

# Modelling devolution

Working together to deliver local services



# Foreword

This is a time of significant change in local government.

Both principal and local councils are seeing an increase in demand for services. Coupled with the reduction in public spending and the development of new methods of joint working such as community budgeting and local integrated services, the time is right for a fresh look at how councils at all levels can work together.

We know that there is much existing good practice of councils working more closely together, pooling resources, devolving services, and building capacity throughout the sector.

With around 9,000 local and nearly 400 principal councils in England alone, there is a rich supply of knowledge and skills, with a real willingness to work differently. We know the best councils are already working together to develop and provide services at the lowest appropriate level.

The Local Government Association (LGA) and National Association of Local Councils (NALC) support councillors and officers in part by sharing good practice and learning. This report aims to outline common features of how those leading councils are devolving services and assets and how principal councils are working with local councils to help develop their capacity and do even more on behalf of their communities.

We acknowledge that this is not always easy.

Culture, behaviour, ambition, political will, availability of financial resources and technical expertise can vary hugely from place to place. However, national policy and regulatory developments in planning, asset management and service provision, coupled with the financial pressures faced by all councils, are driving a renewed wave of interest in working at a very local level.

A spotlight is truly being shone on how councils are working together and what more can be done.

We hope you will find the examples in this report inspiring and informative. We are proud of what our councils are capable of when they work positively together.

This is a trying time for councils and councillors are having to make tough decisions with diminishing resources.

More than ever, councillors and officers will have to work with and listen carefully to local people to ensure that the right services are being delivered in the right way, to the right people, at the right level. This cannot be a short term, one-off effort. For local councils to continue to grow in importance and prominence in the years to come – matching their long and rich heritage with a bright and prosperous future – the media, public, private and voluntary sectors must firmly place local councils on their radar,

In order to deliver localism and the provisions of the Localism Act local councils in their turn must seize the opportunity and in particular find new ways of working with principal councils to deliver for local people and communities.

Continued strong local leadership will be needed at all levels to deliver the best possible outcomes for communities.



**Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell**  
Chairman, Local Government Association



**Councillor Ken Browne**  
Chairman, National Association  
of Local Councils







# Introduction the localism landscape

Our report is set within the context of the Government's localism and decentralisation agenda and its ambitions for open public services. This recognises that solutions designed, developed and delivered locally are often better placed than more centrally inspired initiatives to secure the cost effective outcomes people and communities need.

Responses that are developed, as well as delivered, locally can provide for real local ownership and put local people in the driving seat. This ownership matters because it means that projects can make better use of local knowledge, assets and infrastructure.

In the Coalition Agreement of May 2010 the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged that 'the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today'. This undertaking was reflected in a Government commitment to pass new powers and freedoms to town halls and communities, with power exercised at the lowest practicable level.

## Localism Act

One of the key instruments for doing this is the Localism Act 2011, which gave councils and communities new powers and rights to continue to make a difference locally.

Importantly for principal and eligible local councils, the act introduced a new general

power of competence giving them the legal capacity to do anything that an individual can do that is not specifically prohibited. This new power gives councils more freedom to work together and with other organisations in new ways, be it to drive down costs or simply work more effectively. Crucially it gives councils increased confidence to do creative, innovative things to meet local people's needs.

The Localism Act also introduced:

The community right to challenge, giving local councils and other groups the right to express an interest in taking over the running of a principal council service.

The community right to bid, whereby principal councils are required to maintain a list of assets of community value, which have been nominated by the local community, including by a local council. When listed assets come up for sale or change of ownership, this right gives community groups the time to develop a bid and raise the money to bid to buy the asset when it comes on the open market.

The community right to build, part of the neighbourhood planning reforms, which give local councils and communities, in particular through local councils, the right to draw up a neighbourhood plan. It enables local people to shape and deliver the small scale site specific, community led developments their local community wants.

## Open Public Services

In parallel with the Localism Act the Open Public Services White Paper, published in July 2011, further advocated the Government's wish to give people, where possible, direct control over neighbourhood



services, either by transferring the ownership of those services directly to communities, or by giving neighbourhood groups democratic control over them. It also articulated the Government's desire to do much more to reinvigorate the most local forms of government – parish, town and community councils – and allow them to take control of key local services, ensuring that these opportunities are available to everyone in the community. The white paper also set out Government's plans to make it easier to set up local councils.

## Community budgets

As part of the drive to encourage more local control over the delivery of services, in 2011 the Government launched its community budgets pilot programme at the LGA's annual conference, followed in October 2011 by publication of the Community Budgets Prospectus.

This resulted in ten areas being selected to pilot neighbourhood community budgets, two of which are being led by local councils: Haverhill in Suffolk and Ilfracombe in Devon.

Neighbourhood community budgets offer people the freedom to do things differently in their own neighbourhoods. They enable areas to bring together the money, people and other resources needed to tackle local issues and improve services. They also provide a basis for much more integrated ways of managing local services, with residents and service providers working together to design and commission services around the community's priorities. Through these pilots the government wants to test how control of services and the budgets to run them can actually be pushed down below the principal council level to communities and neighbourhoods. These projects build on work already undertaken through initiatives such as participatory budgeting and the Cabinet Office's Local Integrated Services.

## Modelling devolution

Finally in their Open Public Services 2012 document the Government undertook to ask the LGA and NALC to help with the development of model schemes for neighbourhood councils to become more involved in local service delivery and assume responsibilities and powers devolved from principal councils.

It is against this background that the LGA and NALC have undertaken to work together, including developing this joint report.

There is little new in what we are proposing. Right across the length and breadth of the country many local and principal councils have already seen the benefits of devolving service delivery to a more local level. By working more closely on shared ambitions they are already reaping the rewards.

The models described are based on the experiences of just some of these councils. But with nearly 400 principal councils and around 9,000 local councils in England alone, there could be an almost infinite number of ways that they could work together.

The five approaches described are not meant to offer a prescriptive solution to partnership working and delivering localism and community empowerment. Rather, drawing on the experiences of those that have already done it, we are aiming to offer food for thought with some recommended do's and don'ts for those councils that are just contemplating setting off down this path to consider

Readers of this report – be they councillors or officers – are invited to take a 'pick and mix' approach to the models outlined and adapt the elements and ideas included to

create a plan and way of working together that best suits their local context.

## Approaches and illustrative case studies

We have distilled five broad approaches from the almost infinite variety of approaches that principal and local councils could take to working together. These are based upon the significant amount of engagement in service delivery that local councils already have and represent the core models from which most local variation derives.

The five broad models enabling local councils to become more involved in service delivery are:

1. **The charter approach.** An agreed local charter or more formal contract which lays down the principles of how principal and local councils should work together.
2. **Community asset transfer.** Where the principal council transfers assets to a local council.
3. **Clustering.** Cooperative working across local councils to take on services.
4. **Service delegation.** Top-down or bottom-up initiatives to transfer service delivery to the local council with the service funded locally from the parish precept, volunteers or some other local resource.
5. **Joint service provision.** The local council enhancing or 'topping up' an existing service provided by the principal council, through funding or provision of volunteers, or principal councils supporting local councils to improve their capability to provide services.

## The charter approach

Charters aim to improve joint working arrangements and develop an understanding between the different tiers of local government. The arrangement is likely to be at a county or district level (including the county or district and all local councils) or it might be between all three and sets out the aims and expectations for partnership working.

The charter approach has been widely used for many years and a model charter – based on good practice from around the country – developed and promoted as part of the Quality Parishes Scheme. This model is still popular today as it provides a structure within which principal councils and local councils can agree to work. It can include a number of general principles and cover a common set of themes such as communication, planning, service delivery and how the document and relationship will be monitored and evaluated.

The charter approach is only a starting point setting out a commitment to work together and a statement of the principles by which all partners will approach their work together. The document itself should be able to adapt, evolve and be a living entity given at its heart is an ongoing relationship between the people in the organisations, rather than something that is signed and sits on a shelf merely to collect dust.

Many charters are in two parts: the first setting out the relationship between the principal council(s) and local councils, giving details of working practices aimed at improving partnership working, information sharing and communications; the second covering the functions or services that might be considered for delegation

including financial arrangements or a relationship with any Quality Councils.

For the charter approach to be meaningful the process by which it is developed is important. This will in itself help improve and strengthen relationships through clear dialogue and discussion. County associations of local councils, working on behalf of local councils in an area, play an important role in the development of charters and can act on behalf of one or all councils in an area. The final document itself should be just the beginning and used as an ongoing tool to improve relationships, with regular monitoring and review.

## Community asset transfer

Principal councils can help local councils to assume responsibility for buildings or land in their area through the community asset transfer process. Asset transfer is the change in either management or ownership (or both) of a building or land. This gives local councils and/or community groups the chance to:

- keep open a service that the community relies on, which might otherwise close, like a community centre, swimming pool, or library
- bring an underused building or piece of land back into use for a new service
- attract new investment into the area.

The first stage for a principal council considering asset transfer is to identify the key objectives and outcomes expected of the programme. Asset transfer requires extensive community consultation – often facilitated by the local council – at an early stage to ensure that the council and community can work with the council to shape proposals.





Understanding and buy-in from local people, particularly users and volunteers, will help to ensure that asset transfer is effective in the long term.

## Clustering by local councils

Clustering is not a new phenomenon and is best described as local councils increasing their effectiveness and meeting objectives through collaborative joint working and partnership arrangements. This can enable greater partnership working between the tiers of local government, especially around service devolution and delegation.

The most significant benefit of clustering to local councils is the potential for enhancing capacity. By achieving this, many other things become possible. Through clustering, a range of activities can be enhanced, including:

- collaboration in service delivery and resource sharing
- working together to influence a principal council or other agency
- networking through, for example, attending county association events and training seminars.

To this list, we can also add sharing of experience and knowledge and greater engagement with local people.

In practice there are a wide range of drivers that stimulate clustering, co-operation and collaboration. The underlying processes that are motivating a new wave of clustering amongst local councils include:

Local councils coming together under their own volition to achieve better results for their communities. These can be inspired by, amongst other things service delivery, economies of scale (including sharing of



clerks), resources and raising awareness of issues between councils and with an external audience. These aspirations are often the product of community-led planning or other engagement and appraisal exercises which can act as a catalyst for clustering.

Policies and governance structures established by principal councils encouraging local councils to work together – often with partners and stakeholders beyond their sector – to make the most of opportunities offered by the principal council initiatives.

## Service delegation

Services work best when they are designed, managed and delivered at the most local level possible, and where they can be readily attuned to local circumstances and priorities. The delegation of functions and services from principal authorities to local councils has

steadily grown in popularity in recent years.

This has been in response to policy drivers around empowering communities and local councils; a greater demand from local councils to play a bigger service delivery role; and also the challenging financial circumstances facing principal authorities.

Local councils have a wide range of existing powers to deliver services and in many cases there is no barrier to them taking on services or managing assets. They and principal councils frequently have concurrent powers where both can provide a service, so delegation from one to the other is possible but without obligation.

In practice some services are much more frequently delegated than others. Some of the most common delegations are those covering the services which maintain the local environment, while others are more likely



to happen with larger local councils or a cluster working together to achieve economies of scale or overcome capacity issues.

Delegations take various forms and there can be different degrees of delegation, depending on local circumstances. One pragmatic approach is menu based where local councils can pick a level which suits their aspirations, capacity and skills.

## Joint service provision

Successful collaboration makes it easier for councils at all tiers of local government to pool resources; share ideas, information and responsibility; and solve problems and find solutions. A partnership provides a forum for identifying the needs and negotiating the common goals of the wider community.

Through working in partnership, tensions can be identified and addressed without hampering the search for positive outcomes. Close liaison between local and principal council councillors, representing the same communities, is essential. The specific local knowledge held by local councils is a precious commodity of real value to organisations working across the district, county or region.

Partnership working is most effective when responsibilities are clearly agreed and players are respected as equals. Trust and openness help to share the load.





# Illustrative case studies

These models and the benefits they bring are illustrated in the following case studies, which through their variety show that no one model can suit every circumstance.

Each case study highlights the processes gone through, the issues faced and how they were overcome. Key common themes and lessons from the case studies are summarised later in the paper.

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## Eastleigh Borough Council and Hamble-le-Rice and Chandler's Ford Parish Councils and Hedge End Town Council: devolving assets and the special expenses scheme

Eastleigh Borough Council in Hampshire has taken a forward-looking approach to delegating services to local councils and actively encourages exploring the benefits of delivering services more locally to citizens, as it believes local people are best placed to manage them.

Local councils were consulted by the borough council about what they were interested in managing and operating with the aim of further improving service delivery. Following consultation, a number of services have been devolved, including community buildings, open spaces, allotments and public toilets. Service delegation started with service level agreements for each local council for fixed periods, in some cases leading to permanent asset transfer or management.

In addition, the borough council agreed to set up a 'special expenses' scheme, to ensure that double taxation did not become an issue when the local councils delivered delegated services or took on management or ownership of assets. The approach concentrated on purely local services (excluding those of strategic borough-wide nature) and the Borough Council made sure buildings and facilities were in good condition before they were transferred.

The borough council has also developed a consultative structure, organising local area committees, each with a local area co-ordinator. These five officers enable both borough councillors and local council clerks to engage fully on the issues for each area. Stakeholders have found that any previous lack of trust between the parties has been overcome by the local area coordinators.

In order for the local councils to successfully manage devolved assets, such as land or buildings, the borough council covers initial legal costs and supports necessary legal training, including trading standards, licensing, planning, and charring meetings courses. The borough council has also absorbed indirect overheads and ensures that Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) does not become a barrier to any delegation or transfer. It is an ongoing partnership and this builds a closer understanding between the tiers, promoting mutual awareness of roles and working practices.

Over 60 assets have been transferred from the borough council to local councils in the last three years, including over 30 open spaces, eight play areas and four community centres. There has been positive feedback from the local area and some facilities, such as public toilets, that may have closed have remained open.

Every local council in Eastleigh delivers at least one delegated service. Below are three examples.

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## Hamble-le-Rice Parish Council

Hamble-le-Rice Parish Council, a twice-accredited Quality Parish Council, were extremely enthusiastic when Eastleigh Borough Council offered asset transfers to local councils. The parish council had managed the Donkey Derby Field since 1994, but seized the opportunity to take on the college playing fields, the lease for which was transferred in 2011. The parish council's management of the all-weather courts, football pitches and cricket square has already benefited local young people and sports enthusiasts and evening floodlights have cut down on vandalism and graffiti.

In 2009/10 the Hamble-le-Rice Parish Council precept rose by 29 per cent, but there were no local objections to this due to the fact that the parish council communicated its intention to residents through the village magazine. The nature of the asset transfer in terms of special expenses was explained in some detail to ensure public support for the initiative.

The parish council works with and learns from the borough council. They have recently taken over management of Westfield Common and hire in help from Eastleigh, which enables their own grounds staff to learn more about tree husbandry and commons management.

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## Hedge End Town Council

In previous years, some of Hedge End Town Council's many assets were leased on a peppercorn rent from Eastleigh Borough Council. These assets have now been formally devolved and are now managed for the benefit of the local community by the town council. For example, the Drummond Community Centre turns over approximately £3,000 per month. In addition, a 16 acre site known as Dowd's Farm (the biggest urban park laid out in the borough) is maintained and managed by the town council after a legal transfer from the borough council and a significant developer's contribution.

Six nature reserves and a woodland meadow have also been transferred by the borough council to the town council, along with the associated maintenance and management services, including grass cutting and tree management, and ensuring International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards are met. The town council's own ground staff now take responsibility for maintaining buildings and grounds maintenance. They are well known in the local community and provide a helpful presence on the ground.

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## Chandler's Ford Parish Council

Chandler's Ford Parish Council was created on 1 April 2010 following a community governance review triggered by a petition from local people. The parish council is responsible for the maintenance of two allotment sites and a working group has been established to begin drafting a neighbourhood plan. This will involve a considerable amount of local consultation and engagement through public meetings, community events, the internet and surveys in order to effectively determine local priorities and future funding requirements.

A key issue likely to be raised by residents in discussions about local service delivery is the cost associated with services. The precept set by Eastleigh Borough Council for Chandler's Ford PC's first year stands at £138,000 (relatively small for a parish population of 18,000), but this will grow as increasing numbers of services are delegated to the parish council.

The approach in Eastleigh indicates that with trust and support, local councils can and will take on a greater role in local service delivery. With its flexible approach, Eastleigh Borough Council has nurtured an environment where the main question is, "What's next?"

### Top tips

- Trust and openness are key to effective project delivery.
- Local area co-ordinators can help develop positive working relationships.
- Support from all tiers of government is important.
- Mutual respect between all of the organisations is critical to success.



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## Wiltshire Council and Salisbury City Council: large-scale change

Salisbury City Council was established in April 2009, when local government in the county of Wiltshire underwent re-organisation. A new unitary council, Wiltshire Council, was created with its headquarters in Trowbridge. The former Salisbury District Council was disbanded and in those parts of the county that were not already parished, local councils were created. This included Salisbury City Council, one of the largest local councils in the country with a population of about 45,000.

Initially, a working group was formed with representatives from the former district and county councils and Salisbury City Council itself. It was decided that Salisbury City Council should take on a mix of services, some of which cost money to run and others which generated an income. This ensured the precept could be set at a reasonable level. Open days were held at the Guildhall and residents' surveys were conducted so they could find out what local people thought. The proposals were negotiated and agreed with the Implementation Executive at Wiltshire County Council.

Total expenditure on services in 2010/11 is £2.9 million gross and £1.2 million net, providing an income from services of £1.7 million. There will also be an extensive capital programme over the next five years.

Currently, Salisbury City Council manages:

- 33 parks and open spaces (including sports pitches)
- 12 play areas, plus skate parks, sports walls and youth shelters
- 12 allotments sites (approximately 700 plots)
- nine cemeteries and churchyards
- the crematorium
- memorial trees and benches
- two of the pay-and-display car parks
- seven public convenience facilities
- a community centre (Bemerton Heath Centre)
- the twice-weekly charter market, plus farmers and continental markets, an annual charter fair, the city carnival, Armed Forces Day, the food and drink festival, Christmas lights and other special events
- the Guildhall
- a caravan and camping site
- various shops, offices and flats within an asset portfolio.

Some staff who had been delivering these services at the district council transferred to the city council under TUPE arrangements and other posts were filled on the open jobs market. Because of its size Salisbury City Council has chosen to distinguish the roles of its councillors and officers along lines more typical of a district council. Councillors take strategic decisions, setting policy direction, while decisions about service delivery decisions take place at an officer level. Officers also have financial delegations set at a level high enough to match the broad remit and working model.

Salisbury City Council holds the view that if a local council is going to be created it should be sufficiently viable to do things or it risks being seen as a lame duck. However, it recognises that its strong remit derives partly from having come about as part of local government re-organisation.

The former Salisbury District Council decided to transfer all its assets to the new unitary council. The intention was that relevant assets could then be transferred again, from Wiltshire Council to Salisbury City Council, at a later date. This process, involving hundreds of assets, has proven bureaucratic, frustrating and expensive. It has involved the city council in negotiations with individual service departments at Wiltshire, in some cases trying to ensure that restrictions (covenants) were not added to transfer agreements. Having the title deed transfers processed through the Land Registry Office has also taken longer than expected and involved much form filling. The issue has consumed a significant amount of management time and legal fees.

Salisbury City Council may continue to take on additional services over the next few years. This is being driven by financial pressures faced by Wiltshire Council and an ambitious city council. However, this drive forwards seems likely to be matched by a sober assessment of what is practical, recognising that growth brings its own challenges and the precept must remain acceptable to residents.

### Top tips

- Asset transfer on a large scale can in some cases place a burden on the local councils involved.
- Transferring a mix of services which include some sources of revenue can help keep the precept down.
- Engage local people in consultation about changes to understand their service needs.



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## Sevenoaks District Council and Hextable Parish Council: finding your feet

Hextable Parish Council was created on 1 April 2008. Hextable is a rural village with a population of 4,400 in north-west Kent, in the district of Sevenoaks. It was granted parish status after a public petition which led to a Governance Review, following a campaign by local people. Previously, Hextable formed a significant part of the area covered by Swanley Town Council.

Following concerns from residents about appropriate representation, a Governance Review was undertaken, which recommended splitting Hextable away from Swanley to establish a new local council.

Sevenoaks District Council played a key role in the creation and early establishment of Hextable Parish Council. Following the Governance Review, the residents association became, in effect, the shadow body for the new local council. An officer from Sevenoaks was appointed to the task of liaising between the principal authority, Swanley Town Council, and the residents association to ensure the successful set up of the new council. This was a challenging role for two key reasons:

- Swanley Town Council had concerns about the creation of Hextable Parish Council, primarily because of the significant impact it would have on their tax base
- there were a number of formal duties required of Sevenoaks because of the way that Hextable would be created from an existing parished, rather than unparished, area. In effect, it was a disaggregation of Swanley Town Council.

Sevenoaks had not gone through such a process before and found itself on a steep learning curve. Its responsibilities included electoral arrangements, initial council meetings, premises identification, and asset and staff transfer. In addition, the decision to split the Town Council area was somewhat controversial. This meant an additional role for Sevenoaks was to arbitrate between the existing Town Council and the new local council over issues such as budget and precept setting, ensuring that tensions at a political level did not derail the process.

Specific duties undertaken by Sevenoaks during the set up phase included:

- Organising and overseeing the first contested election in May 2008, after the council was established in April that year.
- Managing the council's business, after its creation, through the first elections and until a Clerk was appointed. This meant running the first three parish council meetings and it involved a legal arrangement whereby the Hextable ward members from Swanley Town Council acted as consultees for the new Hextable Parish Council, though they had no decision making authority.

There was some confusion and lack of clarity around division of responsibility and control between the three concerned parties. Sevenoaks noted that knowing where to go for good practice, support and ideas might have eased the transition process and helped Sevenoaks prepare for their role.

Despite this initial confusion, Sevenoaks was able to step back very quickly once Hextable had recruited a clerk. One legacy of the separation process is that there is still a good relationship between the two councils.



The separation of Hextable from Swanley involved the transfer of three staff to Hextable Parish Council, together with playing fields, some buildings and a heritage centre. Transferring the assets that were within the Hextable area was relatively straightforward. Agreeing the appropriate staffing numbers that should transfer was initially a delicate issue. It relied heavily on time-consuming and complex TUPE arrangements, under which the transferring body (Swanley Town Council) had to identify and justify the staff that were to transfer.

Sevenoaks was able to recruit a local field manager, who had excellent local knowledge and had undertaken some parish and town clerk management courses. This post was crucial in establishing the effective governance and operation of the council right from the start. The manager was employed initially by Sevenoaks District Council, but transferred to Hextable Parish Council upon its vesting. He was able to sort out many initial practical arrangements, such as insurance, health and safety, and set up the new council office (eg installing telephones, IT and a payroll system). This manager eventually became the first parish clerk.

Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) were involved closely in the recruitment of the clerk and provided timely advice to both Sevenoaks and the newly vested Hextable Parish Council. KALC also sat alongside the new Hextable councillors to help them with the selection process. Sevenoaks set up that recruitment process, but the Parish Council conducted interviews and appointed staff.

One other key area in which Sevenoaks District Council played a role was in the negotiations about the first budget and precept for Hextable. Both Swanley Town

Council and the residents association (representing the shadow Hextable Parish Council) developed draft budgets and associated precept levels for the first full financial year. Their initial positions were very different. Sevenoaks instituted a compromise precept which was halfway between the two positions.

In addition, Sevenoaks introduced a £25,000 contingency loan fund. In setting the first annual precept, Sevenoaks decided to make available this fund in case either of the new local councils was unable to balance its budget at the end of the year. Both councils greatly appreciated having this insurance, though neither of them ultimately needed to draw upon the fund.

The parish council has now emerged from its set up phase following a period of consolidation with the development and implementation of various necessary policies and procedures, including health and safety, staff welfare and staff appraisal.

There is a new parish clerk in post and there are plans to increase the local impact of the council's services. Hextable is a small, tightly knit community and the move to create the council is seen locally as a success. Because the pressure for a new parish council came from residents, there has always been good local engagement. This is something the clerk is building upon. A new website was launched, which provides better information about Council meetings and local decisions, and the regular Parish newsletters have always been well received.

The council is keen to make best use of the assets which were transferred from Swanley, including the Heritage Centre where the council has its office.



### Top tips

- Local councils should use their regional association of local councils to find good practice.
- A local lead officer can be a valuable asset in setting up new structures.
- If available, a contingency fund can provide peace of mind through a period of transition.

## West Sussex County Council and Burgess Hill Town Council: one point of contact

Burgess Hill is situated in the Mid Sussex district of West Sussex. In the early 1990s neither the county nor the district council had a presence in the town, and having county hall some 40 miles away presented a problem for delivering very local services. Burgess Hill Town Council took advantage of the new push for partnerships and worked to develop a single contact point for all council services in the heart of their town.

The Help Point, as it is known, has now processed over 400,000 enquiries since it opened and has been visited by the Queen. It has successfully fulfilled its initial aim to provide a single contact point for town, district and county services and has eliminated the confusion between responsibilities of the various tiers of government.

In the first three weeks of opening the Help Point registered over 400 complaints about local highways. This instigated a review of the highways function by the town and county councils and resulted in an arrangement in which the town council took on certain highway functions.



In the beginning a business case was negotiated based on the town council fulfilling the role of a schedule of rates contractor. Burgess Hill Town Council took on environmental maintenance work, such as clearance of weeds from gutters, highway sign cleaning, trimming highway trees and removal of fly posting.

The town council's remit soon expanded and it is now providing a trouble-shooting resource in the town for the highways department on items such as blocked drains, repair of potholes, maintenance of landscaped areas and removal of graffiti. This role eventually expanded to the point that the town council now provides a five-year contract for three teams of mobile maintenance units staffed by five full time workers. These teams have a thorough understanding of the area and are able to respond quickly and efficiently to problems.

The mobile maintenance units have reduced instances of low level flooding across the area, with blocked drains immediately checked and monitored if flooding is forecast. Their work on tree trimming means in the long term the need for this service will be reduced and potential damage avoided. The units are also able to attend to very seasonal tasks such as weeds in the summer months and additional cleaning of road signs in the winter.

The success of the initiative is attributed to a simple contract structure between the town council and the county council based on trust, local ownership and a sense of local responsibility. In addition, this service has resulted in a clustered working arrangement with neighbouring smaller and more rural local councils. The local councils involved in monitoring and reporting of the clustered working arrangements have a direct relationship with the county council and their contractor Burgess Hill Town Council.



This model has been so successful that it is now being used as an exemplar to encourage other local councils to take up service delegation across West Sussex.

Ongoing regular meetings between town, district and county council representatives, in an atmosphere of mutual support help to maintain and improve the scheme, and the wider ongoing relationship between the tiers.

#### Top tips

- A single point of contact can make it easier for residents to access local services.
- A business case foundation ensures that services are viable and sustainable.
- Local ownership and leadership is important.

## Shropshire Council with Morville, Eardington, Billingsley, Burwarton and Chetton Parish Councils: encouraging service delegation

Across Shropshire, local councils are being encouraged to take up delegation and devolution of services by the unitary principal council.

The local councils of Morville, Eardington, Billingsley, Burwarton and Chetton serve a deep rural area in the south of Shropshire to the west of Bridgnorth and the east of Ludlow. Covering 14 villages, with a combined electorate of just over 1,500, the five local councils represent very small communities. They sit in the Brown Clee Division of Shropshire Council. The councils share a clerk.

The local councils have a positive and collaborative working relationship with the principal council and its highways department. Shropshire Council has for some time been encouraging the more informal delegation of services via a system of small maintenance grants which allow local councils to deliver specific and widely differing services to their local communities.

Following the retirement of a long serving local lengthsman<sup>1</sup> in Chetton employed by Shropshire Council, and subsequent decline in some environmental highways maintenance services, the shared council clerk applied for a small maintenance grant on behalf of Chetton, Billingsley and, soon after, Burwarton Parish Councils. This application was successful and two local lengthsman were appointed. Grants were subsequently sought and won for the two other local councils and the hugely successful local scheme has led to an efficient, responsive and cost effective service.

As a result of their detailed knowledge of every local highway, byway, ditch and stream the lengthsman know where the danger points might be and have turned out, whatever the day, time or weather, to ensure as far as they can that emergencies are prevented. In addition, the lengthsman have become well known around the villages and are able to fulfil a monitoring role which is of value to the Highways Department and the wider community. They keep an eye out for the older population and also make sure that pathways are clear and safe for local school children.

<sup>1</sup> Lengthsman refers to a person who keeps a "length" of road neat and tidy. This person is generally responsible for a few miles (3-6) of road. Employed by the local parish council, his or her job is, for example, to keep the grass and weeds cut down at the edge of the road and the drainage ditch clear.



The lengthsman are employed under an annual contract by the respective parish council and consideration is being given to extending delegations to run for longer than a year. In the first year, great improvements were made with positive feedback coming from parishioners (especially during times of heavy rainfall and flooding). It was soon obvious that much more local work could be done if more money was available.

The scheme has grown from the initial £700 per local council to a sum of £3,000 per council. The local councils are very keen to extend the scheme if funding continues to be available.

At the same time the then new unitary, Shropshire Council, made a commitment to encourage take up of participation in their delegation schemes. For example, the minor highways maintenance grant has been extended to encompass other environmental maintenance functions and the value of the grants now ranges from £700 to £3,000. The services to provide verge cutting are still an issue of contention between the two councils, however.

The local accountability of services is an important new feature of Shropshire Council. Through local joint committees the council hopes that local councils are able to participate fully in reviewing existing services and shaping future service provision. Across Shropshire, local councils are being encouraged to take up delegation and devolution of services by the unitary principal authority.

#### Top tips

- Commitment from the principal council to clear and straightforward paper work – a simple service level agreement – is integral to the success of service devolution.
- Both tiers of government operate in an atmosphere of trust and local ownership.

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## Telford & Wrekin Council with Great Dawley, Stirchley and Brookside, Hadley and Leegomery Parish Councils with: securing the future of libraries

Telford & Wrekin Council is a unitary district with borough status in the West Midlands. It encompasses 28 local councils, including Great Dawley Parish Council; Stirchley and Brookside Parish Council and Hadley and Leegomery Parish Council.

Following a council review of the existing library service, Telford and Wrekin Council decided that a 20 per cent saving could be achieved without the need to close any of the nine libraries across the borough. The review determined that the saving could be made through a reduction of opening hours along with the exploration of working with other partner services in order to share building costs.

Consultation between October 2011 and February 2012 also gave the local councils the opportunity to put forward their ideas around how savings could be made. Since the review, a number of parish councils have agreed to take on provision of the library service in partnership with Telford & Wrekin to secure the future of the libraries and local jobs for their communities.

Great Dawley Parish Council has agreed to fund five hours of staffing costs per week at Dawley library for two years, which will maintain current opening hours which would have otherwise have been reduced to make savings.



Stirchley & Brookside Parish Council has agreed to relocate the council from Progress House into the public library space next door, which will result in shared building costs. While staffing hours at Stirchley Library will be reduced to 16 hours per week, the introduction of self-service technology means that all other times when the building is open visitors will be able to borrow and return books. In addition, as a result of the local council's support of the library service, opening hours will increase significantly – from their present 27 hours per week to 40 hours per week.

Hadley and Leegomery Parish Council is also contributing to the borough's library service by funding three hours of staff time per week for an initial period of six months. The reduction staffing hours will now be less severe and the library will be operational for 19 hours per week.

These three local councils have worked in a positive, co-operative fashion with their principal authority in order to ensure services (and associated jobs) that would otherwise have been dramatically reduced can continue.

All three councils are looking forward to the positive impact the new partnership will make on their local communities and the Telford and Wrekin area as a whole.



#### Top tips

- A positive and cooperative attitude to joint working can lead to real improvements in services.
- Allow time for local councils to respond to consultations on changes to services.
- Local councils are a valuable resource in supporting – or expanding – available services.

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## North Dorset District Council and Gillingham Town Council: creating a hub

Gillingham Direct is a joint project between the three tiers of government, Dorset County Council, North Dorset District Council and Gillingham Town Council. Based in Gillingham Town hall, the service provides residents with a single location through which they can access services provided by all three tiers of government. The aim is to make services more accessible to local people.

Where residents formerly had to travel over an hour, with limited and costly public transport services to get to the district and county administrative offices, the three councils have created Gillingham Direct, a 'hub' which delivers town, district and county services locally. In the long run this joint asset management project aims to reduce the number of council premises in Gillingham.

Residents are able to find out about a wide range of issues relating to all county, district and town council services at Gillingham Direct. The County Registrar for the Gillingham area has already re-located to the town council offices and the Town Hall can now offer civil marriages. In addition Gillingham Direct has recently expanded to include building control, housing services, council tax enquiry services, housing and council tax benefit advice. This now provides a personal service to this rural community – something which is unique in an increasingly global society.

The Town Hall facilities are regularly used by other charity groups and not-for-profit organisations that are of direct benefit to the town. Income is also received by offering the facilities for hire to businesses and

other organisations such as Asda, the Youth Offending Team and tutoring for children who are unable to attend full time education. These lettings, in an expanding town, contribute to the ongoing costs of the Town Hall.

Initially Gillingham Direct was staffed by two existing Gillingham Town Council staff who were trained to use the new IT and telephone systems to incorporate the telephone and 'face to face' enquiries that would be generated by Gillingham Direct; the County Registrar; and rotating North Dorset District Council staff, providing housing advice, benefits and council tax advice. Opening hours have already been extended due to public demand.

The setting up and running of Gillingham Direct has not been expensive in cash terms, but it took a small team of people several months to arrange. Synchronising telephone and computer systems has been the most challenging aspect of the process; computer and communications problems have resulted in a recent upgrade to the system by the County Council.

Gillingham Direct is part of an ongoing, wider collaboration between Dorset Councils and is the first to involve councils at all tiers of the local government framework. The project has saved all three councils money through collaborative working and provides a much more efficient and effective service to local people.

### Top tips

- Using public spaces flexibly can generate income and support local community groups.
- Bringing services together can make them more accessible for local people.
- Consider the back office implications when looking to work together.

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## Gloucestershire County Council with Lydney, Tetbury, Stonehouse Town Councils: Highways – Your Way

In Gloucestershire, parish and town councils across the county have been working with the county council to extend the highways services they receive.

Highways – Your Way, a project run by Gloucestershire County Council, is building on this work to provide additional support and tools so that the two tiers of government can ensure safer, better maintained local highways.

Not every parish, town or community is the same and each area has different issues or needs when it comes to highways. While the county council will continue to carry out standard maintenance, inspections and winter support, parish and town councils are working with Gloucestershire County Council to provide additional services, including snow wardens and snow plough operators; public rights of way volunteers; street lighting monitoring and support; grass cutting and roadside planting.

Highways – Your Way has three elements:

- **Community Action** – the county council gives community groups the support and tools to carry out work themselves within their community. For example snow wardens and grass cutting.
- **Community Match** – if there's a scheme a community thinks it badly needs Gloucestershire County Council will match-fund the cost to enable this to happen. For example, safety schemes or resurfacing that is not included in the normal programme of work.

- **Community Top-up** – Gloucestershire County Council provides groups with a product list of services and items that they can buy directly from the council, for example extra gully cleaning or traffic monitoring services.

Local examples of the Highways – Your Way project include:

As **Lydney Town Council** is in a rural area, the council plays a key role during bad weather, helping to keep footpaths free of snow and ice. They are also involved in other works including grass cutting and the planting of verges. When bad weather hits, Lydney Town Council have use of a hand spreader and salt supplied by the county council to remove snow and prevent ice from forming on pavements in the town.

As one of the busiest Cotswold towns, Tetbury has an extremely active town council which takes part in several projects as part of the county council's Highways - Your Way scheme. With support from Gloucestershire County Council, **Tetbury Town Council** carry out grass cutting and planting, winter salt spreading, and run their own lorry watch scheme which monitors heavy goods vehicles blocking town centre roads with the aim of preventing congestion.

The **Stonehouse Community Partnership** high street scheme was a major project which totally transformed the town. Gloucestershire County Council and Stonehouse Town Council teamed up to match fund the project, which saw a totally new road layout in the high street, refurbished roads and improvements to the street scene.



### Top tips

- Build in flexibility to best meet local needs.
- Consider how match funding might have positive outcomes for local communities.
- Think about providing a menu of options from which local councils can choose what suits them best.

## Hampshire Association of Local Councils: Member-led development charter pilot project

The Hampshire ALC (HALC) is a not-for-profit membership organisation serving member parish and town councils across Hampshire, with a current membership total of 243 of the 261 parish and town councils, including 21 parish meetings. HALC offers a variety of services, including consultancy, HR advice and training.

HALC believes that the renewed political focus on localism and the increased motivation to devolve services from principal councils to the local council sector means extra rights and responsibilities for parish and town councils.

They perceive that principal councils and similar stakeholders sometimes harbour doubts over the credibility of parish councils. The main issues that arise are elections being uncontested, governance being shaky and a lack of development for members and officers. HALC believes that addressing these issues will support greater capacity in local councils.

Principal councils have been using a development charter to encourage training and development over the past decade. In September 2011, HALC teamed up with local organisation South East Employers with the aim of producing a plain-English,



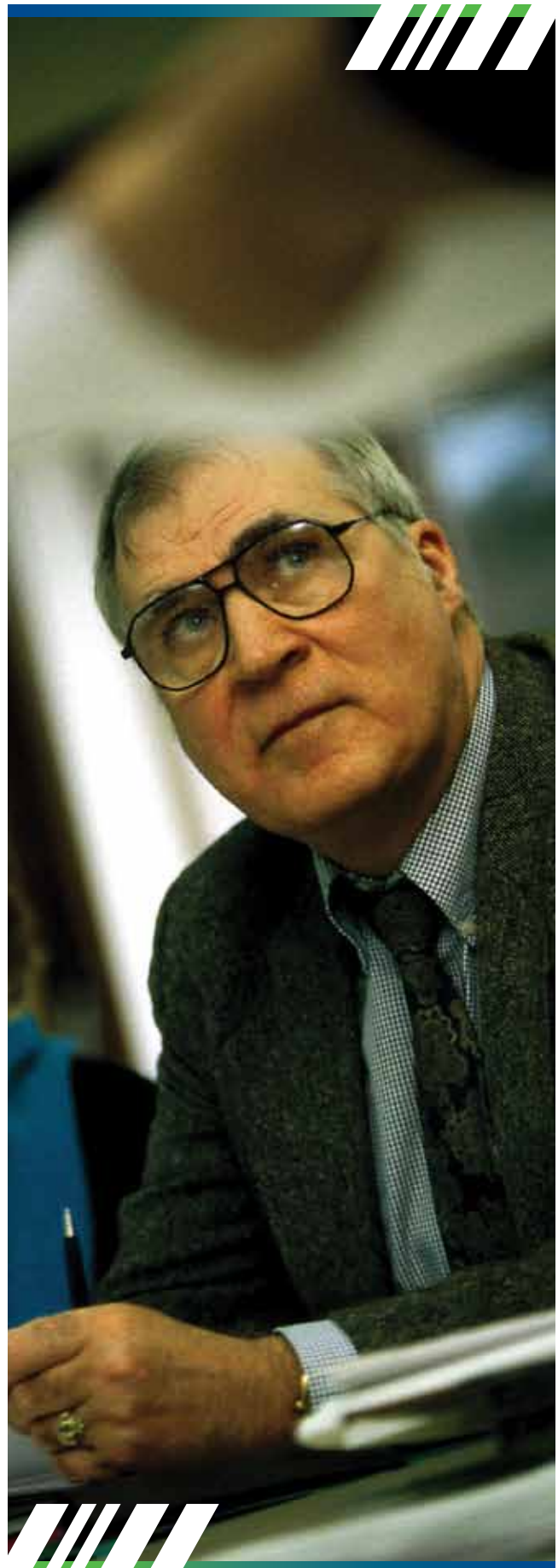
size appropriate, concise version of the development charter for local councils. The Charter was designed to be cost-conscious while supporting member-led development and building credibility in stakeholders' eyes, as well as providing a source of pride for local councils. Having gained recognition from both the LGA and NALC, HALC is now beginning to pilot the draft Charter with Hartley Wintney and Whiteley Parish Councils. They are working towards an assessment date of September 2012.

HALC aim to launch the Charter formally in the autumn of 2012.

The Charter has a five-step circular development process:

1. Commitment to the Charter and develop action plan
2. Improve development of members
3. Assessment
4. Award of Charter
5. Reassessment

The Hampshire ALC believes in the journey of members leading their own development, and of each member being able to explore and express their own needs in building personal development. Stronger and more cohesive councils will then be better adapted to take on the demands of the next ten years; which will be challenging to say the least. Time, cost and size of council must remain at the forefront of thinking.



### Top tips

- A Charter provides the flexibility for members to assess their own needs and develop an appropriate response.
- Encouraging member training is an important part of ensuring councils are equipped to respond to the demands of the future.

## Northamptonshire Association of Local Councils: developing a member charter

The Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (Northants CALC) is a membership organisation representing the parish and town councils of Northamptonshire, England. More than 85 per cent of the 208 parish and town councils in Northamptonshire are in membership.

In addition, the Association provides training via the County Training Partnership and offers courses on such varied subjects as chairmanship skills, council procedures and accounting and budgeting.

In 2009, Northamptonshire CALC initiated a partnership project with Northamptonshire County Council, Corby Borough Council, the Borough Council of Wellingborough, Daventry District Council, and Northamptonshire Borough Council. Officers worked together to produce the charter *Parish Partnerships: A charter to describe the working relationships between local and principal councils in Northamptonshire*.

The charter is in two parts. The first describes the relationship between local councils and principal councils and the second lists nine workstreams on which

Northamptonshire councils could work together.

While the charter focuses on Northamptonshire councils it recognises virtually all local council activities involve a wide range of public bodies and other organisations, particularly the police and health service, voluntary and community sector organisations, the Society of Local Council Clerks, and NALC. The aim is for appropriate stakeholders to be identified for each workstream and included in the process.

Northants CALC believes that local councils endorsing the charter see it as the start of a new dialogue between Northamptonshire councils. The charter uses aspirational language but recognises that ultimately each council will need to make its own decisions and set its own direction. The important thing is that all councils strive to work towards the aspirations in the charter, and that where measurable targets exist these are monitored and performance is assessed against them.

For example the charter's aspiration is to "Develop a community policing scheme" for the county but the corresponding target (which may be revised up or down by stakeholders in due course) is "Twenty per cent of local councils in each area command implementing at least one option in the community policing scheme by 2013".

The charter does not in itself create any new groups or organisations. The workstreams it articulates may lead to the establishment of new structures to address critical issues, but the aim is to use existing structures and networks where available.





The workstreams are an illustration of priorities as suggested by local councils. It is recognised that the stated outcomes may need to be reassessed once all stakeholders have had an opportunity to have their say.

The charter is for all local councils, from the very smallest parish meeting to the largest town council. It is of course recognised that there will be a different level and style of engagement depending on the size, capacity and aspirations of the parish concerned. In addition, the charter is very clear that the capacity and aspirations of larger councils cannot be taken for granted, nor should the capacity and aspirations of smaller parishes be underestimated.

The charter uses language that should enable each council to pick and mix a level of involvement that suits them: it does not intend to make service devolution compulsory. The charter also recognises that there is currently no new money for implementation. However, it is hoped by applying a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to some old problems waste can be avoided, resources can be deployed more precisely and savings in service delivery can be made.

Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils has noted that the process of development of the Northamptonshire Councils' Charter was a useful exercise in itself. It was the catalyst for conversations, both internally and externally, that would not have otherwise happened. New personal relationships between principal councils and the Northamptonshire CALC representatives were forged during the development of the charter that have endured and have benefited local government in Northamptonshire over and above the ambitions of the charter itself. In other words, the process of producing a charter may have been just as beneficial as the final outcome.

Northamptonshire CALC has led the implementation of the charter and the nine workstreams, which has been very challenging. The charter was signed in June 2010, just after the election of the coalition government and just before the Comprehensive Spending Review that signalled significant spending cuts for local government generally.

In addition, many of the principal council personnel that the CALC had worked with to develop the charter have either moved to a different role or have left

altogether which has made it very difficult to maintain momentum. Northamptonshire CALC believes that the charter is about building personal as well as organisational relationships and this has been a stumbling block for the otherwise very successful – and ambitious – project.

Nonetheless, Northants notes that progress has been made on the nine workstreams in the charter; progress that would not have been made without it. Northamptonshire CALC is now looking to the future to use the charter as a platform from which to launch a number of new initiatives, particularly when economic stability returns to the area.

#### Top tips

- Make use of the process to build relationships and gather momentum.
- Acknowledge that different places and councils will take different approaches.
- Think beyond local government – many public services involve a wider range of people and organisations.
- Be prepared for personnel to change and don't let changes, when they occur, blow you off course.

## West Devon Borough Council and South Tawton Parish Council: community-led flood defence

Devon County Council, West Devon Borough Council and South Tawton Parish Council have been working together to set up a new flood warning system in South Zeal, a village within the South Tawton parish.



The new system will give South Zeal residents an hour's warning of potential flooding, which will provide enough time to install professional flood boards and pumps - purchased last year - preventing water affecting 14 homes under threat in the village.

The 14 homes were flooded in 2000, after heavy rain on the 550 metre high Cosdon Hill, above the village, sent a deluge of water down the Ramsley Stream. The 70-metre culvert carrying the stream under properties and the road through the village was overwhelmed.





Planning to reduce the impact of another flooding incident has involved partnership working between the local community, West Devon Borough Council, Devon County Council, the Environment Agency, South West Water and Dartmoor National Park Authority.

The Environment Agency provided a grant of £6,000 which initially kick started this part of the project; a further contribution was pledged by the parish council. The new flood warning system will be installed before the end of 2012. The system ensures that, when the water rises to a pre-set level, an alert is triggered and calls up to five telephone numbers to raise the alarm. Residents can nominate who receives the alert, and they cascade the message onwards. This alert will give residents time to put in place the flood boards and pumps that have previously been purchased.

By working together, the borough and parish councils have developed a flood response strategy which has become part of the overarching parishes' emergency plan.

But importantly, the project has been delivered with input from a range of local people, inspired to action by South Tawton Parish Council. People who have been involved include:

- Residents, who formed a flood defence group and established a team of 'OWLS', people who live outside the flood water level, to help in an emergency.
- Local farmers, who allowed Dartmoor Ranger Ian Brooker to divert water running down bridleways away from the Ramsley Stream and onto fields.
- Residents who raised £4,000 for further flood support measures for the banks of the Ramsley Stream.



The Clerk of South Tawton Parish Council, Peter Brotherton, said: “I think we all sleep more comfortably at night since these new flood protection measures have been put in place. The striking thing is the community spirit that has been engendered. The community is most grateful for all of the help and assistance we have been given by West Devon Borough Council, local MPs, and other agencies who contributed to the success of this venture. We are particularly indebted to Mrs Jackie Smith, Senior Engineer for West Devon Borough Council who was critical to the success of this project.”

#### Top tips

- Harness the power of local residents to participate.
- Engage with all the relevant organisations in your area.
- Find local advocates to work with.

## Lancashire County Council: Better working with town and parish councils

There are three levels of local government in the area covered by Lancashire County Council: one county council; ten borough and two city councils; and 204 parish and town councils.

Lancashire County Council delivers a broad range of services across the county. In addition the 204 local councils across the county deliver a wide variety of local services, either jointly with the county and/or borough council or individually, from their precept.

In order to improve upon and better coordinate service provision, Lancashire County Council and the local councils in the area worked together to develop a ‘Better Working between Lancashire County Council and Parish and Town Councils’ document, this was originally written as a Charter and was updated in its current form in 2011. It represents an agreement of good working practice between the principal and local councils. Prior to the development of the Better Working Together document the relationship between the two tiers was uneven and often resulted in delays in achieving results.

The overarching aim of the Better Working between Lancashire County Council and Parish and Town Councils’ document is for councils in Lancashire to provide better services by working together. Key issues identified were: improving communication, consulting each other, giving support and help, measuring how well partners are doing.

The ‘document’ notes that local government at all levels is currently faced with unprecedented change, whether this is from the challenges posed by reduced financial resources or the opportunities provided by the devolution and delegation of decision making to the most local level practicable. This context also provided a motivation for the two levels of government to aim to work together more effectively.

The ‘document’ itself is a live document which is constantly monitored and reviewed to enable it to adapt and evolve as relationships between Lancashire County Council and parish councils continue to develop, improve and grow stronger.



Where previously there had been strong direction from Lancashire County Council, there is now a more 'bottom-up' approach that means local issues can be managed more effectively across government. As a result of the 'document', local councils can also be consulted on issues and contribute to debates on service delivery at a county level. Parishes have indicated that the consultation process is now more open and transparent; they are now able to click on the internet and view all the responses to consultations, including those of the parish councils.

#### Top tips

- Adopting a charter type document can help put relationships on a more productive footing.
- Devolution and decentralisation can be a catalyst for closer working.
- Understanding both partners' situation helps build trust and respect.

Members of the parish council working group noted that, prior to the original charter project contact with the county council had been sporadic and uncoordinated. The process of development significantly improved the relationship between the two tiers of government. It also gave representatives from both tiers a better idea of the issues affecting the other. This improved understanding led to a sense of trust between the two tiers and officers now have improved access to relevant colleagues and their expertise

In some cases the 'document' has also led to the local council having a more strategic role in developing services for their area.

## North Somerset Council: paperless parishes

North Somerset Council is a unitary authority on the coast of the south west of England. In its Annual Report 2011/2012 the council committed to exploring many new ways of supporting communities and providing access to services. The report noted that while the resources available to local public services will be significantly reduced over the next four years, the council must remain ambitious as an organisation, and as communities. The council is looking to make further efficiency improvements and to redesign many of their services.

The Paperless Parish scheme commenced in early 2012. The aim was to provide

subsidised ICT equipment and training to local councils with the goal of reducing the amount of paper sent to them by North Somerset Council and to enable local councils to make more use of ICT in their own work.

In a move to more paperless working, North Somerset Council increasingly communicates with partner organisations electronically. By avoiding unnecessary circulation of hard copies the council will save time and resources, working more efficiently and encouraging others to do the same. To support local councils in a similar transition to more paperless working, the council offered a 90 per cent subsidised ICT equipment package. For a contribution of £100 parish councils in North Somerset received a hardware and software package along with setup and installation of the equipment and an initial training session.

The 39 local councils in the area are at various stages of moving to electronic working, but the majority took up the ICT offer. Those having already adopted paperless working reported the following benefits:

- cost savings on printing, as they no longer circulate multiple hard copy papers before meetings
- reduced requirement for office space as filing of hard copies is now minimal
- the need for paper recycling/disposal is minimal, saving time and money
- a wider variety of up-to-date information is available at meetings (eg through accessing online maps and aerial photographs).

The long-term transfer to completely paperless parishes is still some way off. Nevertheless the scheme is the start of a sustainable way of working between the two tiers. Both North Somerset and local councils will have to commit to working hard to ensure necessary electronic information is available in a timely manner and in a suitable format that will at least resolve the electronic plans issue.

Although paperless meetings require some preparation, such as setting up presentation slides, that can be offset by a reduction in the amount of time spent copying and collating papers. Local councils have reported that meetings can be quicker and more efficient with organised councillors, who take time to prepare!

For those, whose ICT skills are a barrier, North Somerset Council arranged a follow-up basic ICT course and will offer to arrange further courses later in the year if there is sufficient demand. North Somerset will also shortly be introducing a regular e-bulletin for local councils, to further improve electronic communications and make up-to-date information as accessible as possible.

#### Top tips

- Support to local councils can take many forms – look for the option that best suits your area.
- Even the most basic of operating procedures can be reviewed for improvement.
- Principal councils' buying power can have benefits for local councils.



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## North East Lincolnshire Council and Immingham Town Council: rebuilding relationships

Immingham is a town in the Borough of North East Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire Council being a unitary authority. Immingham Town Council has, in the four years since 2008, gone from facing a Community Governance Review (CGR) that looked set to disband the council to becoming a model for service devolution and partnership working with their principal council, North East Lincolnshire Council.

The CGR looked at every aspect of the operation of the council. Councillors and officers were very aware that things had to change and without doubt the following year saw a marked difference in almost every aspect of Immingham Town Council's function. In fact, the result has been a change in not only how the council operates, but also in its relationship with partners, in particular North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC). The town council now has an excellent dialogue with North East Lincolnshire Council officers and the working relationship with the three ward members has also improved substantially.

Immingham Town Council believes it has become a pilot for the transfer of services between the two tiers. The council has had a number of services devolved to them from NELC. This includes the operation of the public toilets under a devolved service model for the past three years (with a £10,000 grant from NELC).

NELC and Immingham TC also jointly developed a service level agreement on the

takeover of manual street cleaning within the town. This is the second year of the scheme, which is estimated to save NELC about £15,000 through cheaper working and reduced overheads. This scheme has been extended for three years.

Since April 2012 Immingham TC have also taken over grounds maintenance in the town, seconding two employees from NELC for a 12-month pilot and adding in three additional town council employees, including a newly recruited apprentice. This programme of joint working has also made significant savings for North East Lincolnshire and improved service delivery.

The town council has also brought together NELC and Shoreline Housing Association into its own building to deliver a 'one stop shop' customer service portal. Town council employees signpost and take enquiries, freeing up NELC and housing association employees and creating significant savings. Immingham Town Council receives around £22,000 per year in rent and staffing contributions from the other organisations.

Joint working as well as a strong commitment from councillors at both tiers has led to the change of fortunes for Immingham Town Council and a better, cheaper range of services for residents – Immingham Town Council has reduced its precept in 2012, despite delivering more services!

### Top tips

- A commitment to change for the better can turn around challenging situations.
- One stop shop arrangements can make sure best use is made of partners' resources.
- Hosting other organisations can be a source of income.

# Key lessons and themes

While each of the case studies provides its own pointers and considerations, on which councils will want to draw when thinking of devolving or adopting services or transferring assets, this section briefly highlights ten key overall lessons and themes emerging from just some of those councils that have already been through the process.

## 1. Public support

Good quality community engagement and active measures to secure public support for taking on new responsibilities, particularly where an increase to the precept or the need for volunteers is required, is essential.

Councils in all tiers of local government need to communicate openly and effectively with and seek the support of their communities when considering devolving services. In this respect a community, rather than a council-led approach may be an advantage. Well run and functioning local councils, especially those meeting minimum standards set out through the Quality Parishes Scheme, will be at a distinct advantage in securing public confidence for any developed or enhanced role.

Councillors at all levels will play a vital role in championing their residents' aims and winning hearts and minds around the difficult decisions that must be made.

## 2. Local charters

Real benefit can be had from the development of local charters as a framework for partnership working and dialogue. This



process can help to bolster local councils and be the catalyst for conversations and relationship building. A charter can lead to a more even relationship between the tiers of local government across an area and in that way lead to more consistent and timely service delivery.

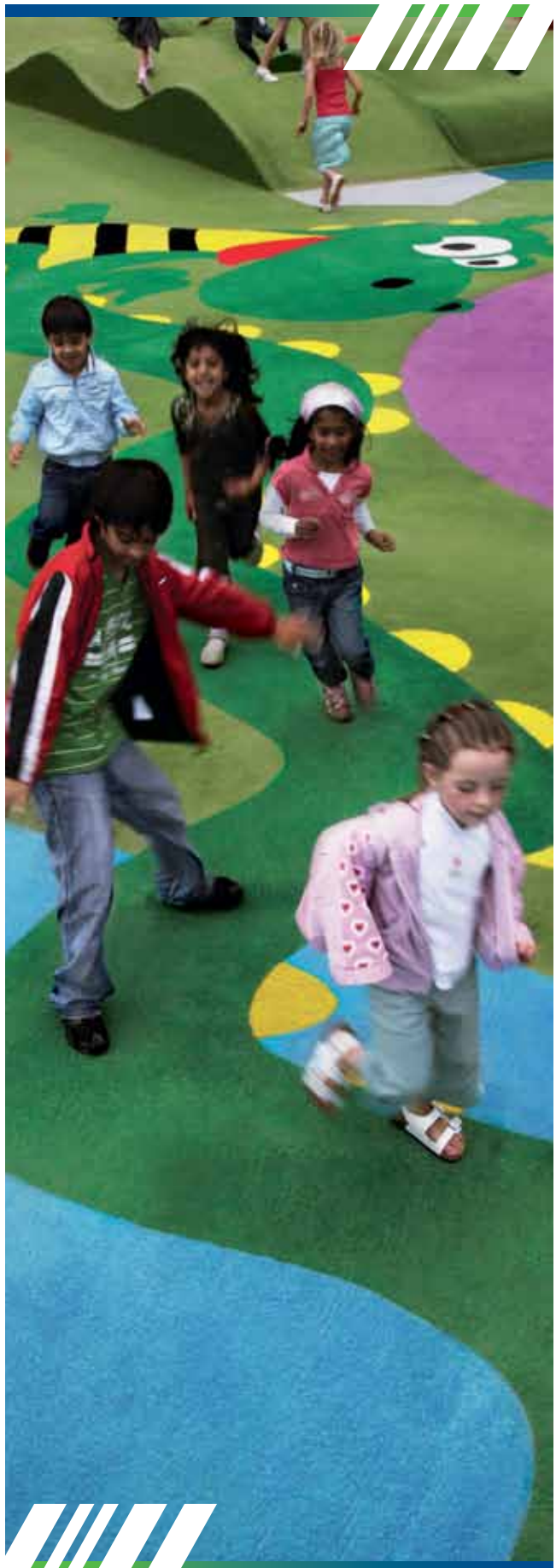
### 3. Close understanding and trust between tiers of local government

The importance of building trust and mutual understanding between local and principal councils can't be stressed enough. This could be through regular meetings, close bespoke support or the development of personal relationships at both the officer and councillor level. It should be noted however that an understanding that relies purely on personal relationships is vulnerable to personnel changes on either side.

### 4. Councils' openness to devolution and culture change

Unsurprisingly successful devolution is much more likely where the principal council has an open-door approach to service devolution and to developing their relationships with local councils. But equally the local council needs not only to want to take over a service, but also to show leadership and have the capacity and capability to take local ownership and sustain delivery in the future.

To accelerate the process of transferring service delivery to local councils, a widespread acceptance of and desire for change in ways of working in both principal and local councils is essential.





A balanced approach to risk and innovation needs to be cultivated, with both officers and councillors open to new ideas and ways of working with the citizen and community at the heart of all considerations. The foundations for this are there and can be seen in many of the case studies. However, more can be done by councillors and officers at all levels to bring this attitude into the mainstream and for it to become the norm

For some councillors the idea of letting go of power and putting it into the hands of communities could be seen as a threat. But it is far from this. Devolving services to local councils offers great opportunities for councillors of principal councils to work more closely with their colleagues on local councils, their constituents and groups within their wards and divisions to bring about better outcomes for their communities. The evidence gained from this closer engagement potentially gives them increased power to influence the decisions of their own administration. This could particularly be the case if a group of councillors representing wards with similar interests were able to come together to make a unified case for their communities.

For officers too there have to be changes in attitude and practice to reach the full potential of this way of working.

Openness and an acceptance that things can be done differently are essential. Officers in principal councils will have to be open-minded and proactive about options for transferring services to local councils. Equally local councils have to accept that in some limited circumstances it will not always make sense to transfer service delivery to a more local level. But it is only by working closely together in an open and honest way

and genuinely listening to each other that these decisions can be made in the best interests of local people.

## 5. Evolution not revolution

In some cases it may be better to start small, build on success and develop a track record rather than let ambition lead you to bite off more than you can chew. A very small local council may not have the resources or experience in the first instance to take on anything more than a relatively straightforward service, but with time and investment in capacity more ambitious projects can be undertaken in the future.

## 6. Simplicity

A commitment by the principal council to a clear and straightforward process with the minimum of bureaucracy leading to the transfer of service delivery is integral to success. Avoid as much as possible convoluted paths to the transfer of assets and think carefully about the need for restrictive covenants. Where a service level agreement is involved, keep it simple and easily understood. Similarly keep communication channels straightforward.

## 7. Project management

Even simple transfers of responsibilities need careful management and often benefit from the provision of a dedicated resource to complete the transfer. Where the principal council can facilitate delivery through a dedicated local area coordinator transfers are likely to be smoother.

## 8. Support of county associations of local councils

Bearing in mind the limited resources and experience of some local councils the local county association of local councils can be an invaluable source of knowledge and experience to mentor councils through the process of transferring assets or service delivery. Working alongside both the principal and local councils, the county association can bring much needed additional capacity, knowledge and expertise.



## 9. Area management

Principal councils with a positive agenda of transferring services to local councils have in some cases found it helpful not only to develop an area-based management structure, but also to establish joint area committees for local accountability. Effective involvement of local councils in these processes is important to the building of relationships and trust.

## 10. Precepts

In transferring assets and services it is essential that principal councils seek to avoid double taxation of citizens. Wherever possible if local councils find they need to increase their precepts then principal councils should make every effort to provide some financial resources or deliver a compensatory reduction of their council tax. Where an overall increase in the precept is judged to be desirable to deliver enhancements in services it is clearly important to ensure the support of council tax payers.

# Looking to the future of service delivery

A large-scale change in culture in local government would lay the foundation for more creative and innovative approaches to service devolution. Some possible options for this are explored in the following paragraphs.

## A different approach to contracting

Sometimes it is argued that economies of scale make it cheaper to let one contract to cover the delivery of service(s) over the whole of a principal council area rather than each local council negotiating its own contracts. This can be used as an excuse for not devolving service(s) to local councils. However, a more innovative approach to procurement can deliver the financial benefits of a large contract while also protecting local flexibility. For example a contract and financial limits could be negotiated with one contractor, but with the relevant local councils defining the detail of what should be delivered in their particular area. In this way the economies of scale could be maintained, but with control being passed to the local council.

## New approaches to balancing taxation

If a local council takes responsibility for service delivery from its principal council, it is not unreasonable for that local council to feel the need to increase its precept to cover the costs of delivering the newly acquired service(s).

To compensate for this and to minimise inflation of the overall council tax paid by individual tax payers, it would be helpful if the relevant principal council(s) could reduce their share of the tax take or at least hold down increases by an equivalent amount. Equally local councils will want to be mindful of creating new bureaucracies and therefore costs to run the services devolved to them, particularly if the principal councils are not able to reduce their bureaucracies by a corresponding amount. It will often be the case that principal councils will need to retain staff to provide services to those parts of the council area not covered by a local council, even though their responsibilities have reduced.

## Innovation in workforce management

Finding efficiencies and ways of reducing costs is something principal councils are adept at - as has been seen over recent years - and there will be different solutions for different circumstances.

However, staff costs in a principal council following devolution of services could be reduced by the council paying officers, who have had responsibilities transferred to the local council, a base salary to undertake the rump of duties remaining with the principal



council. The remainder of the officer's salary could then be made up from income earned by the council selling commissioning/contracting and other services to the local councils. So for example if an officer is currently paid £30,000, following devolution s/he could be paid £10,000 out of the principal council's core budget with the remaining £20,000 being made up on a sales related basis from income earned by the council from the sale of services to the local councils. In that way, if the officers are good enough and local councils want to use their services, the officers will see no difference in income (or maybe an increase). If however their performance, for whatever reason, leaves a little to be desired the local councils could decide to go elsewhere leaving the principal council to make compensating reductions to stay within budget.

There will be other ways of working to keep costs down that councils will be able to devise as they get more experience of devolving services. The keys to success however are honesty, openness, trust, innovation and a willingness to accept change and new ways of working. Councils that are willing to take risks and push the boundaries will be those that will make the biggest gains.

## Conclusions

There are clear advantages from principal and local councils working much more closely and collaboratively as well as from devolving service delivery and transferring assets to local councils. This report shows how some of the many councils across the country are already reaping the benefits of these approaches.

In this time of straitened principal council budgets, a more local control of services and assets can enable otherwise threatened services to continue; sometimes at an enhanced level. But it may not be sensible or indeed cost effective for every service to be considered for devolution or delegation and what may be appropriate for one council may not be for another. Through close cooperation principal and local councils can develop a common understanding and identify what is right for each particular circumstance.

While there are some clear common paths to be followed and pitfalls to be avoided, devolving of assets or services is a very local issue and not something to be dictated centrally. Mutual understanding, the building of trust and the development of solid partnerships at the local level are what need to be promoted. It is from this point that appropriate levels of devolution will follow.

For the local delivery of services to work, and not just council services, culture change is required not only in some principal and local councils but also in Whitehall. This is not something that will happen overnight or from the publication of this paper. It will need continuing effort, promotion and support from both central and local government over a period of years rather than months.





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