

Working with town and parish councils

Councillor workbook



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This councillor workbook includes references to materials published by the Local Government Group (LG Group) and Local Government Leadership (LG Leadership), now both the Local Government Association (LGA).

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgement about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of the key features of effective working with town and parish councils.

Those members who are new to local government will recognise that they have much to learn. This workbook will provide you with an understanding of the nature of town and parish councils and their importance for the communities you serve.

Town and parish councils are often referred to as 'local councils' and their corresponding district or county councils as 'principal authorities'. These terms are used occasionally throughout the workbook.

The workbook offers few firm rules for ward members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to work with the town and parish councils in their ward. This will be influenced by the governance arrangements in your council area and the nature of the relationships that you forge with town/parish councillors and clerks. As such, there is no presumption about 'typical wards' or 'typical members' and the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

In practical terms, the document will take around two to three hours to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through

the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about the issues presented and how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the way that you collaborate with town and parish councils. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by other people or organisations.



Hints and tips – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information and support, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendix to the workbook.

Working with town and parish councils

The nature of town and parish councils

Town and parish councils were established by Act of Parliament in 1894. There are around 9,000 such local councils in England with around 80,000 citizens serving as voluntary but elected parish councillors. They are democratically elected and represent some 16 million people across the country. They also perform a number of important roles: as providers and supporters of services; as signposts and access points to services; as representatives and community leaders.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) represents town and parish councils in England and Wales. At a local level, each area has its own county-based Association of Parish and Town (or Local) Councils known as the 'County Association' which provides information on issues affecting this first tier of local government.

A typical parish council represents around 2,700 people, although some have much larger populations. Shrewsbury Town Council – created in 2009 – serves over 72,000 people, which is more than some small county authorities.



Some facts about parish councillors

- They must be over 21 years of age.
- They may be British nationals, but can also be citizens of the Commonwealth or the European Union.
- They receive no financial reward as the law forbids it (although they may receive an allowance).
- While many stand for election and are voted in, some are co-opted onto their council to fill the vacant seats resulting from a shortage of candidates at election time.
- Some represent a political party – others are independent of party affiliations.
- The chairman of a town council can also be called the 'Town Mayor' – the election of a town mayor distinguishes a town from a parish council.
- Some are also district or county councillors – they are often referred to as dual- or multi-hatted.

These considerable differences are reflected in the annual spending of local councils which can range from under £1,000 to £4 million. With these figures in mind, it is important that you know how much any town or parish councils in your ward are spending each year – their significance should not be underestimated.

Alongside the chairman, most local councils have a paid clerk, who provides advice and administrative support to councillors and takes action to implement council decisions. The clerk may also operate as a project manager, personnel director, public relations officer or finance administrator. But the role is not just secretarial – a parish clerk is answerable to the council as a whole and is the authorised officer of the council in law. Legally, councils can agree to delegate decisions to clerks because they are professional officers whose independence allows them to act on behalf of the council.

The diversity of parish councils is their strength. Each can make a unique contribution to the needs of local communities with a sensitivity that may be more difficult for other councils to achieve. At their heart, they are genuinely 'local councils'



Exercise 1 – the town and parish councils in your area

Using your existing knowledge or any research you are able to carry out on the council's intranet (or other information sources available to members), set out below what you know of the local councils in your area:

(a) How many town and parish councils are there in total?

(b) How many parish chairmen/clerks do you know by name?

(c) How often do the councils meet (and what proportion of these meetings do you attend)?

(d) How much do the councils spend each year (highest and lowest)?

(e) What are their principal functions – what services and support do they provide?

(f) What partnership arrangements (if any) are the councils included in?

Look again at your answers. While they may be very diverse in nature, most town and parish councils have the potential to influence greatly the social, economic and environmental well-being of the communities you serve. As such, they are key partners for you to engage with as a community leader.

What do town and parish councils do?

Town and parish councils have discretionary legal powers and rights to take action. And while their responsibilities are more limited than those of your own council, they play a vital part in representing the interests of local people and improving the quality of life and the local environment. On top of this, they can influence other decision makers and can, in many cases, deliver services to meet local needs.



Legal obligations of local councils

Alongside their discretionary powers, town and parish councils have a number of legal obligations to fulfill:

- They must hold an annual meeting and at least three other meetings each year.
- They must appoint such officers as they believe necessary for the proper discharge of their functions – this may be an unpaid councillor, but in most cases will be a parish clerk and/or treasurer.
- They must make standing orders for the supply of goods and services to the council.
- They must adhere to local government legislation.

The services delivered by these councils can include planning, highways, traffic, community safety, housing, street lighting, allotments, cemeteries, playing fields, community centres, litter, war memorials, seats and shelters and rights of way. And as part of the new localism agenda, they are being encouraged to play an even greater role in their communities (see Halewood case study).

The delivery of some of these services may be subject to various consents, from, for example, the owner of land or another public body such as the highways authority. Significantly, town and parish councils have an unfettered right to raise money for the services they provide by precept (which is a mandatory demand) on their district council. The precept required is then collected by this collection authority as part of the Council Tax levied on local tax payers in that parish.

Like you, parish councillors are required to act ethically in carrying out their role. Most local councils have their own code of conduct and require councillors to act openly and honourably in the public interest. They must also do nothing to bring their council into disrepute and must never use their position to secure personal advantage for themselves, their family or friends. Like you, they must declare any personal or prejudicial interests as part of this ethical framework.



Sudbury Town Council – delivering local services

Sudbury is a small, ancient market town in Suffolk. In 2010, Babergh District Council announced its intention to close the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) in Sudbury due to budget cuts. The TIC shares the same building as the council offices and councillors felt it was important to maintain this essential service in the town. The town council took over the management of the TIC in April 2011, thereby keeping the service and safeguarding three jobs. The TIC now promotes and sells tickets for local events, sells local produce and crafts and offers guided walks of the town. By taking over the management, the town council can now offer a much more localised service which is geared to the needs of the town and its visitors.

Adapted from Localism in Practice, NALC, 2011



Exercise 2 – community challenges – parish council potential

Imagine as part of your role as a community leader that you are drawing up a list of ideas for providing greater support to the young people in your ward. What support do you think the parish councils in the area could provide to assist you?

Parish councils are a good first port of call for any support you might be considering. They are likely to have good contacts for the full range of public, private and third sector organisations delivering services for children and young people in your area. As providers themselves, some may already be running services in partnership with other bodies or as their agent, eg managing library services or working with village hall committees to help local youngsters. As long as they act lawfully, parish councils can fund equipment and premises to help others to provide services or give grants to organisations that run child care, arts activities or sport – in fact, almost anything that will improve the quality of parish life, eg an evening bus to take young people to the nearest town, a teenagers' drop-in club, a summer youth festival or a local playgroup.

Why work more closely with local councils?

Changes in the legislative backdrop of local government in the last decade has prompted and facilitated closer working between principal authorities and their parish tier. Town and parish councils have an important role to play in the lives of communities and greater powers and responsibilities have been devolved to them, eg the recently introduced **Localism Act** has broadened the scope for local councils to represent their communities (see text box).

Town and parish councils are the democratic bodies with the closest direct links to communities and as such are ideally placed to contribute to the long-term vision and priorities of principal authorities. They also have a vested interest in improving the local quality of life and can be useful partners in exercises designed to improve public services (see **Sudbury case study**). Principal authorities also have a responsibility to contribute to the plans of town and parish councils. This includes the new **neighbourhood plans** introduced by the **Localism Act**. This process provides an ideal opportunity for ward members to participate in some community-led planning.

In a similar fashion, principal authorities should be supporting bids by local councils to achieve 'Quality Parish' status. The 'Quality Parishes Scheme' was launched in 2003 with the aim of providing a benchmark for all parish councils. It was updated in June 2008 to better reflect the increased professionalism of town and parish councils. Three new tests were introduced as well as a number of amendments to some of the existing tests – see the NALC website for further details – <http://tinyurl.com/cq2g6u>

The scheme is open to all parishes, irrespective of size. Having achieved the required standard, a Quality Council is in a better position to influence local decision making processes and take on additional responsibilities from principal authorities. It may also help the council to attract additional funding – all good reasons for members in principal authorities to support the scheme.

The Localism Act

The Localism Act expands the role of local councils in representing local communities. It has repealed the power of well-being for councils in England but makes provision for local authorities, including 'certain' parish councils, to have a new power, wider in scope than the power of well-being. The new power is the 'general power of competence'.

Rather than councils being limited to activities which must be expressly permitted by legislation, the new general power permits authorities to do anything that an individual can generally do unless specifically prohibited by statute. This should free up local authorities to do whatever they choose in responding more effectively to their communities' needs, encouraging innovation and assisting in shared service delivery.

Under the Act, parish and town councils will lead the creation of neighbourhood plans, supported by the local planning authority. Once written, the plan will be independently examined and put to a referendum of local people for approval.

www.legislation.gov.uk



Localism in Halewood

Halewood, in Merseyside, is located in the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley.

Halewood Town Council determined its eligibility to use the power of well-being in September 2009, and again made sure it met the requirements for using the power after the elections in May 2011.

The council has a strong history of using grants from what has been known as the Halewood Community Chest Fund. Since using the power of well-being it has awarded over £11,000 in grants to various bodies by referencing the principal authority's Sustainable Community Strategy, and its own Statement of Intent on Community Engagement.

The grants have benefited not only local organisations, but have enabled small grants to individuals.

Adapted from Localism in Practice, NALC, 2011



Exercise 3 – using parish councils to translate strategy into action

District councils are required to produce community strategies which identify the vision for their area and the priorities for action that have been agreed by members. Many of these documents contain objectives in relation to improving the environmental stewardship of the local authority and its role in tackling environmental challenges like climate change. Identify below any ways that you believe town or parish councils could assist in tackling the environmental agenda (and thereby helping to translate these community strategies into action:

Local councils can be hugely influential in mobilising local people to take action in relation to environmental concerns. They can help to raise awareness of the issues at a neighbourhood level by providing information in parish magazines, on notice boards or via their websites and blogs. They can help to run or grant fund schemes which assist people in increasing recycling and home composting or insulating their homes. They can champion initiatives to support local post offices and other community facilities to reduce car use and support sustainable local businesses. And they can lobby for greater investment in renewable energy at community level. Every small change can make a difference.

Collaborating as a ward member

Many ward members place great value in having good relationships with their parish tier and see working closely with town and parish councillors as important for gathering local intelligence. Parish councillors will often serve as representatives and advocates for local communities and can be a useful sounding board for local opinion. Town and parish councils also have important rights of consultation.

Your council is likely to have an agreed charter or protocol setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of the different tiers of local government in the area. You may also have dedicated parish liaison officers who can assist you in your dealings with these local councils. But don't be limited by the formality of any inter-authority arrangements in place – town and parish councils can be invaluable allies for all aspects of your ward member role.

If your council has introduced area or neighbourhood management schemes, you should ensure that town and parish councils are key players within these. Similarly, if you have a delegated budget as a ward member (sometimes known as a neighbourhood budget) you would be well advised to consult with your parish council colleagues in identifying where this money could be best spent in targeting community needs.



“I do use the parish councils quite shamelessly within my wards, for consultative purposes...those consultative bits are going quite deep into the community...I do make great use of that.”

District and Parish Councillor

One of the biggest challenges facing many ward members is the rural nature of their area and the fact that the size of some ward boundaries makes close working with all town and parish councils difficult. While there is clearly a need for these members to be selective in focusing their time and attention on the most important local councils, it is not a reason for inaction. At the very least, it should not limit ward members' attendance at the annual meeting of each parish and any other significant meetings and forums that involve the key players, eg the county-based association of town and parish councils that meets periodically to discuss strategic and operational issues.

While there is no prescription on the numerous ways that you can collaborate more effectively with your town or parish council colleagues, you may wish to consider the following:

- Attending regular parish meetings when the agenda suggests that there are issues of concern or interest to you or your constituents. Many parishes will routinely invite you to attend their meetings in any case, although you will have no voting rights.
- Acting as a communication conduit to keep parishes informed about what your council is doing, eg contributing to parish newsletters, websites and blogs and holding joint surgeries etc.
- Consulting parish councillors on any issues that may be usefully considered by your council's scrutiny function, eg South Norfolk Council has a 'Community Reference' approach which gives parish and town councils the right to bring items of local wider concern to the council where they do not have the power or the resources to deal with it themselves. If appropriate, the scrutiny committee of South Norfolk Council will investigate the issues raised on behalf of the parish or town.
- Using your influencing skills to broker talks with smaller, less influential parishes, on the scope for pooling funds or working in clusters to enable them to be better heard and 'punch above their weight'.
- Challenging your own council to provide parish councillors or clerks with advice, training and support on pertinent issues.



Exercise 4 – making the most of your parish contacts

Look back over your diary, correspondence or e-mails for the past six months. Identify six major issues that you have had to deal with as a ward member (these should be community-related rather than any internal council business). Having identified these, consider how you could have made better use of your town or parish council contacts in resolving these matters:

Major issues

Ways that town/parish council(s) could have helped

Reflect on your answers. If the issues you identified are typical of the sorts of challenges you are likely to face again, how likely is it that you will make better use of your parish contacts in the future?

Keeping it personal

Like any effective partnership, much of your success in collaborating with town and parish councils will come as a result of your personal approach. So invest time in building good rapport with both councillors and clerks.

Remember also that the collaboration can be a two-way street – a chance for local councils to share their views and requests with you, but also a chance for you to engage their support in tackling issues of common concern.

The extent to which they may be able to assist could surprise you. A great many town and parish councils are proactive in not only working closely with principal authorities, but in taking a lead on many of the social, economic and environmental issues affecting communities (see Hardwicke case study).



Tips for building rapport

- Be clear, open and honest.
- Acknowledge the important role that the council plays and the value to you of closer cooperation.
- Give feedback and explain any decisions taken by you or your council.
- Aim to ensure that while there may not always be agreement between you, there will always be an understanding of each other's views.
- Maintain mutually courteous and beneficial behaviour at all times.
- Be careful to listen and respond accordingly – don't assume you understand the issues.
- Don't focus only on the issues that you consider important – make it a genuine two-way dialogue.
- Be careful to explain the limits of your authority or influence, ie don't commit to actions that you can't deliver on.



Dealing with community concerns in Hardwicke

Hardwicke is a village south of Gloucester, within the Stroud District Council area.

Hardwicke Parish Council, in conjunction with Gloucestershire Police, has created a Good Drivers Scheme which – among other traffic management measures – aims to improve driving and safety within the parish. The idea was generated by community members, who were concerned about the number of traffic and speeding incidents locally. The pledge asks drivers to stick within designated speed limits and to drive carefully.

The parish council hosts the Good Drivers Scheme on its website, where it lists the 50 individuals who have signed up to the pledge. Those doing so receive a 'good driver' sticker which they can display in their car. In addition to the pledge, residents have been asked to stick '30 mph' speed limit stickers to their recycling and wheelie bins. The council has been told that the stickers have had a noticeable impact on drivers.

Adapted from Localism in Practice, NALC, 2011



Exercise 5 – jointly tackling the challenges of your community

Imagine your council has a new, high profile, campaign to increase volunteering by older people in the community. A number of the parish councils in your ward are keen to assist on the campaign. Identify a list of ten ideas you could present to them in discussing the scope for a collaborative approach:

Final summary

Like other types of local authority, town and parish councils have their own identity, working cultures and personalities. No two are the same in fact. But it is this diversity which makes them appealing. Often they are characteristic of the communities they serve – vibrant and progressive, traditional and unchanging or a thousand shades of colour in between.

Assuming that any one council is likely to be or act just like another would therefore be inadvisable. And while this workbook has outlined many good reasons for working closely with town and parish councils, the practical realities of doing just that rest with ward members like you. So go on, give it a go – there's more to be gained than lost.



“Empowered local people taking responsibility for their community through local councils is a tried, tested and trusted model of action at the neighbourhood level. Given this important role local councils have in their communities, they are well placed to demonstrate how best to approach and achieve localism.”

**Councillor Michael Chater OBE,
Chairman, NALC, 2011**



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

- (a) What key action points can you identify to improve the way that you work with town and parish councils, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

- (b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix – sources of further information and support

Printed publications

'All About Local Councils', NALC, 2010.

'Localism in Practice', NALC, 2011.

'The Good Councillor's Guide: Essential Guidance for Local Councillors (3rd Edition)', The National Training Strategy for Town and Parish Councils, NALC, 2011.

'The Parish Councillor's Guide (20th Edition)', Paul Clayden, Sweet & Maxwell, 2009.

Useful websites

<http://www.acre.org.uk>

Website of the organisation representing rural community councils and councils for voluntary service. These county-based organisations offer advice on local service delivery, funding and community projects.

www.defra.gov.uk

Provides information on community halls and other parish matters.

www.local.gov.uk

The Local Government Group's website which is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government.

<http://www.nalc.gov.uk>

The website of the National Association of Local Councils, which represents town and parish councils in England and Wales. At a local level, each area will have its own county-based Association of Parish and Town (or Local) Councils known as the 'County Association' which can provide information on issues affecting the first tier of local government in your area.

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Provides information on a wide range of local issues, including parish plans. The Commission for Rural Communities was established in 2005. Its role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England.

<http://www.slcc.co.uk>

The Society of Local Council Clerks which provides legal, financial and other advice and support to Parish Clerks.



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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