

councillor

The pros and cons of sitting on two councils



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Which hat should I wear today? How many times do we, as twin-hatted councillors, say this to ourselves? Although still useful, in today's world this is not the most important question we should be asking.

Instead I ask myself, how can my collective two hats ensure that my residents live in a thriving community, with the local services they need, want and deserve, within the context of the wider district? This is my mantra as a twin-hatted councillor.

I am the Chairman of Wythall Parish Council and Leader of the Independent Group on Bromsgrove District Council. My parish is sizeable, with an electorate of around 10,000. I am very lucky in that my parish and district wards are identical so my residents are the same. I am their councillor with responsibility across both the first and second tiers of government. My paymasters are the residents that I represent, not the councils that I sit on.

Planning and addressing housing needs, and balancing those needs and the aspirations of ward, parish and district, is one of the greatest challenges facing any dual-hatted councillor.

Not only are we trying to represent and prioritise our own ward, we must also ensure that our parish plays

an active part in the plan-making process.

I believe neighbourhood plans must provide the answer, as they position and state the aspirations of our neighbourhoods within the wider district, regional and national landscape.

To date, 90 per cent of all neighbourhood plans have been led by parish councils. My own parish is just starting its neighbourhood plan, following the adoption of Bromsgrove's Local Plan.

The neighbourhood planning process, although led by the parish, needs the support of the planning authority: my being involved from both perspectives should help move the odd log-jam.

How can I ensure that my residents continue to benefit from those discretionary services that are under threat as a result of the financial pressures that face the district council?

We need to work together to develop creative solutions that will save money for the district while being affordable to the



parish. As a twin-hatted councillor, I understand those financial pressures and can help identify opportunities where the parish council can take on the delivery of local services.

As Chairman of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), I spoke at the recent annual District Councils'

Network's conference (see

p23), at a workshop on double

devolution. We were all impressed by the partnership working between Newark Town Council and Sherwood District Council with regards to their devolution package, which will give the town council more control and influence over the delivery of its services while delivering significant savings to the district.

Locally, we are still at the embryonic phase of any such discussions, but with the support and knowledge that is becoming available within both NALC and the LGA I am confident that we will find ways of working together to continue to deliver the services that our communities want.

Is there a downside to being twin-hatted? Not really. I have a couple of personal ground rules that I try to stick to.

At a district council meeting, I am representing my ward, not my parish, and will consider the risks and benefits to the district

as a whole when making a decision. At a parish council meeting, I am representing my ward, within the parish, and will consider the risks and benefits to the parish as a whole when making a decision.

Otherwise I consider that I have a bigger toolbox that I can dip into to resolve local issues, and a larger network for support.



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The LGA has a councillor workbook on **'Working with town and parish councils'**, see www.local.gov.uk/councillor-workbooks