

Community Engagement and Local Leadership

The Role for Parish and Town Councils
Good Practice Pointers

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Policy Advice Note

This advice note shows how working with parish and town councils adds value to services, involves communities and builds social capital. It sets down practical good practice pointers and proven ways¹ in which parish and town councils can help your organisation, and identifies what you can do for them.

This advice note is presented in four sections:


1. Summary
2. Benefits of engaging Parish and Town Councils
3. Policy and Good Practice Pointers in detail
4. Sources of evidence for this Advice Note

Summary

Parish and town councils are actively helping to implement policies, programmes and services that improve the quality of life for their communities. In doing so they are helping to deliver the strategic objectives of many organisations, including principal authorities and government departments. To maximise these opportunities, this note presents recommendations for policy makers, support agencies and service deliverers. These are:

- To foster the capacity of parish and town councils;
- To build effective partnerships with parish and town councils;
- To involve parish and town councils in neighbourhood development;
- To build the confidence and skills of individuals within communities;
- To manage grant funding schemes effectively;
- To guarantee consistency and joined-up policy making;
- To give parish and town councils the power to promote local wellbeing.

¹ This advice is based on a review of good practice arising from selected work of the Countryside Agency between 2000 and 2004.



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Benefits of engaging Parish and Town Councils

Parish and town councils are helping to deliver the Government’s commitments to improving ‘Citizen Engagement and Public Services’. The Government believes “that more could be done at the parish level and councils should play a key role in facilitating this.”²

Working with town and parish councils adds practical value for government departments, regional agencies, principal authorities and others seeking to deliver services or improve communities. Parish and town councils are long established, representative and democratically accountable bodies and the tier of local government closest to the communities they serve. There are about 8,000 such councils in England, spending £200 million a year and involving 80,000 parish and town councillors. More than 100 new parish councils have been created since 1997, many of them in large towns and urban areas. Parish and town councils employ some 25,000 staff and serve at least 15 million people (~30% of the population).³

Parish and town councils are diverse. Many rural councils serve small populations of under 500 while others represent urban areas with over 50,000 people. A few spend less than £500 a year and many have a single part-time officer, while others have budgets of over £500,000 and a large workforce. Some act primarily as a local watchdog while others deliver services similar to those of a district council. Parish and town councils can raise money through the council tax as a precept and from other sources to achieve local improvements.

Many parish and town councils are working towards accreditation as ‘Quality councils’,⁴ demonstrating the ability to represent and involve their communities, to provide facilities and services and operating to a high standard.⁵

² ODPM (2005), Citizen Engagement and Public Service: Why Neighbourhoods Matter, (Section 70) London, HMSO www.odpm.gov.uk

³ National Association of Local Councils <http://www.nalc.gov.uk>

⁴ A full list of councils with quality status can be viewed at <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/quality/qualitycouncilslist.html>
For more information refer to The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme: The Quality Scheme Explained obtainable from http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/quality_parishes/default.htm

⁵ For examples of projects carried out by parish and town councils, see Commission for Rural Communities (2005) Pointers to Good Practice: A guide for town and parish councils

➔ Main points:

- Parish and town councils are the democratic organisations which are active at the most local level. Engagement with the community through the parish or town council helps agencies work closely with neighbourhoods, involve more people and actively respond to their views.
- Parish and town councils can make connections with local organisations and unlock volunteer contributions to regeneration activities.
- Investment channelled through parish and town councils helps funding agencies to deliver initiatives cost effectively and to sustain them beyond the initial funding.
- Parish and town councils assist agencies to promote good practice and to deliver legal requirements for community engagement including Comprehensive Performance Assessments and Community Strategies.
- Involving parish and town councils puts you in touch with local knowledge and with new ways of working that may not have been considered before.

● Good Practice Pointer 1 Foster the capacity of Parish and Town Councils

Promote the work of Parish and Town Councils

The capacity of parish and town councils can be developed by promoting achievements to date.⁶ Agencies such as the NALC (the National Association of Local Councils), CALCs (County Associations of Local Councils), the SLCC (Society of Local Council Clerks) and principal authorities, can publicise the work of parish or town councils. Funding to encourage networking, and websites promoting good practice, would enable parishes to share experiences. A ‘parish partners’ scheme operates in Yorkshire and Humberside, where a parish pays £50 and expenses for a speaker from a parish experienced in the parish plan process.

Support charter agreements and the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme

Principal authorities should collaborate with the parish sector (normally through the County Association of Local Councils) to support the Quality scheme and draw up Charters for joint working.⁷ Charters can establish connections between parish plans and strategic planning, and agree the delegation of functions and financial arrangements, including the perceived

⁶ For examples of projects carried out by parish and town councils, see Commission for Rural Communities (2005) Pointers to Good Practice: A guide for town and parish councils

⁷ See The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme: The Quality Scheme Explained obtainable from http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/quality_parishes/default.htm and charters: A Good Practice Guide obtainable from www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

problem of double taxation.⁸ To develop the Quality scheme, support agencies must demonstrate tangible benefits for Quality councils, including regular co-operation, respect for their views, and delegation of power and resources to deliver services where this is requested. Small councils might be encouraged to work together for mutual help in achieving Quality status.

Encourage 'parish clusters'

Parish clusters offer economies of scale for service delivery and access to a number of parishes. Clusters might include market town initiatives that help surrounding parishes: for example, Bodmin Town Council links with six neighbouring parishes to implement regeneration policies. Parishes also combine forces to obtain joint funding for local transport solutions, such as at Lavenham in Suffolk, where nine parishes have organised a new bus service.

Further encourage councils to use the parish precept to support local projects

Parish and town councils should be strongly encouraged to precept. This demonstrates support for an initiative, reduces external input and helps sustain action. Funding from the precept can lever assistance from other sources. A gradual increase could mirror phased withdrawal by other funders. Local people are often willing to pay for visible improvements on their doorstep.

● Good Practice Pointer 2

Build effective partnerships with Parish and Town Councils

Reach out to Parish and Town Councils

Liasing with parish and town councils is useful to policy makers because it fosters face-to-face contact, enables external staff to see local conditions and generates community input into strategic plans. Agencies can take their messages, including funding programmes, out to parish and town councils. For example, they can speak at the Annual Parish Meeting, have a stall at a local event, and promote action through the branch library. This liasing needs to be systematic and structured, to avoid ad hoc delivery that may favour the articulate and those who have joined representative bodies. Parish and town councils should be encouraged to join organisations such as their CALCs and clerks can join the SLCC to access information and support networks and contribute to the collective voice of these organisations.

⁸ Double taxation occurs when the principal authority withdraws a service from a parish but continues to provide it in its unparished areas. People in the parish are reluctant to use the precept to foot the bill for the withdrawn service because they are still paying for it to be delivered elsewhere through other elements of their council tax. See The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme: The Quality Scheme Explained obtainable from http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/quality_parishes/default.htm

Promote collaborative working and joint service provision

Parish and town councils and partner agencies should explore efficiencies of scale through joint provision, recognising the value of bringing a service closer to users. Parish and town councils own land and buildings that may benefit the projects of other agencies. Land could be used for affordable homes, while local premises might house a regeneration officer or principal authority information point.

Parish and town councils often initiate or support the multi-use of community owned assets. For example, Grassmoor Community Centre in Derbyshire offers ICT, adult education, advice services, lunches for the elderly, a playgroup and parish council meeting room. In Tackley, Oxfordshire, with a population of about 1,000, the All in One project runs a general store, post office, coffee shop and computer facility in the hall. Examples of sharing premises include satellite post offices and health clinics in pubs, and schools and libraries offering ICT access and community activities.

Parish and town councillors often wear many hats as they engage in community action (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch, school governor). The parish or town council therefore provides an entry to other community groups. Parish and town councillors are frequently district and/or county councillors, members of agency boards or are public sector employees, thereby multiplying the channels of communication.

● Good Practice Pointer 3

Involve Parish and Town Councils in neighbourhood development

Ensure that consultation at parish level contributes to strategic planning

Consultation at parish level offers policy makers and service deliverers an opportunity to ensure that public money supports local preferences. Agencies can facilitate bridge building to link parish plans with policies to address the needs and aspirations of local communities,⁹ such as Community Strategies and Local Development Frameworks. Some principal authorities (such as Carrick and North Cornwall District Councils), make a financial contribution to parish plan production. The West Berkshire Partnership of voluntary and public bodies has funded an officer to advise on parish plans and make links to council decision-making. The local authority offers up to £5,000 per plan to take forward action points. The partnership has supported 40 parish plans and recognises this as "an excellent

⁹ See Countryside and Community Research Unit (2004) The Bridges Research Project, Cheltenham, CCRU, University of Gloucestershire.

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way in which a wider strategic partnership can find out about the concerns of residents at parish level.¹⁰ Stroud District Council in Gloucestershire has a dedicated parish plans officer who provides a free statistical profile to parishes embarking on a plan.

West Berkshire, Caradon District and Herefordshire County Councils have adopted parish plan material as supplementary planning guidance, thereby directly contributing to development control decisions. There is potential (Planning Policy Statement 11 s.2.17)¹¹ for incorporating parish plan content into Regional Spatial Strategies.

Encourage the parish sector in piloting new ideas

Piloting has proved useful, for example in relation to Village Design Statements. It tests ideas and highlights adjustments whilst reducing wasted resources. Prior to the launch of a programme, stakeholders should be involved so that they can achieve effective design, introduction, delivery and assimilation of the intended scheme. Policy makers and those delivering services will benefit from piloting initiatives because it fosters innovation and enables reflection and adjustment before full scale delivery. Precept to address identified needs.

Encourage parish and town councils to develop their own innovations

Using their local knowledge, people in communities often suggest innovative ways of addressing local issues. Networking and the dissemination of fresh ideas can help all players to find solutions. For example, some parish and town councils have already supported development trusts and social enterprises locally; national agencies such as NALC and the Development Trusts Association can disseminate these ideas. Support agencies will benefit from a lively and innovative parish sector.

¹⁰ References to specific research findings are taken from evaluation reports commissioned in 2004/2005 by the Countryside Agency.

¹¹ Planning Policy Statement 11 can be viewed at http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_planning/documents/page/odpm_plan_031152_01.hcsp#P98_19029



● Good Practice Pointer 4

Build the confidence and skills of individuals within communities

Further promote the development of skills and confidence in communities

It is good practice to incorporate capacity building, such as skills training, into a scheme. There are examples of this in programmes developed by the Welsh Assembly Government such as Communities First.¹² Community skills development fosters sustained action beyond initial funding and helps build more self-reliant communities.

Invest in community development and project workers

Community development staff help policy makers because they can ‘speak the same language’ as support agencies and community groups and engender mutually beneficial processes and outcomes. Research evaluating Countryside Agency funding programmes (2000-2004) demonstrates that community development workers play a crucial role as intermediaries, knitting together the patchwork of community aspirations and outside help. Project managers, community development workers and specialists working with young people, identify and tackle social exclusion in parishes. For example, Derbyshire Rural Community Council runs a ‘village agent’ scheme supported by European funding, the RDA and local authorities.

Encourage volunteering

Community volunteers represent a committed workforce that can save resources. The Local Heritage Initiative shows the benefits of giving a financial value to volunteer effort as match funding. The Faringdon Action Plan from Oxfordshire involved 17 groups in 32 projects; voluntary input was estimated at 23,000 hours, or 17 fulltime volunteers valued at £750,000. Similarly Wolverton Unlimited, a regeneration partnership near Milton Keynes, estimates volunteering equivalent to £98,000 per year. The Southeast Rural Towns Partnership noted that “if Government wishes to encourage local involvement in many areas of public life they should provide re-imbusement, either as payment or recognition of time given or pay in lieu of hours lost.” The Department for Education and Skills could consider ‘national service’ grants in exchange for students volunteering with a parish council or community project, thereby fostering the involvement of young people.

“Community skills development fosters sustained action beyond initial funding and helps build more self-reliant communities.”

¹² Information on the Communities First scheme can be obtained from www.wales.gov.uk/themessocialdeprivation/



Training for volunteers, including parish and town councillors and staff, should be encouraged. The East Midlands Development Agency Community Leadership Programme, for example, offers training through online and face-to-face sessions to volunteers and school governors. Principal authorities should be represented on County Training Partnerships for Town and Parish Councils and offer support for training.¹³ Principal authorities in Essex have made a major investment in training for town and parish councils, enabling the county's Training Partnership to employ an officer to support its work.

● Good Practice Pointer 5

Manage grant funding schemes effectively

Make sure that the funding process is robust and not over demanding

Straightforward yet stringent grant schemes can offer accountability, speed of administration and customer satisfaction. Applicants need clear guidance on deadlines and eligibility. Tight deadlines put applicants under pressure that can compromise the quality of a bid. The funding process must be inclusive and not favour the most articulate. Agencies are encouraged to offer grants to parish and town councils as well as to voluntary sector organisations. This prevents competition between people who should be working together. Parish and town councils usually need a long lead time to prepare for local action. Assistance could therefore be considered over a five-year rather than a one to three-year period. This would also promote project officer job security and address the slow uptake of some grant programmes.

Modest funding at an early stage can help parishes to develop ideas before submitting proposals for more substantial grant aid. Advisers could be paid for developmental work with groups leading to an initiative, including payment to staff for writing applications for further funding. Danbury Parish Council in Essex, for example, committed £2,000, unlocking £250,000 for further improvements from other agencies. It is important to support innovation, but it can also be cost effective and sustainable if grants reinforce existing projects and organisations. Applicants should be required to plan the aftercare and evaluation of a project from the outset. Agencies need to work with parish and town councils to ensure an orderly withdrawal of support, to secure the lessons learned and momentum gained.

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¹³ For more information on the National Training Strategy for Town and Parish Councils visit <http://www.nalc.go.uk>

If funded programmes are transferred to other agencies, or ground rules and eligibility change, then stakeholders need to be informed at an early stage. The ending of the 'Vital Villages' scheme in 2004 caused difficulty. In particular Community Services and Parish Transport grants ceased just as substantial numbers of parish plans identified action that could have benefited from this assistance.

Contribute resources as well as funding

Help in kind can benefit service providers in terms of direct cash savings. It can tailor input to specific issues using existing resources. Where relevant, agencies can offer help in kind, such as specialist advice and expertise, training, use of equipment, administrative services and financial management to benefit ventures supported by parish and town councils. The principal authority can also offer savings to the parish sector by buying goods and services in bulk, as long as this is not at the expense of local facilities like the village shop.

● Good Practice Pointer 6

Guarantee consistency and joined-up policy making

Aim for consistent and complementary policies and programmes

Joined up policy making and delivery mean that support agencies carry through Government requirements, and do not waste time and money on initiatives that may be undermined from another quarter. The successful partnership between Defra (leading on rural policy) and the ODPM (responsible for local government) in establishing the Quality scheme should be replicated. Government places increasing emphasis on neighbourhood governance and the role of parish and town councils.¹⁴ This must be aligned with specific rural policies, while Defra's programmes should complement neighbourhood government for urban areas.

'Rural proofing' is a valuable technique for checking that policies from a variety of agencies meet the needs of rural areas. Similarly organisations in both rural and urban areas should check that their policies and practices include parish and town councils when seeking to engage with neighbourhoods.

Put in place clear plans for evaluation and aftercare of programmes

Evaluation and project aftercare are useful to policy makers and service deliverers because they protect the investment of time and money, facilitate desirable changes and can generate good practice for transfer to other places. The evaluation of policies and programmes should

¹⁴ For more information on the National Training Strategy for Town and Parish Councils visit <http://www.nalc.go.uk>

be planned so that agencies learn from experience and progress is measured. Evaluations can be activated from the outset by establishing baseline data; they also need to range widely in order to capture the benefits of participating in community action such as capacity building. Evaluators must be alive to the possibility and importance of unexpected gains or problems. There should be a clear link between evaluative research and subsequent changes to ways of working with the parish sector.

Confusion and disappointment can occur when time-limited programmes end, as in the case of Vital Village grants, especially if this happens suddenly. Agencies need to publicise proposals for the aftercare or conclusion of a programme well in advance.

● Good Practice Pointer 7

Give Parish and Town Councils the power to promote local wellbeing

To strengthen the role of parish and town councils it is strongly recommended that Government gives them the power to promote and improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area (Local Government Act 2000 s2 (1)) without limit on expenditure. An extension of the power to promote wellbeing to parish and town councils will revolutionise their ability to work in partnership with support agencies and lead community ventures.

Under the Local Government Act 1972 s137 (as amended) parish and town councils are permitted to spend a limited amount each year on activities of benefit to their communities for which there is no other statutory provision (such as health services). Principal authorities however, have the power to promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area (Local Government Act 2000 s2 (1)). Government is urged to extend this power to parish and town councils to bring them in line with principal authorities, and give them more scope for responding to local need.

“An extension of the power to promote wellbeing to parish and town councils will revolutionise their ability to work in partnership with support agencies and lead community ventures.”

Sources of evidence for this Advice Note

The evidence to support this advice has been drawn extensively but not exclusively from evaluation reports reviewing the following Countryside Agency programmes (2000-2004).

- Community Development Worker and Rural Housing Enabler Schemes (with the Community Development Foundation)
- Local Heritage Initiative
- Market Town Initiative
- National Training Strategy for Parish and Town Councils (with the National Association of Local Councils)
- Parish Plans and Community Service Grants (with Rural Community Councils)
- Parish Transport Grants and Rural Transport Partnerships.

Other programmes informing this advice note include:

- The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme
- Advice to parish councils on planning matters
- Rural proofing for local authorities
- Joint provision of rural services
- Design Statements
- Countryside Communities Initiative (Countryside Agency with the Community Fund)

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