

WORKING TOGETHER

INTER PARISH AND TOWN COUNCIL COLLABORATION

Introduction

There has already been considerable discussion in the Council Policy Group, within CALC and elsewhere about how best to promote collaboration between town and parish councils. The Commission for Rural Communities has produced a Guidance Note on Clustering by Parish and Town Councils (P&TCs). This sets out the arguments in support of collaboration, describes the various forms it can take and the benefits and challenges. This report is derived largely from that Guidance.

The focus of this document is the many different ways in which P&TCs can increase their effectiveness and meet their objectives through collaborative joint working and partnership arrangements.

Why does it matter?

Collaboration between neighbouring P&TCs has been a feature in some parts of the MHDC area for some time. Perhaps its most significant relevance is in its potential for enhancing P&TC capacity. For example in this District there are 14 parishes with populations less than 300. Such small parishes are less likely than larger parishes to have councils and clerks who have the necessary experience and expertise to develop activities and plans that reflect community needs and priorities.

Through working together a range of activities could be enhanced including:

- Collaboration in service delivery and resource sharing
- Banding together to lobby a principal authority or other agency, being heard and speaking with a louder voice are important objectives
- Networking through, for example, attending CALC training seminars
- Community/neighbourhood planning across two or more parishes
- Sharing of experience and knowledge
- Building communities of interest (not necessarily geographically proximate parishes)

What motivates collaboration?

The Guidance identifies two broad underlying processes that motivate new waves of collaboration. These are as follows:

- **Bottom up inspired partnerships** where P&TCs come together under their own volition to achieve better results for local communities. These can be inspired by, inter alia, service delivery, economies of scale (sharing of clerks and other resources) and raising awareness of issues between councils and with an external audience. These aspirations are often the product of parish planning which can act as a catalyst for partnership working.
- **Top down inspired partnerships** where policies and governance structures being established by principal authorities encourage P&TCs to work together – often with partners and stakeholders beyond their sector – to engage effectively with those policies and structures.

The Council Policy Group has already taken the view that it wishes to encourage inter parish collaboration through a bottom up process. However the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) notes that the bottom up/top down distinction is a generalisation and that there are shades of grey in between.

LGIU also reports that *'In many of the examples of clustering found, but by no means all, partnerships between local councils were initiated by District or County Ward Councillors.'* However, LGIU goes on to say that *'where principal authority councillors have been involved in parish partnerships, the intervention has not always been helpful.'*

This suggests that, in the development of any District policy for encouragement of inter P&TC collaboration, the role of facilitation may be important to define. It should perhaps include the possibility of independent facilitation from bodies other than principal authorities e.g. CALC, Community First.

The LGIU report also emphasised the importance of resource implications and capacity issues as a motivator for working together. The variations in the resources available to P&CTs means that larger town councils are able to generate income from various assets whereas, for the majority of smaller parishes, the precept is the sole source of income and expenditure.

What do partnerships look like?

Partnership arrangements on the ground display a very wide range of characteristics.

- **Form:** Various models exist including hub and spoke where a market town might form the hub of surrounding parishes; grouping of broadly similar sized, often rural parishes where capacity and economies of scale can be gained from sharing some functions such as parish clerk.
- **Commonality between members:** Usually the links between parishes are paramount. These can be because of geographic proximity to each other or community of interest such as a secondary school serving several parishes.
- **Purpose:** This can vary a lot. Objectives for a partnership can cover streamlined administration, policy development, community planning, better representation or democratic inclusion, joint service or programme delivery.
- **Organisation:** Varying from simple informal arrangements through sharing of clerks and other resources to formal structures with joint governing constitutions and codes of conduct

Benefits and Challenges for Parish & Town Councils

Benefits: These commonly include the following:

- **Capacity:** Economies of scale can often be derived from sharing key functions and resources. This is particularly important for small rural parishes.
- **A louder voice on common issues:** Either as a geographic community or a community of interest they can lobby for change or influence on issues such as planning, education provision and highways.

- **Addressing area-wide issues:** some issues of local interest impact on more than one parish such as public transport. Inter parish collaboration can provide a means of tackling these issues in a coordinated way.
- **Better representation and influence:** it is easier to gain a seat at the table with other tiers of government on their committees and groups
- **Gaining service delegations:** smaller parishes in particular may be able to gain a service delegation from a principal authority which they would not have gained alone
- **Funding leverage:** working together enables more effective engagement with funded initiatives and projects.
- **Networking and exchanging ideas:** it can lead to mutual learning and support through exchange of information and an understanding that solutions often rest in working together
- **Training:** working together can be a vehicle for councils to identify and organise their own training requirements.

Challenges: The most important challenges are:

- **Fear of loss of identity:** most acute among smaller parishes that fear being swallowed up by larger entities. This acts as a barrier to seeking collaborative solutions.
- **Conflicts of interest:** difficulties that arise when councils of different sizes and resource bases seek to cooperate. For example cooperation with a town could mean a progressive surrender of control to an administration focussed on the town's needs rather than on the needs of local villages. There may also be conflicts on planning issues e.g. where to site a waste disposal plant.
- **Pressure on councillor and officer time:** running, organising and managing a partnership takes up valuable councillor and officer time which may feel like a diversion from the business of their own parish
- **Apportioning costs and contributions:** P&TCs may be reluctant to pay for any project or service outside their own boundaries. In addition, to make projects work, there are resource implications, as well as funding requirements of the secretariat function
- **Geography and capacity:** small populations can limit parish capacity to collaborate while bigger distances between neighbouring P&TCs in sparsely areas can make it harder for them to cooperate and reduce their perception of a common cause
- **Representation of wider stakeholders on joint working bodies:** some P&CTs may not want representation from other sectors such as voluntary or community organisations

Principal Authorities

Benefits for both district and county councils may include:

- **Economies of scale:** officers and members are able to discuss issues with several parishes at once
- **Better engagement:** when two or more parishes are working together, this offers a better chance for district and county to engage with communities and empower them at a relatively local scale through representative and participative groups about the decisions

that affect them. P&TCs working in partnership may prove better able to help deliver various principal authority goals

Challenges may include:

- **Ensuring inclusivity:** encouraging the development of balanced arrangements that draw in stakeholders from across the community
- **Capacity:** support and guidance will be needed to help promote collaboration.

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