



LGC's special report on town and parish councils

July 2017

Where next for localism?

SUPPORTED BY

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National Association
of Local Councils

Localism: the next stage

NALC chair Sue Baxter says local councils can help to solve some of the problems affecting communities and residents

Welcome to the second LGC parish and town council supplement, in partnership with the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). The purpose of this supplement is to highlight the great work of local councils; how they are a vital part of local government and communities, and how they can help principal councils and national government address many of the profound challenges facing us today.

It would appear that national politics is in a fluid and uncertain state. Local government has its problems and crisis too but generally remains a strong and constant force delivering for local people and making a difference in communities.

This year we have seen the election of new metro-mayors in England, which is a brilliant development creating a real focus for devolution from Westminster and potentially Brussels. NALC wants to see this devolution cascade to the lowest level.

However, the wider devolution agenda remains disjointed and confusing as the picture varies so widely from place to place. Many communities and neighbourhoods up and down the country feel disconnected from the project and sceptical of its benefits.

NALC would like to see the new government relaunch the



devo project ensuring it is effective and engages all local communities. NALC calls on the government and those in power in other parts of the public sector to think even more positively about local councils because:

- As the first tier of local government, these councils can help provide local solutions to mitigate any negative fallout from Brexit and help build social cohesion. They can repair people's disconnection from politics and remoteness from decision-making and can contribute to local public service delivery during a time of continued austerity.
- As democratic, accountable and transparent grassroots bodies, local councils can bridge these gaps by engaging with the community to build community cohesion and make decisions about and invest in the economic, environmental and social prosperity of their area.
- There is an opportunity for local councils to fulfill their localist potential but to do so they need the much

needed support and help of government through fair funding, more powers, stronger local democracy, building capacity and increasing engagement.

Local councils are the backbone of our democracy and at the heart of many communities in England.

They provide our neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities with a democratic voice and a structure for taking action; real people power at grassroots level. We need more local democracy with more empowered people and places.

Giving power to local people, when it is done right, brings democracy closer to home; it is empowering and can make for better decision-making, less disillusionment with politics and more local accountability and transparency.

The features within this supplement make an undeniable case for greater local council involvement in community representation and service delivery. Our exclusive survey with LGC

shows local councils are getting more and more involved in services that in previous years would have not been seen as part of their role. It also confirms what we knew: local councils have been asked to do lot more over the past year by residents and principal councils faced by the challenges of austerity.

Within this supplement you will see the ever-changing picture of local councils' activity in big-ticket matters such as health and wellbeing, local economic development, housing and neighbourhood planning and devolution.

But if the government wants devolution to be deep and sustainable, everyone should benefit from a degree of public involvement and bring power down to local people on their doorsteps.

Finally, I would like to thank colleagues across local government for their help in our successful opposition to the extension of referenda principles last year. We must win this ongoing battle in order to ensure local councils can provide the support their residents want in these uncertain times.

If you want to discuss this more please contact NALC via our website: www.nalc.gov.uk.

Alternatively come and see us at the LGA Annual Conference, where will be running a fringe at 5.45 pm on Wednesday 5 July, What Next for Localism, in Hall 7; and hosting an exhibition stand at D3.

Double devolution

LGC research reveals local councils are increasingly taking on the delivery of services. **RACHEL DALTON** reports

Parish and town councils are taking on services to fill gaps as principal authorities cut provision, LGC research reveals.

Our survey of parishes, supported by the National Association of Local Councils, drew 634 responses, of which 63% were from parish clerks and deputies and 37% from elected members.

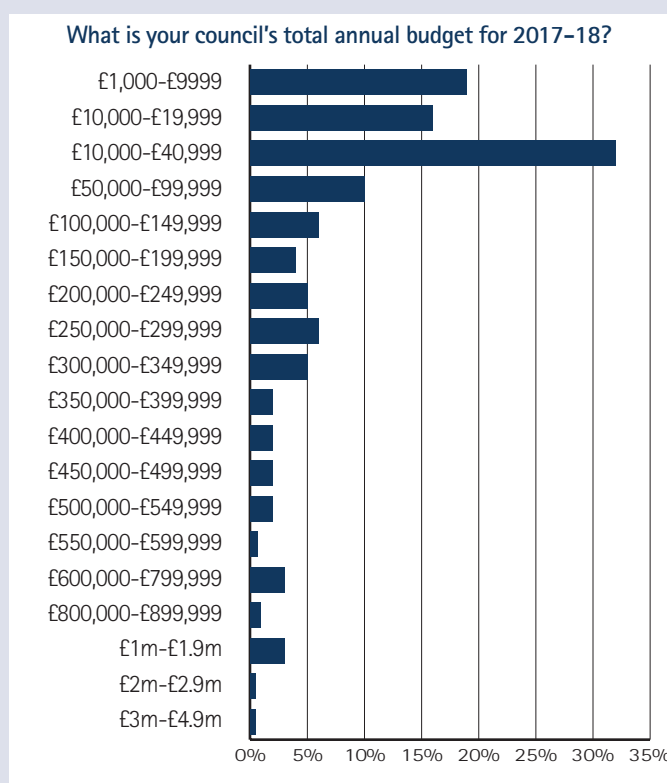
The survey revealed that as principal authorities' budgets shrink and services are cut or withdrawn, parish and town councils are seeking to pick up the pieces.

Budgets and tax raising

Sue Baxter (Ind), chair of the NALC and a councillor on Wythall Parish Council and Bromsgrove DC, says parish councils set their precepts according to the budgets they need to deliver their priority services, which they identify in consultation with their residents. Many councils are looking to reduce dependency on the precept by generating income from facilities such as crematorium, markets and wedding venues.

LGC's research revealed that almost four in 10 local councils have a precept of less than £20,000 per year, but as with population, there was a wide variety of levels of precept among parish and town councils; 2.5% of respondents said their total precept was greater than £1m.

Accordingly, respondents



revealed budgets were roughly in line with precept levels; 77% of respondents said their budget was less than £100,000, for instance, although again there was a wide range of budget figures with a very small proportion having control of more than £1m.

"Where the precept is high, it indicates two things: high population and higher activity," says Cllr Baxter.

The size of the precept and the size of the population or number of services delivered does not always match up neatly. Cllr Baxter explains: "There are some very small

councils who deliver a lot of extra services.

"But as a general rule, it's roughly in line with population and what you deliver."

Where parish and town councils want to deliver a service for which funding is not forthcoming from either the principal authority that has stopped delivering the service or from an increase to the precept, local councils must consider other forms of funding, Cllr Baxter says.

"One thing that is perhaps something to think of for the future is crowdfunding," she says.

"We haven't done it as yet,

but it could be a possibility. With crowdfunding, you've got to give something back to the funders, so they own a share [of what you deliver or build]. It's very early days for that; I know it has happened in some community groups around the country."

She adds NALC will continue to campaign for parish and town councils to keep a share of business rates raised from firms within their patches.

Service delivery

Parish and town councils revealed in LGC's research with the NALC members in 2016 their ambition to take on more services; at that point, 70% identified at least one service they would like to add to their current provision.

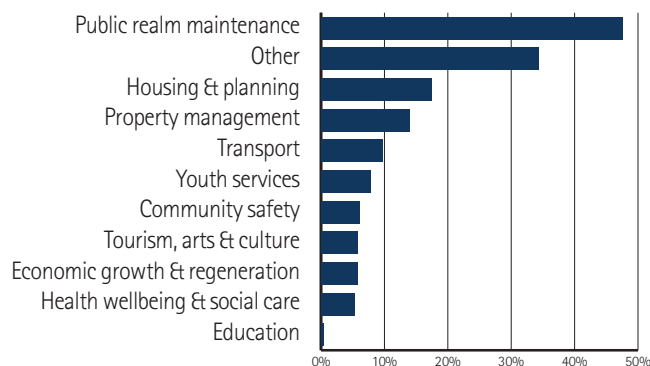
Asked about their current provision, 94% of this year's respondents said they were delivering public realm services, 47% delivered some form of housing and planning, 43% undertook property management and 28% community safety.

However, a significant minority were involved in delivering economic growth and regeneration (14%) and 10% delivered health, wellbeing and social care.

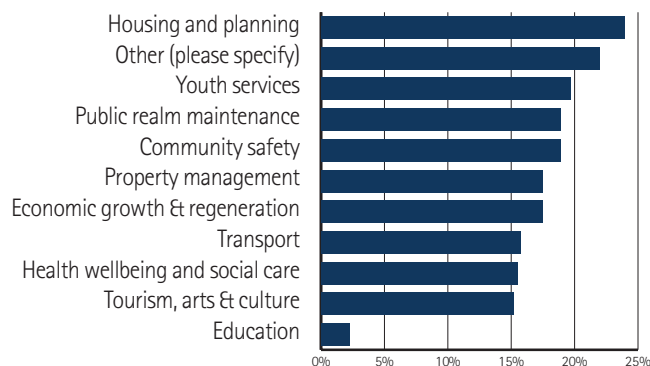
These latter two groups of services "are huge growth areas", Cllr Baxter says, and the figures bear this out. Just under half of the respondents said they had taken on at least one new service in the past

on the rise

Which additional services has your council taken on in the past year?



Which services would you like to deliver in future that you do not deliver now?



year, and of these, most had taken on a public realm service (48%) or a housing and planning service (18%).

However, 8% said they had taken on the delivery of youth services; 6% said they had adopted a role in economic growth; and 5% said they were newly delivering health, wellbeing and social care services.

“We’ve got councils that have set up GP outreach services in village halls, or

have set up a room for an NHS dentist,” Cllr Baxter says.

“We’ve got a lot of parishes that are interested in the dementia agenda and are looking at ways of improving their own environment for the benefit of the elderly and people who have dementia; social isolation is an area where we can make a huge difference. We spend a lot of time talking about rural isolation, but urban isolation is just as important.”

In economic development, Cllr Baxter gave as an example the parish of Falmouth in Cornwall that has set up its own business improvement district, and St Neots in Cambridgeshire, which has run business showcases for five years.

Transport too is a growth area for town and parish councils. Cllr Baxter says: “There are two main areas. One is highways; in Devon, parishes have teams that fill in potholes. We have lengthsman schemes, where we have people who clear out ditches and tidy up, doing the small jobs that highways authorities don’t have the time or resource to do.

“Then there’s the other side, which is around community transport, supporting public transport and [running] dial-a-ride services.”

Cllr Baxter says youth services has been a “main hit area” for county councils, which have had to withdraw provision, but that parishes have stepped in to provide these on a more local level.

Respondents also said they wanted to take on economic growth (17%) and health and wellbeing (15%) in future.

The funding for these extra, gap-filling services is “a mixed picture”, Cllr Baxter says. She says services that Wythall Parish Council took on from the principal authority had funding attached for the short term but that this would stop ▶

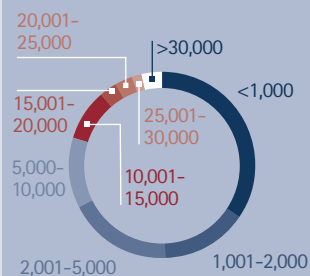
VARYING SIZE

More than a third of people responding to the survey worked for a council serving a population of fewer than 1,000, while a similar proportion worked for a council with a population of between 1,000 and 5,000. However, as the graph below shows, the population served by the remaining third of respondents varied widely, with 10 having populations of between 25,000 and 30,000, and 22 serving more than 30,000 people.

Sue Baxter (Ind), chair of the NALC, says: “Larger councils are generally orientated around a town, and service delivery is more concentrated in that environment than in the more rural ones.

“Our sector is so diverse, but in a way that’s one of its strengths, to share learning, and we come up with solutions that almost meet every scenario. I don’t believe there’s an optimum size for service delivery because every case is different.”

What size is the population that your council serves?



COMMENT

NICK GOLDING
Editor,
Local Government Chronicle



Empower local councils to shape their own destiny

England's decision makers are both remote and irresponsible. That much was clear even before the Conservatives lost their parliamentary majority.

The obvious solution to this lack of local empowerment is devolution: give local areas power to take the decisions that will shape their destiny. While principal or combined authorities should often be the recipients of powers previously been held centrally, it is often when the former bodies pass their own powers down to local councils that residents gain the greatest feeling of empowerment.

The average population size of a top-tier council is little short of 350,000; the size of a medium-sized city. When councils can seem remote, it is necessary to consider whether they really engage with local communities and fail to properly consider the principle of subsidiarity – passing power down to the lowest possible level.

Local identity is a complex thing. While one's county or city might feature prominently in allegiances, people often identify most with their market town, village or immediate neighbourhood. Units of governance of this size might lack the economies of scale, required for instance to run social care or children's services departments, but they are sufficiently local to give residents a genuine input into how to tackle some really thorny issues.

LGC's survey with the National Association of Local Councils of parish clerks and local councillors shows the enthusiasm at the lowest tier of government both for grappling with thorny issues

“Double devolution – from the centre to principal authorities, from principal authorities to local councils – seems a wise response to so many of the difficulties in which the nation finds itself

and becoming involved in the provision of services cut back by larger councils. Nearly half of respondents' local or parish councils delivered housing or planning services; a growing number are delivering some form of health or wellbeing service.

To use one important example, if younger people cannot afford to live in the village in which they grew up but residents are instinctively distrustful of development, maybe it's time for the parish to decide how to balance this sensitive issue when locating new homes.

Double devolution – from the centre to principal authorities, from principal authorities to local councils – seems a wise response to so many of the difficulties in which the nation finds itself. Sad to relate, only a sixth of respondents believed the government is enthusiastic about such localism. When the government now has diminished ability to respond to national needs, it might just find empowering local residents at the lowest level of representative democracy ensures could remove some of the unmet need and disconnection.

“because the county council can't afford to do it”.

“These are the reasons why precepts have gone up, because we're taking on services that are really valuable for our communities,” Cllr Baxter says.

“There is scope for local councils to deliver services slightly more cheaply [than principal authorities] because they're closer.

“[Town and parish councils] are accountable as well in that I can consult with my residents and say to them, if they want a new service that's going to cost £5,000 per year, that will cost them an extra pound on their council tax.

“That is much more difficult if you're a principal council, because of the different demographics across the area and the services are not the same across the whole patch. In a parish you know every penny they collect is spent within the parish.”

Next stages for devolution

In last year's survey, respondents revealed their wariness over the detail of devolution. Although many were keen to see more subsidiarity, several used the survey to voice fears that ‘double-devolution’ would become ‘double-dumping’ if at least some funding did not follow services from principal to local councils.

The number of councils responding to this year's poll that said they have taken on extra services demonstrates that parish and town councils are making some devolution happen. At a time of huge political uncertainty, however, the future of devolution – as a priority with national government, and a possibility given the Brexit

backdrop – is still hazy.

When asked if they thought Whitehall's preoccupation with delivering Brexit would help or hinder localism, only 11% of respondents said they thought it would help, while 35% said it would prevent more devolution and 55% were unsure.

LGC also asked respondents what importance they thought principal authority officers and elected members, the communities secretary and the government as a whole placed on localism.

Cllr Baxter says that as well as having to deal with Brexit, a huge drain of Whitehall resources, having a minority government could distract Westminster from localism. “One of the disadvantages of having a minority government is that it's not going to want to make too many radical changes,” she says.

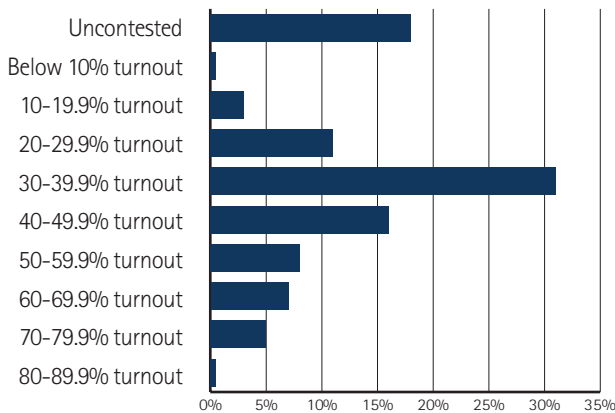
Most respondents (83%) said they believed their local principal authority councillors and officers saw localism as quite or very important. A slightly smaller proportion (78%) thought local residents regarded localism as being important.

However, respondents believed central government was less enthusiastic. Only 15% and 17% thought the communities secretary and government (respectively) regarded localism as very important, and around a third

55%

are uncertain whether Whitehall's preoccupation with Brexit would help or hinder localism

Turnout for town or parish council elections



thought the government and communities secretary did not see localism as important at all.

Democracy

One of the arguments in favour of town and parish councils is that they can bring decision-making closer to people in their own community. For this to work effectively, it could be argued that residents within a town or parish patch must be engaged in the democratic process.

Survey respondents revealed a wide variety of levels of engagement with local council elections. Eighteen per cent of respondents said the last election to take place for their council was uncontested – one respondent said no seat on their council had been contested since 1987 – and several said that seats on their councils were frequently vacant because too few candidates put themselves forward.

However, a third of respondents said that turnout for their last town or parish council election was between 30% and 39.9%.

Overall, where elections were contested the mean

turnout was 33%. According to BBC data, as a general rule of thumb, turnout in principal council elections tends to be about a third of registered voters, and if these coincide with a general election, turnout tends to be around two thirds.

Cllr Baxter said one of the reasons behind the variety of levels of turnout among respondents was the timing of their parishes' elections.

“Some of them coincided with the 2015 general election, and where you have a local election coinciding with a general election you always get an increased turnout, so that could account for the spread. Where you’ve just got a parish council election at the same time as a principal authority election, the turnout will always be less.”

Cllr Baxter says parish and town councils are keen to improve turnout and to streamline the business of holding elections.

“We should perhaps look at other ways of holding really local elections. Our current election process is unwieldy and expensive if you have an electorate of a couple of thousand people. We could

do it locally perhaps, rather than using the services of principal authorities.”

Contentious issues

Town and parish councils deal with a wide range of issues but some things are high on seemingly all councils' agendas.

When asked what issue was the most contentious in their council area, 45% of respondents highlighted housing and planning as being problematic. Some felt their area was being forced by the principal authority to develop houses local residents did not want because of threats to greenbelt land or a lack of accompanying infrastructure, while others were struggling with affordable housing shortages.

Cllr Baxter says there are things town and parish councils can do to defuse a contentious development plan in their area.

“Make sure you have got a neighbourhood plan,” she says. “Although you may not be able to determine the number of houses that you have to take on, you can at least have some control over the type, the location, the style, what other supporting infrastructure you need and the mix as well. It’s about making sure that people are engaged and involved up front because nobody likes to have

things imposed on them.”

About a fifth of respondents identified a problem with parking, highways or public transport as being the most contentious issue in their local area. Many said speeding and potholes were the main problems, but some highlighted growing traffic on major roads, forcing motorists to cut through their villages, as an issue. Some also said public transport, such as rural bus routes in their areas, was under threat.

Six per cent of respondents identified public realm issues, such as dog fouling, maintenance of parks, allotments and street lighting, fly-tipping and litter as a major bone of contention in their areas.

A small number (1.5%) of participants in the survey said devolution presented a big problem in their area. Some highlighted “difficult dealings” with their principal authority over services to be devolved to parish level, while others said the funding to go with their newly devolved services had not been forthcoming.

Some answers revealed the breadth of issues facing local councils and the individuality of certain areas. One respondent said the “smell from a local pig farm” was the most difficult issue, while another said dealing “with feral boar and free-roaming sheep” presented the biggest problem. Others highlighted a “lack of burial space”, “beach shore erosion”, solar farms, fracking, phone masts and an issue around a bowls club as being highly controversial. Five respondents said dealing with gypsy and traveller sites was problematic.

“These are the reasons why precepts have gone up, because we’re taking on services that are really valuable for our communities

At your service in the

Town and parish councils are instrumental in co-ordinating health and wellbeing services on the ground. Here there are three case studies describing this work in their areas

CASE STUDY: SOCIAL PRESCRIBING IS TAKING THE PRESSURE OFF GP SERVICES

For our sector, trying to work with health services can be difficult: understanding the very complicated structures, the language and where we can most usefully apply our relatively limited budgets. The voluntary sector has been involved for many years and some of its involvement has become a mainstay of the local community, such as community car schemes, caring groups, befriending schemes and memory cafes. GPs, however, do not necessarily know all the groups that exist in an area.

In the past couple of years, Ivybridge Town Council in Devon has been working with the local community and voluntary sector and health service to explore ideas for working together. Introducing a social prescriber had been mooted but no funding scheme seemed to be available for our area.

Social prescribing is not a new concept; there is now a National Social Prescribing Network.

The network explains that social prescribing "is to enable healthcare practitioners to refer patients to a link worker, who can co-design an appropriate social prescription to support a patient to improve their health and wellbeing".

It adds: "The social prescription is most often provided by the voluntary and community sector."

The council has now engaged a part-time social prescriber, Karen Highfield, who started work on 15 May. This is a one-year pilot project costing £15,000. Funding has been provided by the Devon Town and



Parish (TAP) scheme, in which the county and district councils provide a fund of £600,000, from which parish councils can apply for grants. The pilot is also partly resourced by Ivybridge Town Council itself, GP services provider Beacon Medical Group, and care provider Livewell South West.

Ms Highfield is based at the Ivybridge Health Centre on some days as well as at other local venues, and makes visits to patients' homes. GPs may refer patients to her who need help with matters other than treatment for medical conditions.

People can also refer themselves to Ms Highfield and our intention is for her to offer up to six one-hour appointments to each person, providing signposting to other services and advocacy. The only criteria for accessing the services are being aged over 18.

The scheme is not just for the benefit of the frail elderly. GPs have made clear that their most frequent visitors were not the elderly but young parents of babies and young children, who were struggling with isolation and the resultant stress, depression and anxiety. The loss of

the children's centre in Ivybridge in 2016 could have exacerbated this problem, along with poor mental health services.

We hope social prescribing will prove to be a great source of help and advice over the coming year.

Ms Highfield is building a comprehensive database of what help we have available in the town, and we expect that this may also highlight shortcomings in services or where there are problems with transport, preventing people from reaching the services. Analysing the benefits of social prescribing will be critical if we are to secure more funding, so we have developed a simple GP referral form, alongside a goals/outcomes form for each patient to complete. The Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale is likely to be used as well.

Our hope is that we will be able to demonstrate that GPs have found the patients who visit their surgeries more than 50 times per year will be able to find help and support from other community services, relieving pressure and cost on the GPs.

Lesley Hughes, town clerk, Ivybridge Town Council

CASE STUDY: BRINGING ELDERLY

North Horsham Parish Council in West Sussex has a diverse community but in line with national statistics the proportion of those aged 65 and over is increasing.

In 2014, an elderly resident confided to the then clerk, Sue Kemp, that she was lonely. It was observed that the Roffey Millennium Hall, where the parish council offices are based, would make a central venue for people to meet. Ms Kemp put the idea of a friendship group to the parish council, which not only supported the initiative, but also agreed to award it a small grant.

The group is open to all residents aged 60 and over. The council donates five hours of

CASE STUDY: KENT COUNCILS

Health, wellbeing and community resilience has been a key theme for the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) in its work during the past few years.

For example, KALC has been working closely with Kent Fire & Rescue Service on the Fire Hydrant Initiative Project, which received national recognition last year as a runner-up in the NALC Star Council Awards. The aim of the project is for local councils to monitor and report fire hydrant defects and water provision issues within their local area to ensure any issues are resolved in a timely manner. This is in

e community

RESIDENTS TOGETHER TO CUT ISOLATION IN WEST SUSSEX



officer time every two weeks, costing £1,742 per year, to scheduling activities and hosting

the group. The parish council gives a grant of £150 every year towards activities and allows the free use of

one of the rooms at Roffey Millennium Hall for the meetings.

Residents pay a small subscription when they attend to cover the cost of refreshments. Activities on offer may include quizzes, bingo, card games, singalongs led by a local theatre group or talks from outside bodies such as the Weald and Downland Museum, the fire service and Age UK. The group has, in the past year, visited garden centres, a local beauty spot and a stately home. Members are asked to cover the cost of admission or meals if they go out. At Christmas there is a party and those who attend receive a small gift.

There have been many friendships made at the Roffey

Friendship Club and some members socialise outside the group. Some have even taken holidays together. While the parish council recognised the need to fund a co-ordinator to plan and oversee the group, it was mindful that encouraging local residents to get involved in running social activities gave them ownership of their social lives, supported their independence and encouraged others to join in, so the council was keen for those who came along to the friendship club to get involved in whatever way they felt comfortable.

Pauline Whitehead, clerk, North Horsham Parish Council

DEMONSTRATE THEIR COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

in addition to the ongoing fire service inspection of hydrants throughout Kent and Medway, which is done as a rolling, risk-based programme. The project provides community reassurance, as the fire hydrants are now clearly marked, regularly checked and ready for use in the event of a fire.

During the past two years, as part of its work around health and wellbeing, KALC has been bulk-buying public access defibrillators on behalf of member councils and passing on those savings to members. KALC has now purchased more than 80 defibrillators. KALC has also been

working closely with KFRS and the South-East Coast Ambulance Service on the location of additional defibrillators, where KFRS provided £35,000 for 21 defibrillators to be placed around the county. We were delighted to hear that two lives were recently saved by using the defibrillators in Rolvenden and Tenterden.

For the past four years, KALC has been running a community awards scheme, which is supported by the high sheriff of Kent, the chairman of Kent CC and mayor of Medway. The scheme aims to recognise and thank individuals and groups who

have made a significant contribution to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of their community. Previous award winners have included soup kitchens, coffee morning volunteers, volunteer fundraising individuals and groups, volunteers who have given up their time to help local community groups, such as youth groups, and the elderly, etc.

A key project for KALC in the coming months is to promote and raise awareness of dementia. We will be signing a strategic commitment on dementia in the next couple of months to promote

and raise awareness among our member councils to make communities safer, more accessible and sustainable for all. We will be working closely with KFRS and the Alzheimer's Society to develop more dementia-friendly communities and dementia friends. The KALC executive committee will be undertaking dementia friends awareness training at the end of the summer and dementia will be a key subject at our annual clerks conference in September.

Terry Martin, chief executive, Kent Association of Local Councils

Collaboration key to driv

Following the amalgamation of the county council and five districts to create a unitary in 2009, Shrewsbury and its new principal authority, Shropshire Council, had to forge a new path together.

Shrewsbury was the only unparished area in the county and it made sense to set up a town council to provide first-tier local government to the county town. This was never going to be an off-the-shelf set-up and the new council was destined to have an influential role in both the environmental, social and economic life of the town.

Shrewsbury has long been a tourism driver for Shropshire;

“The ability to work in partnership to develop a real sense of ‘team Shrewsbury’ is evident

a quintessential English county town with a beautiful environment, a wealth of architecture dating back a thousand years and a rich history.

Right from the start there was a need to begin collective work on marketing the town as a visitor destination. The town council facilitated Destination Shrewsbury, a tourism management partnership that brought together the key players.

Both councils jointly commissioned a tourism strategy and some branding work. What was our unique international selling point? We are the birthplace of Darwin, the home of Blue Peter gardener Percy Thrower, the home of the world’s first skyscraper, the Town of Flowers, twinned with Zutphen in Holland; this was the collection of unique things that make the town what it is. The result was a branding toolkit, marketing



Shrewsbury as a one-off visitor destination.

That was the catalyst for continued partnership work on enhancing the economic wellbeing of Shrewsbury. The two councils jointly funded a post to promote the concept of a business improvement district (BID) covering the town centre and, with support from

developer contributions and both councils providing officer support, the business community voted overwhelmingly to set up the Shrewsbury BID in 2014.

The town council funded the installation of footfall cameras to help the business community understand pedestrian traffic on normal

More than just high-profile projects

To listen to the debate about industrial strategy, which has gripped politics since the previous government relaunched the idea last year, one would think that the only route to productivity and growth was how many billions Whitehall will borrow and invest.

Indeed, governments gripped by the interventionist bug always want to display their intent by ploughing vast sums into large-scale infrastructure projects and high-profile sector plans.

Of course, modern transport systems and cutting-edge research and development are vital to a successful, complex economy like the UK but what often gets lost in the debate is the culture and mind-set of the country’s citizens or, more importantly, the various cultures and mind-sets of different parts of the country.

Without an entrepreneurial spirit and the optimistic, forward-looking culture that underpins it, large-scale investment in certain places will not prove as effective as it

could be. Equally without that culture, those places that are ‘peripheral’ to the big urban centres that interventionist governments tend to favour will not contribute to the economy as much as they might.

The problem is that entrepreneurial spirit cannot be turned on from above by a civil servant in Whitehall or even by an officer in a large local authority. It must come from within the community itself and it often originates in unexpected ways that no-one outside the community

could have foreseen.

Look, for example, at the way a local grow-your-own movement has turned Todmorden in West Yorkshire into a foodie tourist destination and has launched numerous local businesses, or how a college lecturer’s interest in permaculture unexpectedly ended up placing Totnes in Devon at the heart of the global Transitions Towns network. It is a movement that has inspired a wide array of environmental businesses and local economy initiatives

ing growth



commercial days and during major festivals. Events are key to the town's vitality and the town council has been instrumental in supporting some of the major new events including the food festival, the kids' festival and the Christmas festival.

The town council has invested heavily in infrastructure to keep the town looking good. A Britain in Bloom Champion of Champions, the town council has continued to install high-quality floral displays that both visitors and residents love. If the 1.5 million annual day visitors to the town spend 10 minutes and £1 more as a result of those blooms, that is a huge return on investment.

Christmas is also a time for collaborative working. We provide the Christmas lights and the business community in turn helps to celebrate with a series of events in the six weeks running up to Christmas.

Of late, we have

in the south-west and elsewhere.

Only government agencies deeply embedded in the country's numerous towns and villages could ever play a role in replicating these sorts of entrepreneurial flowerings. That means town and parish councils. They have that organic link and detailed understanding of an area to mobilise residents around the very local initiatives that can lead to new businesses, jobs and growth.

This doesn't mean town and parish councils shouldn't

collaborated on some big strategic projects including the £250,000 wayfinding project, which involves providing public maps to help visitors get around; the development of a plan looking at the strategic direction of the town; and a bid to retain the swimming pool by providing finances and officer support.

The ability to work in partnership to develop a real sense of 'team Shrewsbury' is evident. We work to each other's individual strengths and ability to influence, not being precious and seeing the collective success of Shrewsbury as more important than any individual organisation's kudos. As a town council, we have benefitted greatly from our positive relationship with Shropshire Council. In the words of our motto, 'Floriat Salopia': may Shropshire (and Shrewsbury) flourish.

*Helen Ball, town clerk,
Shrewsbury Town Council*

also play a key role in more tangible spheres such as housing, planning and economic development. But they do provide a unique national network to effect an entrepreneurial awakening in areas and in ways too often ignored by big industrial strategy. Mobilising that network to shift mind-sets across the country could prove just as important to future growth and jobs as the next multibillion-pound railway.

*Adam Lent, director, New
Local Government Network*

COMMENT

CLLR PHILIP ATKINS

Vice-chairman of the County Councils Network
and leader of Staffordshire County Council



Believing in localism

The spotlight has been shone on devolution again in the past few months, firstly with the initial group of metro-mayors taking up their posts, and secondly, with the Conservative manifesto pledging to rescind the requirement of a mayor for county devolution deals.

County leaders will no doubt welcome this sensible change in direction, which is a testament to County Councils Networks advocacy and our relationship with ministers, but it is imperative that devolution of powers and funding does not stop here. CCN will soon be setting out our offer to government: ambitious devolution settlements to allow us to grow our economies, build houses and deliver services for our residents. This is all the more important in the context of the government's industrial strategy and Brexit.

But devolution and localism are already taking place in our county communities, allowing local people to shape their neighbourhoods.

There are many examples of counties collaborating with their parish and town council colleagues across all four corners of the country, from locality governance arrangements, to planning, to running local amenities.

In Wiltshire, the county unitary has set up 18 'area boards' to devolve powers and a budget of £2.4m last year, with parish councillors and stakeholders making decisions over highways, health, and other local priorities. This has successfully offset any concerns over a loss of localism when the county and districts were abolished and the unitary council was born; since their inception, these area boards have had more 32,000 people attend

events and meetings: localism in action.

In Staffordshire, we have a long-standing commitment to working with parish councils, other agencies and local people in each of our eight districts. We have just enhanced this by creating eight cabinet community support members to champion parish councils and residents working together to create connected communities that give vulnerable people access to the help they need.

This is driven by a localist ideology but also by pragmatism.

We must also take into account the stark reality of increasing demand set against decreasing budgets. Counties' unique challenges, such as the fastest growing elderly populations, coupled with less funding than other parts of the country, has put a huge strain on finances. These partnerships between counties, towns and parishes offer hope in finding ways to continue services otherwise at risk. In Buckinghamshire, the community has taken over the running of a local landmark and tourist attraction: the Brill windmill.

This belief in localism is why CCN advocated against a council tax cap for local councils, which would have gone against the principle of devolution and could have put at risk future partnership working. Fortunately, the government listened to these concerns.

Despite fresh hope for devolution, financial pressures will not go away, while there always will be a drive towards greater localism. Collaboration and innovation will continue to reap rewards for the foreseeable future.

Neighbourhood watch

A successfully executed neighbourhood plan can help secure housing that works for everyone. Thame and Uppingham have made their plans a success

Thoughts of a neighbourhood plan for Thame emerged as soon as the principle was announced through the Localism Act consultation in 2010.

The town council believed the future of the town would be best served by a neighbourhood plan, and determined to become a frontrunner in doing so. Thame, following public consultation, decided to spread growth across several sites to minimise impact on any particular area. This approach also allowed for other important objectives to be met, such as screening views of an industrial area from the nearby countryside, and providing much-needed open space.

In the early days, a lack of regulations brought considerable uncertainty about what the plan should contain. Early consultation showed locals were concerned about more than housing numbers. This variety of concerns explains why the plan is so comprehensive. It has 65 policies covering not only housing and employment but also areas such as retail, transport and the built and natural environment.

The neighbourhood plan was adopted just two years after its formal inception. This impressive result was without doubt due to much hard work and the partnership ultimately formed between the district council, the

town council and its consultants.

How the plan has worked

In influencing decision making, the plan has been highly successful. Although compliance with the policies within it require a greater initial level of work by developers, which have to produce schemes that meet both the district and the town council policies, it is not a red tape exercise. The policies in our plan are used by district planning officers to steer development towards what the Thame community is likely to find acceptable. Put simply, a development that is compliant with both the Thame and the district plan will ordinarily receive planning permission with



Success: the majority of Thame's housing need will be delivered by 2019

little or no local challenge.

The plan's identification of the key considerations and policy requirements for each of the housing allocation sites informed the developers' master plans.

Uppingham is a small market town in the East Midlands, with a heritage high street of predominantly independent businesses and a population of around 4,600.

It lies toward the southern boundary of England's smallest county, Rutland. Well known around the world for its famous public school, the town has recently been described as having the most progressive economic and social development agenda in the Greater Cambridge Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership area. In particular, it has attracted attention for its innovative

local governance structure in which statutory, community and business sectors come together in a community partnership called Uppingham First.

In 2011, Uppingham First acknowledged the opportunities presented by the Localism Bill and, supported by Rutland CC, secured recognition for the town as a government frontrunner to prepare a neighbourhood plan. So what has been the town's experience of the localism legislation and what benefits have accrued to the local community?

The neighbourhood plan followed on from two existing plans: Uppingham 2025, a

collection of 36 ideas for the future; and an Uppingham parish plan.

The neighbourhood plan was prepared by a business-led, all-partner task group which became a sub-committee of Uppingham Town Council. The group's remit was to prepare a plan that read like a book rather than a planning document, met the standards expected of it by town and county councils and crucially, fulfilled the aspirations of the town's elected neighbourhood and business forums. The task group worked extraordinarily well and arrived at all major decisions by consensus. At

every stage of the parish plan's preparation, the group sought community and council opinion via open meetings of the town's forums, visits to schools, resident and developer workshops, surveys and monthly meetings. A crucial dimension of the plan's success was the involvement of developers and landowners from the outset.

The resulting plan has 40 pages, 11 policies and 17 proposals. It cost less than £10,000 to produce. Its external examiner was generous in his evaluation and said: "The plan has been written in an interesting way. It avoids 'planning speak'. It is



Four of these large sites are now under construction and the majority of Thame's housing need will be delivered by 2019, just six years into a 15-year plan.

What is notable is that

rather than slowing housing development, as was suggested, the splitting of Thame's new housing across several sites has prompted progress. Other successes include the delivery of three hectares of employment land, more jobs and some of the promised open space. Thame itself, by some measures, is doing very well; there has not, for example, been a vacant shop unit in the town for at least a year.

The development associated with the plan has brought challenges. The plan identifies the need for new community facilities: a new primary school, more sports facilities, a new community health hub, and new and improved community meeting rooms. An entire primary school will also have to be moved. Much of the section 106 funding to help provide these facilities has already been delivered and more is expected. Thame

Town Council is, however, relatively small and continues to acquire further responsibilities as they are shed by the district and county authorities above. It will be difficult to develop infrastructure at the rate that is required.

The future

Once the neighbourhood plan was adopted, the work truly began. Responses to planning applications often involve a detailed, policy-led response from the town council that covers both the plan, and existing and emerging evidence. Land owners and developers will frequently seek not only pre-application discussions but advice on later amendments, or even matters normally left to the district council. The pressures led in August 2016 to the direct employment of a planning officer – me – to respond to these daily requests, drive forward the

town's infrastructure and undertake the review of the plan. We believe I am the only such officer employed by a town or parish council.

That review is now looking to start within the next few months. The district's draft plan proposes allocation of a further 450 homes and another two hectares of employment land for Thame.

The town council, meanwhile, will seek emphasis on regenerating existing employment land rather than allocating new greenfield sites. Greater evidence will be prepared with regard to the matter of affordable housing; despite delivery of 40% of units on housing allocation sites, rising local prices means that few locals can afford the resulting reduced market rent or mortgage.

Graeme Markland, neighbourhood plan continuity officer, Thame Town Council

exciting and innovative and contains ground-breaking policy for neighbourhood planning." He also indicated that joint working between town and county council had been exemplary.

On 10 July 2014, after two and half years' work, a referendum gave the plan a 92% majority yes vote on a 26% turnout. Prior to the plan being adopted by Rutland CC, however, it was challenged in court by a local housing developer whose site had not been selected for development. The challenge was resisted. Following two court hearings and many months of legal activity, the courts upheld the validity of

the document, resulting in it being 'made' on 11 January 2016.

So what benefits does the plan offer? It provides:

- Protection for the heritage and curtilage of town
- Balanced development with new green space
- 6.46 hectares for new homes on greenfield sites (and it reserves four hectares of greenfield for future homes)
- New recreation land
- Three additional hectares of employment land
- Links to the Local Economic Partnership (LEP) for upgrading an existing industrial estate
- Enhanced fibre broadband
- New roundabouts,

footpaths and cycle ways

- Additional signage and improved access for the disadvantaged and disabled.

It also provides prospective developers with a 'housing design' statement. Finally, it extends primary shop frontages in the high street and indicates the town's priorities for community infrastructure levy.

Before localism, the Uppingham community felt disadvantaged in county planning policy determinations as it is not the 'principal' market town of Rutland. Neighbourhood planning legislation has enabled Uppingham to take a

lead in determining its own future and strengthened its community's internal and external working relationships.

The plan and its supporting evidence, can be viewed online at www.uppinghamneighbourhoodplan.info. To date, three of the housing sites detailed in the plan have received planning approval to build the range of homes envisaged in its pages. Encouraged by its success, the community has commenced work on an update to 2036.

Cllr Ron Simpson, neighbourhood planning champion, Uppingham Town Council

Stepping up to the p

Burley-in-Wharfedale is a village between Ilkley and Otley in West Yorkshire with a population that has grown from 4,000 to 8,000 in about 20 years.

Situated on a good rail service into Leeds and Bradford, Burley has become a fashionable place for young professionals with families to enjoy a semi-rural lifestyle with an adequate range of local services.

However in 2012, when the austerity measures began to bite and Bradford MDC started to talk about reductions and closures of services, both the local community and the parish council began to get a hint of what the future may hold.

Burley Parish Council was only formed in 2006 so did not hold lots of land or large balances and so when Bradford



Burley Parish Council took over responsibility for the village's public toilet to save it from closure

MDC began consultation on the closure of the public toilet, most of the village were not really bothered; they had a far more inviting facility at home.

However, some parishioners realised that this

was probably the beginning of changes in the way things were done and that the parish council did have more power than it first realised.

So in 2014, Bradford MDC suggested ways for parish

councils to gradually take on additional responsibilities if they wished to retain services.

Burley Parish Council knew the toilet required a large subsidy and used its website, social media, local press, word

Power to the parishes: a principal autho

Since the period of austerity first began in 2010, and local authorities across the country faced year-on-year reducing budgets, we have had to look at a changing relationship with all those who use our services in the Bradford district.

It has been a long journey in which councillors have had to face difficult decisions about trying to maintain essential frontline services in the face of shrinking resources.

The council has endeavoured to change public expectations about what the

council can continue to deliver and what it can no longer provide, and to secure more voluntary help to keep services going.

This changing expectation also encompasses an evolving relationship with the town and parish councils that represent the residents of Bradford and other towns and villages within the Bradford district.

The Localism Act 2011 brought in the community right to challenge, which is the right for community organisations to submit an expression of interest in running services on behalf of

the local authority.

From 2012, we agreed to develop a scheme that looked at expressions of interest in running some council services and so we started a conversation with our local town and parish councils.

Some parish councils expressed a great deal of enthusiasm, in particular Burley Parish Council and Wilsden Parish Council, which showed interest in taking over the running of some council buildings and spaces. Burley has now taken over the running of Queen's Hall, and a long-term lease to run the park. Library services in the village

“We need to apply a more consistent approach in how we devolve the responsibilities. They add value to the community by harnessing local support and labour, which results in keeping services within the local community

plate

of mouth and the quarterly parish magazine to seek views on taking on additional services. These services would come at a cost but there was an expectation that a different sort of management would reduce these costs.

Perhaps surprisingly, there was support to take on a service that would largely be used by visitors to the village. Bradford MDC was very helpful and in September 2015, under the first phase of asset transfer, the public toilet was transferred to Burley Parish Council.

But austerity continued to have an impact and the parish council in 2015 had a choice of 'buying' Bradford services such as flower beds or doing without. The parish bought flower beds but then consultation about the future of libraries, youth services, community halls, frequency of

“ Consultation about the future of libraries, youth services, community halls, frequency of grass cutting and lots more had to be considered by Bradford to meet the austerity targets... Burley Parish Council realised that unless these services were adopted by either the community or the parish, they would vanish

grass cutting and lots more had to be considered by Bradford to meet the austerity targets.

Burley Parish Council realised that unless these

services were adopted by either the community or the parish, they would vanish and so in 2016, as part of second phase of asset transfer, the parish costed taking on the public library, Queens Community Hall, all parks and open space and in total 39 functions and services.

The parish again used all aspects of communications to ascertain if the local community wanted a band D council tax increase from £15 a year to £48 a year; an increase of £90,000 to retain and improve a very broad range of services. Bradford again helped with professional support and the freehold of the public library site should the facility be relocated elsewhere in the village.

Burley was fortunate in starting from a low band D base but a tripling of the

precept was never going to be popular.

However, the majority of people who responded felt that an extra 63p per week on the parish rate was a price worth paying to retain the public library, community hall and to see improved parks and open space. Burley has a strong volunteer ethos so it has been possible to use this enthusiasm to support many of the transferring services.

Asset transfer may be a new chapter in the role of a modern parish council and it has certainly stretched the role of the Burley parish councillors and improved the parish/district working relationship as both sides have learned more of what joint working and asset transfer can mean.

Ian Orton, parish clerk, Burley Parish Council

community's view



The village of Burley understands the importance of local services

are being run by volunteers.

Burley Parish Council is proud of the community spirit in the village and the volunteers who stepped forward to help maintain

library services and the green spaces. They understand how important local services and a thriving economy are to the village; a crucial aspect of why last year The Times placed

Burley-in-Wharfedale in the top 40 best villages to live in throughout the UK.

At the moment we are negotiating with the parish councils on a case-by-case basis but we need to apply a more consistent approach in how we devolve the responsibilities. They add value to the community by harnessing local support and labour, which results in keeping services within the local community.

Local people are eager to keep facilities, such as public toilets, and transferring such buildings at low cost can prove beneficial as long as

they have the support in maintaining them.

This all shapes and realigns our responsibilities and the services we offer. Devolving such responsibilities also encourages social enterprise and inclusive growth, which are two concepts very close to our heart.

There are other parish councils that want to go in the same direction and we need to start working with them to pursue the same objectives.

Ian Day, assistant director for neighbourhoods and customer service, Bradford MBC



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