to use local contractors wherever possible.

Member councils submit quotations to LCC based on a contractor, or employee, carrying out three cuts per year, pay the contractor and reclaim the amount from LCC in two payments, 50% in May and 50% at the end of the season.

Due to current funding constraints, where councils have not taken up the Parish Paths initiative and LCC are responsible for maintenance, paths are only cut twice a year. The benefits of this scheme reduce the costs for the County Council, but ensure better maintained public footpaths for the residents and visitors using the paths of member councils.

Lincolnshire County Council is now party to a scheme together with the Lincolnshire Road Safety Partnership to purchase on behalf of Town & Parish Councils speed indication signs.

Terms have been negotiated by LCC for the purchase of units on behalf of interested councils with a favourably reduced pricing structure the more units it can purchase in one order. The units range from yellow static signs to units with solar capability for battery charging that flash up the vehicles speed, with an option to have Bluetooth capacity enabling the data collected to be downloaded to a laptop, which can then be presented to the Police if a pattern of speeding is identified in order to push for further monitoring by speed gun. The units, which are lightweight and easily mounted, are moved around poles in various locations approved by Highways as suitable. The Town or Parish Councils undertake to insure the devices and the movement of them.

Lincolnshire is a large rural county principally comprising of villages strung out on A, B or narrow minor roads. Saltfleetby Parish Council is a linear village in the Coastal Grazing Marshes, spread along the B1200 a straight road just over 3 miles long with minor side roads; it has a primary school and houses spread out at varying intervals and it suffers from the effects of speeding because of the nature of the road. The council is currently going through the process of designating locations for flashing speed signs prior to purchase of two or three signs as residents have voiced their serious concerns on the speeding problems in the village. Added to the everyday problem is that the area attracts tourists and their safety also needs to be considered as they are a vital source of income in the area.

To date the County Council has interest from several Parish Councils amounting to the potential purchase of 40+ units, but this figure is set to rise.

With the current funding situation, Lincolnshire County Council Highways Department does not have the funds to purchase and install units, but is answering the clamour of councils calling for a solution. There are funding streams available in the region that can be tapped into by councils who do not have sufficient reserves.

Parish Councils have lobbied and ultimately influenced the County Council to act on their, and ultimately their residents behalf, to a major problem.

Jean Brown
3rd October 2014

3. Working Together in Dorset

Introduction

The Smaller Councils Committee of NALC is gathering examples of working together and sharing services. What follows is a brief look at two examples of community working from Dorset. One is a District Council wide approach and the other is a Town Council inspired and driven community partnership.

In common with all predominately rural counties, Dorset relies to a large extent on locally based enterprise and locally delivered services for its economic health. Partnership working is crucial to the success of both.

The Local Government Acts 2000 & 2007 places responsibility on Principal Local Authorities to implement community planning in their areas. While there will be differences in the models across the county and district councils, the common issues are how local views can be gathered and taken into account and how to turn planning into action. With this in mind the first example is Community Planning in North Dorset District Council, followed by The Bridport Local Area Partnership (BLAP)

Community planning in North Dorset

‘Community planning enables local communities to become directly involved in planning for future changes in their area, and help improve the quality of life for residents, support local businesses and economy, and conserve the countryside and environment.’ (Dorset for You website – Community planning)

In North Dorset, unlike many district councils, community planning is through community partnerships based on market towns and their rural areas rather than the boundaries of the district council. These partnerships have developed organically at different times and in different ways, reflecting the differences between the communities. They have all produced evidence based Community Action Plans for their areas.

The community partnerships and the three tiers of local authority (parish & town, district & county councils) come together in the Community Partnerships Executive of North Dorset (CPEND), which co-ordinates community planning across North Dorset, identifies and works on common priorities across the area. It is also worth noting that CPEND liaise with the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils via the association’s northern area committee.

This grassroots bottom up approach led to North Dorset winning ‘Best Community Partnership’ award in 2010.

It is important to note that the partnerships have no statutory powers to take action on their plans; this is done through the local authority and/or the town and parish councils. This has led, in many cases, to increased co-operation between the relevant town council and its surrounding parish councils. An example of which is the contribution of parish councils to the provision of leisure centre, toilet and other services provided by the town council. While this caused considerable debate initially for some parish councils, for many of them now these contributions have been ‘mainstreamed’ into their budgeting.

While the North Dorset approach has produced a number of considerable successes such as the building and running of the Riversmeet Leisure and Community Centre in Gillingham, it is fair to say that the ‘organic development’ of the partnerships has varied across the four market town areas with some adopting the approach wholeheartedly and others less so.

It is also fair to say that there was, and still is to some extent, a tension between what might be termed ‘elected and representative democracy’, where some elected councillors felt that unelected members of the partnerships were making the decisions that should be made by elected bodies, and some members of the partnerships felt that the councils were unable to act quickly enough and were not representative of their communities. This is improving all the time and there is a growing recognition of the need to work together.

Despite the variations in development and the tensions, the approach seems to be working relatively well and continues to develop.

The Bridport Local Area Partnership (BLAP)

The Bridport Local Area Partnership (BLAP) is a partnership formed by Bridport Town Council with ten neighbouring parish councils and more than one hundred local community groups, organisations and individuals working for the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of the area community.

The role of Bridport Local Area Partnership in community planning is to

- Listen to the views of local people and local organisations on local issues and needs;
- Present local views to decision-makers, in order to influence the decisions being made about the local area and its services;
- Help local people, groups and communities to get involved in activities to meet local needs and improve the quality of life in the area; and
- Encourage organisations and authorities providing services to respond to local views and to work together to meet local needs more effectively.

Geographic Area

The Bridport Local Area Partnership (BLAP) covers Bridport and the neighbouring rural parishes, including Charmouth to the west and Puncknowle and Swyre to the east. The partnership includes the town and parish councils, community groups, voluntary organisations and business associations within the area.

How it was set up and how it works

The process of establishing BLAP was led by the local community supported by Bridport Town Council, which is also providing the secretariat for the partnership, and supported by West Dorset District Council. Together they fund a Community Planning Officer to support the partnership and the community planning processes. However, the Bridport Local Area Partnership is an independent body, with its own structure and processes (including a number of active themed working groups), and its activities are determined by the member organisations through the Steering Group. The Steering Group includes representatives from Bridport Town Council, the parish councils and local organisations representing some of the key issues for the area including: The Bridport Chamber of Trade and Commerce, The Bridport Environment Group, the Bridport Fiftyplus Forum, the Western Area Transport Action Group, Dorset Agenda 21, the Bridport Area Forum for People with Disabilities and the Bridport and District Tourism Association, South West Dorset Multi-Cultural Network, etc.

Achievements include:

BLAP Community Directory and Resource Needs Survey – a survey of community organisations in the Bridport area in order to identify their space and other needs. This has been used as a planning consideration in determining community needs and as a good audit of the health of the community organisations.

Provided support for the establishment of the Bridport Area Development Trust, which is currently taking the lead on projects to restore the Bridport Literary and Scientific Institute and the former Methodist Chapel in West Bay and bring them back into community use.

BLAP initiated and facilitated the discussion by local councils of the feasibility of a Neighbourhood Plan for the wider Bridport area.

Arranged Seminar and report on the Future of Affordable Housing in the Bridport Area.

BLAP participated in the steering group that help to deliver the affordable housing scheme of over 50 units in Allington.

BLAP has been very successful in bringing local councils together including developing the Lengthsman scheme and arranging meetings of local clerks. This has been very helpful in sharing good practice across the area.

BLAP continues to provide support to local groups on a wide range of issues and disseminates information widely to its membership.

BLAP helped to start up the Community Orchard project in Bridport. Today there is a very effective local group managing a very popular community open space.

As these achievements indicate BLAP plays a significant role as enabler and facilitator for the attainment of identified community needs and goals

Challenges

West Dorset District Council and Bridport Town Council provide funding that enables the employment of a co-ordinator. This post is needed to support and facilitate the work of BLAP. Bridport Town Council also provides office accommodation and resources, IT, printing and rooms for BLAP meetings.

The funding for a Community Planning Officer's post is crucial to the success of BLAP and withdrawal or reduction in that funding would have serious implications for the future of the Partnership. The District Council is currently reviewing its funding as part of its service review programme. The Town Council and community organisations remain very supportive of BLAP and are working to ensure that the funding for BLAP is maintained.

Conclusion

These two examples although originating at different levels of local government (with overlap) share the approach of being very locally based and operating a very largely 'bottom up' approach based on identified local need . There is little doubt that both are achieving success and look to be sustainable (subject as always to finding the necessary funds to operate). It should be noted, however, that getting to where they are now has not been easy. In fact, it has been, as one commentator put it, 'a baptism of fire' for both examples. Whenever a new venture begins and new people come together there is always the three stages of 'forming'; storming; and norming before the final stage of 'performing' is reached. In community ventures where local authorities and councils are working with community groups this classic cycle has the added dimension of the representative –vs- elected democracy.

Clearly despite the challenges of such new ventures, persistence, awareness, understanding and compromise can lead to the kind of success seen above.

John Parker
Dorset
July 2014

4. Parish Partnership fund boosted by SAM road safety funds with Town and Parish Councils in Norfolk

Norfolk County Council's ground-breaking parish partnership scheme for small highway projects is being relaunched again this autumn, with a £50,000 boost for SAM2 mobile speed warning signs.

The extra £50,000 has been provided by Norfolk's Safety Camera Partnership, raising the total available to £200,000 for highways-related projects to be carried out next year (2014/15). Parishes will be able to bid for funding covering up to half the cost of small-scale schemes. As well as the SAM2 mobile vehicle activated signs, bids could include footways and paths, crossing points, signs and other highway-related projects that are a high priority locally.

This time the conversion of parish street lights to ultra-low energy LEDs will not be included. These conversions, which reduce the energy use, cost and CO2 footprint of street lights, were the main focus of the special 2013/14 scheme, when 75% support was available. Demand was so high that the original £1m fund was increased to £1.26m, with parish and town councils adding £440,000.

David Harrison, the County Council Cabinet member for Environment, Transport, Development & Waste, said: "I am very pleased to confirm that for the third year running the County Council is offering support for town and parish councils in delivering small-scale highway improvements. It has proved extremely popular, and we received 179 bids for the this year's (2013/14) scheme. Not only does the scheme add value for money, it ensures that money is spent where it will make a real difference to local communities.

"This year, in addition to £150,000 allocated from the County Council's 2014/15 highways capital budget, £50,000 is being made available by the Safety Camera Partnership for SAM2 mobile signs that flash reminders to drivers to watch their speed. I look forward to receiving more good bids from Town and Parish Councils, and will announce successful bids next spring"

Alec Byrne, Chairman of the Norfolk Casualty Reduction Partnership, said: "I am very pleased that the Safety Camera Partnership is contributing £50,000 towards the cost of SAM2 signs. We know that, used in the right way, these signs can prompt drivers to slow down, helping to make villages safer and more pleasant for all."

This year, 2013/14 parish partnership schemes have included street light conversions, 'trods' (loose-finished paths that are more economical than paved footways), crossings and speed-reactive signs.

At Swaffham an improved footpath along Cley Road has just been completed through a parish partnership scheme between the Town Council and County Council. Richard Bishop, Town Clerk, said: "It really is great to have the Cley Road footpath improvement scheme completed, as this will be appreciated by all who use our Town Centre via this path, as this is the main pedestrian access to Market Place from Theatre Street Car Park. It will particularly make life easier for people using mobility scooters, wheelchairs or pushchairs, as the footpath is now widened to give a safer more accessible route."

Leziate now has a SAM2 vehicle activated sign to remind drivers to drive slowly near the school, and Elaine Oliver, Clerk to the Parish Council, said: "Leziate Parish Council are delighted that this project benefited from a partnership between County Council, Borough Council, Parish Council and school. It shows what can be achieved when all parts of the community work together."

5. Parishes Working Together (Nottinghamshire)

Following the introduction of a Lengthsman scheme in Nottinghamshire by the County Council, a number of Parish and Town Councils have worked together to deliver the Lengthsman services. Three different models of partnership working have been developed and this paper discusses the styles of partnership and what makes them a success.

a) The Lengthsman Scheme

The Scheme is a local arrangement with Parish and Town Councils supporting them to do more and be proud of their local area in relation to highways maintenance issues. The County Council provide a grant and support to Councils who want to operate a Lengthsman scheme.

The scheme doesn't seek to relieve the County Council of any legal duty to maintain the highway –normal service will continue in areas taking part in the scheme. It is simply an opportunity for parish and town councils to make a difference to the appearance of their local highway amenities through employing a local person or contracting a local company to carry out minor jobs within their community.

The jobs that a Lengthsman might undertake are those that may cause concern for local residents or the appearance of a local environment, but will not necessarily be prioritised by the County Council unless they are causing a safety issue.

By taking part in the Lengthsman scheme, town and parish councils can take control of minor problems themselves, acting quickly to respond to issues which the County Council may not always be able to prioritise or address immediately.

Possible benefits include:

- Improved satisfaction levels amongst residents
- Increased frequency and improved standards of local service delivery
- Parishes being able to prioritise local activity to meet local need
- Recurring minor issues being dealt with more efficiently.

It will also provide local employment opportunities and is part of the Government's localism agenda, whereby communities become more involved and take pride in their areas.

To reduce the number of Town and Parish Councils which the County Council has to deal with, an incentive was provided to encourage Councils to work together, for example where three Councils agreed to work together and additional sum amount to about to about 5% of the total monies involved was provided to the lead Council to help defray their administrative costs to deliver the scheme for the three Councils.

Each of the lead Parish Councils enters a formal contract with the County Council which covers the range of work that can be carried out (see Appendix 1), the Health and Safety and Insurance requirements. In the case of the lead Parish Council there is also a requirement to maintain adequate records and handle all payments to employees/contractors.

Part of the formal contract with the County Council provides training for employees of the Parish Councils to ensure safe working practices allow with the appropriate personal protective equipment. Where an external contractor is involved, the Parish Councils needs to ensure that they meet the standards for insurance, risk assessments and method statements.

b) The Partnerships

To deliver the Lengthsman services three different arrangements have been established in North Nottinghamshire by different groupings of Parish and Town Councils. The Parish and Town Councils themselves without any direct involvement of external agencies set up these partnerships and these can be described as

- Larger Council providing the full range of services for Smaller Councils
- Common Clerk between a number of smaller Parish Councils
- Local Grouping

These three models are described in detail below

c) The Large Council leading

Harworth and Bircotes Town Council is the largest Council in North Nottinghamshire with annual expenditure in excess of £200,000. Prior to the introduction of Lengthsman scheme, HAB Town Council already employed personnel for carrying out minor duties within the community such as litter picking, snow clearing, etc so when the Lengthsman scheme was introduced HAB Town Council were one of the first to sign up. They also recognised that by working with the smaller Parish Councils in their vicinity that they could extend the scheme to Parish Councils with limited resources and part-time Clerks.

In the first year of the scheme HAB provided the Lengthsman services to Scrooby, Blyth, Hodsock and Babworth Parish Councils. In the second year Ranskill, Everton and East Markham Parish Councils were added.

Each Parish Council in the group decides on what its local priorities are and based on an agreed tariff they are able to request these services from the HAB Town Council and their employees.

The scheme has been successful outcome because HAB and their clients, the smaller Parish Councils had a clear understanding from the outset of what was to be delivered and how it would be delivered.

Benefits of this approach

- Existing Council resources can be expanded to deliver the services
- Administration is possible again with existing resources
- Provides opportunity for Larger Council to develop its own services through the purchase of capital equipment which otherwise might not have been able to be justified

d) Common Clerk

Like a number of small Parish Councils around the country, the neighbouring Parishes of Sturton le Steeple, North and South Wheatley, North Leverton and South Leverton share a Clerk who works for each of them on a part time basis.

The Parish Councils decided to be involved with the scheme and the Clerk administers the scheme jointly on their behalf. These Councils already employed the services of a two contractors and therefore made the additional work of the Lengthsman scheme straightforward to combine with their duties following appropriate training

Benefits of this approach

- Administration resources already available to detailed local knowledge of the issues to be addressed
- Single tier structure of administration
- Reporting back direct to Council is the responsible officer, the Clerk.

e) Local Grouping

The third model involves three neighbouring Parish Councils, Sutton-cum-Lound, Lound and Mattersey, and the partnership working came about because of friendships between the Chairs of two Councils and the Clerk of the third. Because of these friendships (not related to Parish Councils activities) the Councils were able to sit down together to discuss the scheme in the knowledge that three of the people involved knew each other and were able to build trust in their working relationship for the scheme.

Unlike the other two schemes discussed above none of these Parishes had their own employees and therefore set up the scheme using an external contractor selected after the appropriate procurement process.

One of the Councils lead the scheme, in this case the Clerk from Mattersey, and after receiving the schedule of works to be carried out from each Council created the invitation to tender, received and analysed the numbers for presentation to the joint committee set up to manage the scheme on behalf of the three Parishes. The orders were then placed for the three Councils by the lead Council. The individual Councils monitored work and when complete was reported back to the lead Council for payment to be made from the funds supplied from the County Council.

Benefits of this approach

- Removal of administrative burden from two out of the three Councils
- The lead Council can recompense its Clerk for the extra workload from the incentive money provided by the County
- Because existing contractors of the three Parish Councils were invited to quote for the work, they had been vetted for Health and safety requirements, Insurance, etc.

f) Conclusions

Each of the models of partnership working has its own benefits but ultimately relies on the trust built up between Councils before and during the projects and not just at Clerk level but between Councillors from the respective Town and Parish Councils.

The size of the Council and its resources are also key aspects of which model is appropriate.

g) The Future

The County Council has indicated that only half the money will be available in the following year 2014/15 and accordingly each Group will be considering whether to continue in the Scheme which is voluntary on both sides and will not jeopardise this maintenance work being carried out by the County in the event that Parishes are not involved, it might just take longer to happen!

h) Lengthsman Activities in Nottinghamshire

Activities can be carried out on land which is under the ownership or responsibility of either the County Council or parish/town council. Land owners consent will need to be sought in all other instances.

Minor highways works:

- Grass cutting (The County Council will provide a map of the areas that will need to be cut)
- Bus shelter cleaning
- Siding up; cutting out encroaching grass from footways with a spade
- Rights of way (communicating with land owners)
- Removal of soil/detritus where dropped or washed onto road
- Cutting of vegetation overhanging the road or pavement (or liaising with landowner as appropriate)
- Removing growth from parapets or fences and minor repairs
- Reporting safety defects e.g. potholes etc
- Maintenance of landscaping features

Signs (including reflector posts):

- Cleaning (with cold soapy water and a brush)
- Painting of heritage cast iron direction signs
- Minor repairs such as retightening the brackets where signs have slipped

Drainage:

- Grips; (cleaning existing with a spade) - a grip is a hand dug drainage channel from the edge of the road to a ditch, used where water collects.
- Outfalls; keeping the end of a drainage pipe or culvert clear of obstruction
- Localised ditching, digging out existing ditches where silted up, or digging short stretches of new ditch in the highway verge if needed.
- Cleaning leaves from on top of gully grates
- Rodding of pipes (often leading from a gully into a nearby ditch)

Rights of Way maintenance

- Extra grass cuts on gitty paths (where landownership is not usually an issue and paths are similar to adopted footpaths already maintained by the County Council)
- Clearing around overgrown public footpath signs, stiles or gates
- Minor repairs to gates, stiles and bridges (e.g. replacing broken rails)
- Polite requests to landowners/householders to cut hedges or reinstate cross-field paths (if problems are identified locally)

Referral of work to Countryside Access Team including:

- Bridge, stile or gate replacement or installation
- Obstructions where the landowner is not contactable or amenable
- Queries about path location
- Request for new signs and way marks

Winter weather: (same responsibilities as the existing snow wardens)

- Minor snow clearing
- Gritting on footpaths and minor residential roads
- Reporting major problems

Reporting

- Reporting any major highways issues which require action to the relevant NCC District Highways Manager

Parish council/other additional tasks

- Any tasks that the parish or town council determines as a local priority and within their remit.

6. Parish Clusters in Essex

Great Bardfield was one of the first Parish Councils to form a 'cluster' with two of our neighbouring councils, Finchingfield and Wethersfield and we called ourselves "The Three Fields". This arrangement came about in the late 1970s after the last reorganisation of Local Government in 1974/75. We were appointed two District Councillors and the same County Councillor to _____ the three parishes, and so by mutual agreement we had a common forum to discuss our problems with each of the other authorities, and also when required we invited representatives of the local police, the fire service, county highways, the local health centre etc. When we had issues we wanted to discuss with them.

_____ (sentence missing) hold office for a whole year and this arrangement sometimes continued for more than one year. We also arranged joint contracting services which I will explain in more detail later in this report.

In 1998 the District Council followed our example and arranged to 'cluster' the whole of the parished area of the district and created twelve clusters to include the fifty four town and parish councils in groups of three, four or five according to their representation on the district council, and as far as possible to match the boundaries of the County council constituencies. The cluster elected its chairman and clerk and the district council appointed one of its staff as the liaison officer for each cluster. The success of this arrangement largely depended on the personalities involved, and some clusters worked more successfully than others. Some parishes did not co-operate very readily with their neighbours, and where the larger councils had an efficient clerk they felt they could get on just as well on their own.

The consequence was that in 2010/11 the district council, faced with the need to make economies, then withdraw its support from the cluster arrangement and left the parishes to manage these affairs on their own if they wished to do so.

Therefore my council and a number of others in the district have continued their cluster arrangements where they have reason to do so. These arrangements include joint contracts to deal with highway verge cutting, grass cutting on Village greens and playing fields, and now there is talk of sharing snow clearing equipment for paths and shopping areas in adjacent villages. Other partnerships have been created between parishes, not necessarily in the original clusters, to deal with issues such as objections to gypsy camp sites, common problems with county highways on the A604 road which passes through several villages, and objections to a major development on a green field site between a number of villages on our district council boundary. All of these have been, managed by the parishes themselves raising a fund between them to cover expenses.

When the district councils were first set up, because of a large unparished area of the main town of Braintree, the district council identified fifteen concurrent functions which many of the parish councils were already involved in running, and which would now be run by the district council in the town of Braintree. Therefore they agreed to contribute to these functions in the parishes with which they called the Parish Support Grant. This continues to the present day, but with inflation and a freeze which was imposed three years ago this grant has gradually reduced in value. It covers services such as off-street parking, footway lighting, swimming pools, sports fields, allotments, village halls, war memorials, public seats and shelters and public conveniences etc. But not all parishes have those services so they are awarded the support grant accordingly.

The district council has now initiated a 'consultation' on the whole subject of the funding of public services from 2014 onwards, and because of the large unparished area which they have been servicing in the past the parishes will have difficulty in achieving a solution which is seen to be fair to all parties at a time when funding is more difficult to achieve. At the same time we suspect that the district is trying to pass on some of these costs to the parishes, and we should accordingly resist this unless a higher council tax charge is levied from the unparished area.

For the parishes to be able to deal with the concurrent functions in the future, it would seem that more cooperation between partners in the form of clustering to spread the costs would seem to be the way forward.

This is a brief summary of the situation to date, but I may have some more information as our negotiations with the district council proceed. I hope this is of use to your committee members.

Tony Hayward. V. Pres. NALC

7. Other Clustering examples for smaller councils

Introduction

Smaller councils are often perceived as having less capacity to deliver for their communities: they are often isolated, rely on less precept and to deliver for their communities. The examples below demonstrate this is clearly untrue. From Hampshire to Worcestershire, small - even tiny - councils across England are achieving great things including services for young people, increased broadband speed and road safety measures.

Below are twelve examples collected from across the country of smaller councils working together to deliver. We hope these examples inspire other councils within the sector to be equally as innovative – the principles of co-operation and collaboration outlined below is something all councils can utilise.

Working together, smaller councils (those with less than 6,000 person electorate or under £250,000 precept) can achieve great things – often challenging the output of larger councils in their areas!

i) Hurstbourne Tarrant PC: shared Speed Limit Reminder service

The three parishes of Hurstbourne Tarrant, Vernham Dean and Tangleby work with Test Valley Borough Council in North West Hampshire to provide a shared Speed Limit Reminder service.

The service has been in operation for 4 years, providing speed limit reminder equipment across the three parishes to improve road safety and provide traffic calming measures. The speed limit reminder sign displays a neon roundel when approaching vehicles exceed the speed limit, telling them to slow down. They do not record the details of the vehicle, but provide a warning to drivers. The Principal Authority moves the SLR equipment between parishes for a small charge.

Individually the three councils could not afford to purchase and operate this equipment, however the shared scheme spread the capital and operating costs across the three councils equally. In addition, the councils each realised the benefits of better communication, joined up working and clustering generally and will possibly work together on other initiatives in the future.

There were no obstacles to the implementation of this clustering scheme, however it was acknowledged by the participants that a larger schemes may require additional administrative assistance from the lead local council.

The Speed Limit Reminder service continues to run and will do so for the foreseeable future.

j) Burtle Parish Council: Gritting scheme

Burtle parish council in Somerset has joined with three other rural parishes to grit village roads in bad weather. The aim was to provide a route in and out of each village in snowy conditions, which are otherwise not gritted by the Highways Authority. In bad weather, uncleared minor roads going into each village cut off access to the main routes and therefore essential services.

Lead by Burtle the councils – Catcott, Chilton Polden and Edington, all with fewer than 600 electors – have joined together to provide a self-help gritting scheme for the villages. Each member council contributes £100 per annum for a minimum of three years and the Somerset County Council contributes a supply of grit each winter. Last winter, the routes to essential services were cleared, including the Doctors surgery carpark – a service residents were particularly grateful for.

Each council has enjoyed working closely together and the benefits of working cooperatively, with the County Association and the County Council have been noted by the councils and residents.

The main obstacle the project faced was the limited application of HMRC regulations concerning the use of red diesel in the tractors use to tow the gritter (in this case, supplied by a local farmer). Following negotiation with HMRC, councils have been allowed to use red diesel when the weather is severe.

The project will be reviewed at the end of 2014.

k) Shipston on Stour Town Council: local council support group

In Warwickshire, Shipston on Stour Town council, along with Little Wolford, Pillerton Hersey, Long Compton and Tredington have formed a support group for local council clerks and councillors in the Shipston area. Using Shipston council's meeting facilities, the group has met to share resources, expertise and experience. Apart from the administrative costs which are borne by Shipston on Stour, the group is committed to running at zero cost.

When the group identified a need for inexpensive training, they contacted the Warwickshire Association for assistance and the County Association has been able to provide free training for both councillors and clerks on a number of key areas including procedures and powers; finance; planning and the code of conduct. Through the support group, a number of the very small councils have received training that they were otherwise unaware was available.

Although the group is currently made up of six core members, they are hoping that over time others will be encouraged to attend and share their expertise.

l) Kingston Seymour Parish Council: North Somerset Flood Risk Action Group

The North Somerset Flood Risk Action Group is a group of approximately twelve town and parish councils, all of which have significant parts of their parishes at risk of fluvial or tidal flooding. It was formed five years ago, with the aim of addressing the increasingly limited funding spent on flood defences in the area and improving community awareness about the issue.

Together, the twelve councils were able to provide a more cohesive argument, based on their similar experiences, to persuade the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to provide emergency repairs to the flood defence system and to implement a capital works programme across the 2014-2016 period. Their strengthened voice has also allowed councils to successfully challenge elements of the Environment Agency's Severn Estuary Flood Risk Management Strategy, which they believed would have negatively impact on residents in their parishes.

The group also helps to promote personal and community flood plans and encourages members to share these across parishes in order to ensure all residents are aware of flood risk.

m) Dulverton Town Council: Exmoor Parish Lengthsman Scheme

Dulverton Town Council has joined with ten parish councils, West Somerset District Council and Somerset County Council to provide lengthsman to maintain the roads in their areas (a lengthsman is a person who is in charge of a particular length of road and maintains the verges adjacent to it by weeding and tending to the grass and hedgerows).

Originally initiated by a £3,000 funding grant from Somerset County Council, the scheme has been in operation for three years. Funding is provided by each of the ten parish councils to maintain the scheme and in addition the Principal Authority, West Somerset District Council, contributes a small grant. While the costs of employing a lengthsman would be prohibitive for the individual parish councils, by working together, the scheme allows each council to provide a much needed service for their community. In fact, in some cases, where highway maintenance is no longer being undertaken by the Principal Authority, the parish council lengthsman can take over.

Another benefit of close working between a large number of parish councils is that the smaller, rural parishes have improved contact with their colleagues and have a forum in which to raise other issues and share ideas. The scheme is secure up to 2014, however future sustainability will be dependent on the parish and town councils ongoing ability to continue to finance the scheme.

n) Newland Parish Council: improved communication on highways closures

Newland Parish Council and six other parish and community councils in Gloucestershire have joined together to deliver improved co-ordination on highways closures and emergency services issues.

The A466 which runs down the Wye Valley through England and Wales is prone to emergency closures due to land slips. The highway is serviced by the Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire County Council highways departments. The seven local parish and community councils banded

together to create the Consortium of Wye Valley Councils which acts as a meeting point for the three tiers of government, as well as other service providers. The Group is acting as an information hub between the Principal Authorities and the local councils in order to ensure that each local area is kept up to date with road closures and safety issues. They have found that, by working together through the Consortium they have a much stronger voice when negotiating with the Principal Authorities than each council does individually.

The Consortium has gone on to foster important relationships with other agencies, including police and ambulance services, the Woodland Trust and the Forestry Commission.

o) Wolston Parish Council: Community Speed Watch

Wolston Parish Council and Brandon and Bretford Parish Council in Warwickshire have joined together to develop a Community Speed Watch programme. Rather than hire the relevant equipment (including a speed gun and signs) from the police station, which would require booking time slots in advance and travelling to Rugby to collect the equipment, the two councils decided to share the costs and invest in the equipment themselves.

The two councils agreed to share the purchase and ongoing maintenance costs

The councils also organise community forums which train volunteers to use the speed camera. The volunteers, working in pairs at designated locations then monitor the traffic speed within their community. They have no enforcement power; however they feed the information back to the Warwickshire Police. In certain cases, the Police will send out notices to drivers to encourage them to reduce their speed in the future.

p) Kilsby Parish Council: Funding of two Police Community Support Officers

Kilsby and Crick Parish Councils in Northamptonshire had both committed to providing more visible policing but could not individually afford to provide a full time Police Community Support Officer post. The parish council in Kilsby conducted a door to door poll to ask residents if they would be prepared to see a small increase in the precept in order to pay for part of the PCSO post and residents agreed.

The Daventry Rail Freight Terminal, which has a sight near Crick, was losing goods from the back of its vehicles and the company that runs the site, Pro-Logis, agreed to contribute just over half the funding to supply two Police Community Support Officers. The Police Authority spent some time developing a contract between the two parish councils and Pro-Logis in order to start the scheme.

With the additional funding from Pro-Logis, a PCSO now covers both villages and the freight terminal on opposite shifts. All parties report a reduction in crime and residents report feeling much safer. While costs continue to be an issue for the parish councils, this three party agreement has been an extremely successful initiative so far.

q) Isham Parish Council: Speed reduction scheme

Isham and Orlingbury parish councils in Northamptonshire have joined together to provide and maintain a flashing speed sign and speed camera across the two parishes. Both councils were

concerned about speeding in their parishes and together, pooled resources to enable the purchase of a flashing speed sign and camera.

The equipment and maintenance costs are shared between the parishes equally. Both councils report a significant reduction of speed in their areas.

r) Aspatria Town Council: Rural Partnership

Nine parish councils in Cumbria (Aspatria Town council, Allonby, Hayton and Mealo, Oughterside and Allerby, Westnewton, Plumbland, Bromfield, All Hallows and Blennerhasset and Torpenhow Parish Councils) have joined together to form a rural partnership. The group identified some common issues that could be resolved more effectively by working together, rather than as individual parishes. The group has developed a Community Action Plan, based on commonalities shared by the parish councils' plans and additional survey work.

The final plan was written in partnership with a number of other organisations, including Cumbria County Council; Allerdale Borough Council; Police; Fire and Rescue Service; National Health Service; Beacon Hill School and a number of care providers in the area. Key aims identified within the plan are the protection of the environment; supporting the local economy; increasing affordable housing and improving access to health care. The Rural Partnership directs the implementation of the plan and monitors objectives.

The Rural Partnership and Plan has enabled some tiny rural councils (some with less than 500 residents) to address issues within their community in a productive way. The Partnership enabled representatives from very small councils to feel empowered when designing objectives with service providers and representatives from the Principal Authorities. The Parish Councils also developed a more cohesive relationship amongst themselves.

s) Bayton Parish Council: Broadband service provision

Bayton, Eastham, Lindridge, Mamble, Rochford, Hanley, Bokleton, Kyre and Stoke Bliss parish councils in Worcestershire joined together to provide faster broadband speeds for their communities. They worked in partnership with Worcestershire County Council (who originally suggested the clustering arrangement) to partially fund and support the introduction of a faster broadband service. Worcestershire County Association also supported the process and assisted with the contacts from the range of parish councils involved.

Although the project expected to be superseded as a result of funding from the European Union, the initial funding and expertise from the parish councils and Principal Authority has meant residents are much closer to receiving a faster broadband service than would otherwise have been the case.

t) Kilsby Parish Council: Youth services provision

Kilsby Parish Council with Barby and Onley Parish Council made a joint bid for a grant for youth services provision across the two parishes from the Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs.

As neither parish had a youth club or any youth services, a need was easily identified by the clerk, who works for both councils. On receipt of the £10,000 grant, a youth worker was employed to develop a service, including a holiday programme for young people. The scheme has improved joint working between the parishes and as well as providing a service for the young people in each parish, it has also given them a chance to have a voice in parish affairs.

The project is on-going until the grant funding runs out. At this point it will be difficult for both parishes to maintain the cost of the scheme independently, unless additional funding is found.

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