



A Shared Community

Relationship building
and charters for unitary
authorities and community
and town councils

Final Guidance



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A Shared Community - Executive Summary

This resource pack is aimed at encouraging closer and more productive relationships within local government. It has been written specifically to be accessible and relevant to everyone in unitary authorities and community and town councils. It may also be used by other strands of local government such as national park authorities and fire and police authorities.

The pack has been written in three sections:

- General guidance and background.
- A good practice and helpful tips guide.
- A model charter.

These documents are purely supportive. Their purpose is to highlight the many opportunities for both unitary authorities and community and town councils to work together to deliver better outcomes for local people.

Public service reform is an ongoing priority for the Assembly Government and is underpinned by the “Making the Connections” strategy. The Beecham Review also made a number of constructive recommendations that the Assembly Government has taken on board. One very definite outcome of the reform process is the commitment to put the citizen at centre stage.

The vision is that public services need to work together to provide accessible and well co-ordinated services to people in their local neighbourhoods. Citizens need to be able to engage seamlessly with service providers at all levels of public service. In this context, effective working relationships and partnerships with unitary authorities and other public bodies will enable community and town councils to consolidate their unique attributes, and become more viable players in the public service arena.

The University of Wales, Aberystwyth research study of community and town councils in Wales had previously recommended closer working relationships between town and community councils and unitary authorities and had

advocated charters or agreements as a means of establishing these. The Welsh Assembly Government has been clear that charters should be voluntary and not a statutory obligation. It is also important to stress that delegation of services does not automatically result from charters. The decision to take on or to delegate services needs to be carefully investigated and appraised by the community or town council and the unitary authority concerned, and an agreement reached between them.

These documents are the result of more than 12 months research and collaboration between the Assembly Government, One Voice Wales, Welsh Local Government Association, Society of Local Council Clerks and representatives from community and town councils and unitary authorities.

It is hoped that these documents will provide a useful reference source which will help maintain and improve relationships in the local government community, whilst at the same time promoting citizen-centred public services in Wales.

A Shared Community - Relationships in Local Government

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information and introductory guidelines on relationship building within local government in Wales.

The third term for the Welsh Assembly Government means more powers and responsibilities as a result of the Government of Wales Act 2006. Public service reform continues to be a priority. Hence meaningful relationships and joint working are now even more relevant than ever before.

Without constructive co-operation amongst delivery partners, it would not be possible for the Assembly Government to realise its vision for improved public services - "...to bring about a new era in the way public services work together as a team, responsive to citizens, focussed on meeting people's needs..."¹

A Shared Responsibility, the Local Government Policy Statement, re-iterates this vision and spells out the contribution that local government makes to this emerging agenda.

Who is this guidance for and why was it developed?

Joint working is always a challenge, and even more so where the number of partners is large and their nature diverse. This situation applies to relationships between unitary authorities and community and town councils since the number and nature of community and town councils differs in each unitary authority area. Consequently, although general principles and good practice will be applicable to all, a pro-active and flexible approach to developing and sustaining positive relationships will be vital.

This guidance is specifically aimed at community and town councils and unitary authorities but is also relevant to other public authorities such as national park authorities, fire and police authorities. It seeks to:

¹ Making the Connections - Delivering Beyond Boundaries, the Welsh Assembly Government's response to the Beecham Report

- Set out the rationale for enhancing relationships and joint working.
- Provide a brief background and context.
- Identify opportunities and approaches for effective joint working.

In **Beyond Boundaries**, July 2006 the review of local service delivery in Wales, the expectation was that unitary authorities would work with community and town councils to ensure the effective and efficient provision of service to local communities. Sir Jeremy Beecham envisaged an increased role for community and town councils in delivering services, as well as representing the voice of the citizen. It is therefore important that the relationship between community and town councils and unitary authorities provides an effective conduit for the citizen voice to be heard, and potential delegation of services to be discussed. Without this collaboration, and in the face of increasing financial constraints, the quality of life for the people in Wales could well be compromised.

The good practice guide has a selection of case studies and examples, as well as other helpful tips and provides suggestions and practical options for fostering more productive relationships which may then lead to charters or agreements.

Charters are a way of cementing good relationships and a model or sample charter has also been included with the guidance and the case studies.

What is the connection between relationships and charters?

The University of Wales, Aberystwyth research study **The Role, Functions and Future Potential of Community and Town Councils in Wales** published in 2003 recommended that charter agreements between unitary authorities and community and town councils should include procedures for the delegation of a specified range of functions to accredited community and town councils.

In its response to this recommendation, the Welsh Assembly Government took the view that charters should be introduced by local agreement. It would however be for individual community and town councils wishing to deliver delegated services, to demonstrate that they are able to do so effectively and enter into a service level agreement with their unitary authority. The Welsh Assembly Government pledged to facilitate this process by liaising with the Welsh Local Government Association and One Voice Wales to produce a model charter that may be adapted to suit individual circumstances.

Early in 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government set up a charter working group to look at how unitary authorities and community and town councils currently interact, and to produce appropriate guidance to enhance relationships based on this information. The reasoning was that if relationships were strengthened then it would be more likely that discussions about delegation of services would take place.

However, the working group also agreed that encouragement to engage in charters, and the provision of a model to facilitate this process are only steps in the right direction. To achieve optimum take up, these measures need to be strands in a more comprehensive framework of engagement between the tiers of government.

Experience from England has shown that charters can be constructive and meaningful when they evolve from effective working relationships between the tiers of local government. Such agreements are usually between several community and town councils with their unitary authority. This may well reinforce relationships on a formal and professional footing and increase mutual responsibilities and commitments. Fundamentally, this should also result in positive outcomes for local citizens and communities.

What types of relationships do we have at the moment?

There are many examples of positive and effective relations between unitary authorities and community and town councils in Wales.

Responses to a survey conducted by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGGA) with all twenty two unitary authorities during September 2006, revealed that many authorities reported that they have formal mechanisms for meeting community and town councils at quarterly or bi annual forums. These provide an established framework for contact and the opportunity for regular meetings.

The research shows that apart from forums there are also other informal, as well as formal, arrangements for liaison that are individual to each authority. In some unitary authorities, cabinet members hold quarterly meetings with community and town councillors. In others, officers attend town and community council meetings when there are relevant agenda items.

Some unitary authorities also have a dedicated officer who liaises with community and town councils in the authority and provides a point of contact for all queries.

It is interesting to note the different perceptions of unitary authorities and community and town councils when asked similar questions. The Society of Local Council Clerks also sent out a questionnaire to all clerks in Wales during September 2006 to gain an insight into how community and town councils are currently working in partnership. 109 replies were received which is approximately 15% response rate. Many diverse partners such as the police, local health boards, schools, rugby clubs, unitary authorities, voluntary organisations and other community councils were quoted in the response.

On liaison arrangements, community and town councils response did not always reflect an awareness of the unitary authority arrangements. This may be due to a variety of reasons, including poor engagement between some community and town councils and the unitary authority.

To the question "Do you have a formal agreement with your unitary authority/ another body to deliver services?" 26 community and town councils across 12 unitary authority areas identified that they have an agreement to deliver services. Footpath/rights of way maintenance is the most commonly identified delegated service and appears most frequently to be subject to a formal service level agreement.

There are two unitary authorities, Caerphilly and Torfaen that have charters (agreements) with their community and town councils. The aim of these charters is to help build better relationships and currently do not include delegation of duties.

Why is there such an emphasis now on relationship building?

Making the Connections - Delivering Beyond Boundaries, the Welsh Assembly Government's strategic plan to transform public services in Wales was launched in November 2006. The emphasis, more than ever before, is on "putting citizens first" and "working together to deliver".

Chapter 3 of this policy document begins "Putting citizens first means that the Assembly Government and all local delivery partners working much more closely together to achieve a more effective network of public services in Wales. This must happen quickly, purposefully and effectively, without creating new bureaucracies and process. Giving focussed attention to delivering better outcomes for people means:

- Gathering and sharing objective information about citizens and community needs.

- Shared ownership, across sectors, of the action needed to meet the needs of the local population, including action to secure better value for money across budget and to agreed joint delivery programmes.
- Accounting to the local population for service performance and continuously improving services to make them work better for citizens."

For these responsibilities to be fulfilled, it is vital that public bodies in the area, including community and town councils, work together to build effective relationships and networks, so that they continuously and consistently enhance the services they provide to their communities. However, because of the diversity of community and town councils, relationships do not conform to a "one size fits all" formula and this is why this guidance chapter attempts to facilitate the process of developing and improving relationships by exploring various options and approaches.

"A Shared Responsibility" the Assembly Government's local government policy statement published in March 2007, described the role of the sector as follows:

"The sector has an important citizen-focused role to play, not just in promoting strong communications and focusing on very local quality of life (or liveability) issues, but also in service delivery. Community and town councils are the most local unit of local government. This means that they have many direct ways of identifying and enabling the delivery of services in response to citizen's priorities. The larger statutory sectors can benefit from this expertise if there is engagement between local and very local organisations."

The statement also reinforces the commitment from the Aberystwyth study recommendation on charters by pledging to develop national charter guidance and framework for local authorities and community and town councils.

The development of Local Service Boards (LSBs) across Wales will also require high quality relationships between all organisations delivering public services and an effective link to understanding the concerns of citizens. Community and town councils, as service providers, but also in their role as providing the voice of the citizen, have an important contribution to make to the development and effective operation of Local Service Boards. This is highlighted in the Assembly Government **prospectus on LSBs**:

“Boards will need to include the statutory agencies responsible for public services in the area, the Welsh Assembly Government and the voluntary and business sectors. They will need mechanisms for effective citizen and user voice and challenge, including through Town and Community Councils, and for engaging staff in the improvement agenda.”

Common vision, Common goals

Relationships and joint working are the focus of this chapter. If the need arose and a more formal arrangement was required, effective relationships have the necessary foundation to develop into partnerships.

An effective partnership requires that all those involved must be meaningfully involved in the partnership's work and be clear about their roles and responsibilities. For most partnerships, building trust between partners is one of the single most important ingredient in success. However, this takes time and real effort.

There are not that many partnerships in the strict sense within the unitary authority and community and town council sphere of relationships. Arrangements where there are service level agreements would perhaps be the most obvious example of the type of partnership that exists.

However if charters are to be developed, then it would be expected that both parties should aspire to more of a partnership mode of interaction. This should not be dependent on delegation of functions.

Fostering an environment where trust and mutual respect can develop is vital. The more frequent the contact between the tiers, the greater the chances for promoting awareness, understanding and appreciation of each others roles and responsibilities.

Above all, there needs to be complete clarity over the aim of the partnership and it is suggested that, in the context of charters, the overall aim should be to promote joint working between unitary authorities and community and town councils with a view to improving public services locally.

Framework

Since each unitary authority area has differing numbers of community and town councils within its boundaries, ranging from one to over one hundred, meaningful and sustainable interaction can only be achieved if there is an agreed framework for contact and communication in place.

This needs to be done at both the councillor and officer level from the Leader and Chief Executive of the unitary authority to all councillors and grades of staff within the unitary authority as well as in the community or town councils. The aim should be to encourage contact between the political and administrative spheres.

Communication

Frequent and clear communication is also important. A good mix of communication methods will help to foster good relationships. Face to face, telephone, e-mail and written communication all have their uses and benefits.

The content, accessibility and quality of information communicated is important if the message is to provide the basis for appropriate action and/or response.

It is important that there is clear, timely and user friendly communication throughout all levels of the unitary authority with community and town councils. Co-operation and mutual support is brought about through effective communication and vice versa.

Problem Solving

There will be inevitable tensions within all types of joint working and it is important that there is a commitment from all sides to resolve these quickly and amicably. However, close working relationships will sometimes highlight some challenging issues.

Tensions and confusion can occasionally occur when a councillor is both a member of a unitary authority and town or community council. So called "dual hatted" councillors should be clear about their responsibilities and accountability in each of these roles and it is for both the unitary authority and the town or community council concerned to agree a protocol for such councillors.

Finance is another area which often causes tensions. It is vital that the process of setting council tax and that of determining the precept should be transparent so that both the unitary authority and the community and town council share responsibility for the budgeting function.

Evaluation

It is essential to build in the opportunity to evaluate what has been achieved over a period of time as a result of improved relationships. The process of evaluation brings people together and enhances relationships if it is done in a constructive and open manner. An evaluation exercise will certainly help to establish what works and what doesn't work. It will also help to accumulate good practice, improve morale and lead to better decision making. Consequently, it would be useful to include provision for evaluation in the development and operation of a charter.

Developing skills and expertise

It is acknowledged that many community and town councils in Wales have in the past not had the advantage of regular training and development. This is now being addressed through the **National Training Strategy for Community and Town Councils** in Wales that was published and distributed in September 2006.

The capability to deliver services and work in partnership will be enhanced by developing the expertise, competence and skills of community and town council councillors and clerks. Therefore training and development will need to run concurrently with relationship building.

Opportunities for joint training to cover both tiers of local government should be encouraged. This is especially relevant for councillor training. Joint training has many benefits including an awareness and better understanding of each other's priorities and concerns; networking and building relationships; and a more efficient use of resources.

Clustering amongst small groups of community and town councils is currently not well developed. Where practicable, this could be a way of pooling resources, such as funding and staffing, and could provide the community with services that it would not otherwise have.

Groups of councils may also find it viable to take on service level agreements from the unitary authority where this would provide a better service for the community.

Clustering also provides opportunities for joint training and development and promotes the sharing of good practice.

Representative organisations

It is vital that the **Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)**, **One Voice Wales (OVW)** and the **Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)** have a close relationship with each other and foster effective working within local government. Communication and joint working has improved since the formation of One Voice Wales and the latter now has a memorandum of understanding with the SLCC.

WLGA has provided guidance and support for the National Training Strategy and there is increasing cooperation with OVW as a result of the 'Widening Participation' agenda promoting citizenship and highlighting the role of all councillors ahead of future elections. Further joint working may be facilitated by:

- Regular strategic meetings at national level.
- Establishing a Memorandum of Understanding between One Voice Wales and WLGA.

Agreeing a formal Charter

There are many examples of positive and effective relations between unitary authorities and community and town councils in Wales. Many of these however are ad hoc and rely on the personal drive and commitment of particular individuals.

It is therefore recommended that formal agreements and communication protocols are agreed between unitary authorities and community and town councils to ensure clarity of expectations and an understanding of respective roles.

Various written agreements between some community and town councils and unitary authorities already exist in Wales. Some of these are called charters and they set out the way that the two tiers of government primarily exchange information and consult with each other.

There is evidence from England, where charters have been developing over a longer period of time, that good relationships between all tiers of government leads to a greater acceptance and understanding of the agreement. It becomes a means of regularising effective working practices and offers a process that all parties can have a say in and sign up to. The process of arriving at a charter is as important as the charter itself because it necessitates in depth consultation and negotiation.

A model charter has been compiled which draws on a variety of elements featured in existing agreements sourced from England and Wales. This model is provided alongside this guidance and may be used as a pro forma.

The model highlights certain aspects of working that are equally important to both unitary authorities and community and town councils. These include “recognition”, “consultation”, “information and communication”, “land use planning” and others.

However, local discretion and flexibility is fundamental in the agreeing of a charter. A charter needs to be a bespoke agreement and so it is for individual unitary authorities and community and town councils to use this as a starting point to arrive at an agreement that suits them best.

It is recommended that each unitary authority agrees a single charter with the full spectrum of community and town councils in its area. This means that the charter will have universal application within the area and serve as a common bond that brings community and town councils together with each other, as well as with the unitary authority.

It is advisable for both parties to fully consider the wider implications of the commitments they sign up to and make sure that they are able to deliver their promises. They also need to recognise that by entering into joint working arrangements there may sometimes be some outcomes that they may not necessarily have anticipated. Specific care needs to be taken when formal partnerships are made as in the case of a community or town council taking on delegated functions from the unitary authority. In this instance it is recommended that legal advice is sought when formulating an agreement.

Action plans to accompany charters are useful as a means of ensuring ongoing inter-action and progress once the charter is agreed.

Charters will also need to be revised and updated regularly to reflect changes in local circumstances.

Delegation of services

Charters may be purely a means of improving relationships and communication as well as a way of implementing ethical and administrative functions.

However, they may also cover procedures, including financial arrangements, for delegating services from unitary authorities. It is suggested that when considering any delegation of services the focus should be firmly on improving

local service delivery, whilst retaining or enhancing value for money. There may also be a need to address any capacity issues to enable the community or town council to deliver the delegated service.

The Assembly Government believes that the delegation of services is a voluntary option and must be the result of local agreement between the unitary authority and community or town council. Community and town councils have varied levels of capacity, aspirations and at the present time many will need to benefit from the National Training Strategy and other types of support before they acquire the confidence and capability to perform these functions.

The unitary authority needs to have confidence that the community or town council which wishes to take on a delegated service has the powers to deal with such a function.

Clear arrangements must be in place regarding the accountability of the community or town council for the service it has taken on with clearly defined limits for authority beyond which referral to unitary authority is required.

Funding matters

Community and town councils raise most of the funds for their activities through a precept levied in Council Tax. It is therefore important that before these taxes are calculated, there are discussions between the unitary authority and community and town councils to make sure that concurrent functions are being materially enhanced or extended in such a way that they add value in addressing community needs. A shared awareness of future plans and developments should also be encouraged.

Where a town or community council takes on provision of certain services, the level of funding and terms will need to be agreed by the unitary authority and the respective council. This can open up a variety of barriers or obstacles that need to be resolved. One of the main considerations to take into account is the avoidance of double taxation.

According to United Kingdom Department of Communities and Local Government guidance

“The double taxation problem cannot be addressed in isolation because successful resolution is only likely to be achieved in a wider context of good relationships between and within the tiers of local government..... The majority of councils reporting a satisfactory position on double taxation

already have in place charters, forums and other agreed methods of regular liaison between tiers. Many such respondents commented that the better the relationship, the fewer the problems."

Financial considerations are undoubtedly important, but there are a variety of approaches that may be used to address them and the process of achieving a consensus will only serve to further strengthen relationships and improve delivery of services. Difficulties with overcoming financial obstacles should not be used as a reason for not engaging in charters.

Conclusion

This guidance has introduced the concept of charter working and attempted to set it in the current local government and public service policy context in Wales. Whilst recognising that the eventual form of a charter is a matter for unitary authorities and community and town councils to agree locally, it is believed that a charter offers considerable scope to formalise existing good practice and develop closer working in the interests of improving public services.

A Shared Community - Relationship Building in Practice

This chapter accompanies the relationships guidance and model charter. It aims to provide practical assistance and suggestions which follow the sub headings used in the guidance to simplify cross reference.

Common Vision, Common Goals

There are many ways in which understanding of each others roles and responsibilities may be facilitated. Better awareness often leads to a realisation of shared responsibilities. This in turn can lead to constructive outcomes for the community.

Case Study 1 - Joint initiatives

Aims/Objectives:

Overcome negative economic effects of closure of main employer in the area.

Where?

Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd, north Wales.

How was it done?

Jobs became scarce when Trawsfynydd nuclear power station was decommissioned. The community council conducted an appraisal in 1994 which had a 86% response rate and led to many projects. The Traws-Newid community company was formed in partnership with the community council to stimulate economic, social and environmental development. Membership of the company is open to all residents over the age of 18 and 245 have paid the nominal subscription of £1. This gives members of the community a voice in the running of the company.

Who was involved?

Gwynedd County Council, Snowdonia National Park Authority, the Prince's Trust, Trawsfynydd Community Council and Traws-Newid.

What did it achieve?

A redundant building in the village centre has been refurbished into a work shop, auditorium, office, exhibition centre and twenty bed hotel. The building is owned by the community council but is run by Traws-Newid. The manager is also the clerk of the community council and two full time and five part time staff are employed. Funding for the £750,000 project was obtained from European Objective One Regeneration Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the former Welsh Development Agency, Gwynedd County Council, British Nuclear Fuel, Snowdonia National Park Authority, the Prince's Trust and Traws-Newid.

The hostel and heritage centre are revenue making projects on a small scale.

Contacts:

For further information please contact the clerk and manager of Traws-Newid at trawsnewid@btconnect.com or 01766 540400.

Case Study 2 - Joint vision

Aims/Objectives:

Develop a joint vision for the future development of a community

Where?

Kidwelly & Mynyddygarreg, Carmarthenshire, South West Wales.

How was it done?

The Visioning Day event was hosted by the Town Forum in conjunction with the Kidwelly Town Council and Menter Cwm Gwendraeth. The event, held at the Princess Gwenllian Hall by the Town Forum and the Town Council, was set up to encourage members of the community to participate in a questionnaire, the results of which will be used to inform the forthcoming 5 year strategy for the two communities. The event also offered the local groups the opportunity to hold a display of what is available in the immediate locale.

A wide range of partners that offer services to the area were also invited, these groups included the local police the local health board, the County Council, Business Eye and Foothold.

The Forum and the Town Council publicised the event in the local papers, on the local radio station and posters throughout the town and village. To encourage as many as possible of the local community to attend, the members of the Forum and the Town Council hand-delivered leaflets to every household in Mynyddygarreg and Kidwelly.

Who was involved?

Planning and hosting the event: Kidwelly Town Forum, Kidwelly Town Council, Menter Cwm Gwendraeth, Trustees of the Princess Gwenllian Centre and the Kidwelly Project Officer.

Over 40 local and national organisations attended on the day, ranging from the local junior football team and historical society to County Council, Business Eye, Local Health Board and WAG officials.

What did it achieve?

- networking between all of the local groups.
- networking between the local groups and the local service providers.

- the opportunity for all participants to meet grant and training providers for the local area.
- Increased awareness of the groups that provide the local services in the locale.
- a set of results that will be taken into account for a new 5 year strategy for Kidwelly and Mynyddygarreg.

Contacts:

For further information please contact the clerk of Kidwelly Town Council on 01554 890203 or towncouncil@kidwelly.gov.uk

More ideas ... common vision, common goals:

- Development of Community Strategy.
- Setting budgets and precepts together.
- Ward councillors to attend community and town council meetings and vice versa.
- Joint training (including induction training for newly elected councillors).
- Joint initiative e.g. setting up vehicles for specific regeneration projects, joint youth working schemes, working groups etc.
- Agreeing service level agreements.
- Consulting each other when making bids for funding.

Governance/Framework

It is important that unitary authorities and community and town councils maintain close relationships. This may be facilitated through specific arrangements to ensure effective engagement and liaison between them.

Case Study 3 - Developing a community strategy

Aims/Objectives:

To ensure community councils are involved in the partnership approach to the establishment and implementation of the Community Strategy.

Where?

Torfaen County Borough Council.

What is the activity/initiative?

The Torfaen Partnership was established to take ownership of the process for developing a Community Strategy as well as ensuring that it is implemented. Community councils are important for giving the partnership an understanding of the issues and priorities of people in their areas and also because they directly carry out work within their communities.

How was it done?

The Community Councils were therefore invited to appoint a representative Councillor and a Clerk to become members of the Torfaen Partnership. A Community Council liaison committee exists in which Torfaen County Borough Council and the Community Councils can exchange information and discuss issues of mutual relevance and it was to this forum that an invitation was extended. The representatives have attended every meeting of the Torfaen Partnership and have been actively involved in the issues and discussions. This includes advice on undertaking community consultation, the collection of data and the actual formulation of the Community Strategy itself.

Who is involved?

Whilst there is one Councillor and one Clerk represented at the Torfaen Partnership meetings, they play a role in ensuring that the other Community Councils are kept up to date with events.

What is it achieving?

The Community Strategy has been drawn up and is heavily based on achieving outcomes for the people of Torfaen. Something that the Community Councils were particularly keen on identifying, maintaining that improvement in quality of life has to be focused on citizens.

The representatives have played a vital role as a conduit between the Torfaen Partnership and the Community Councils - the Torfaen Partnership's Terms of Reference and the draft Community Strategy for example went back to the Community Councils for discussion and agreement.

During the information gathering and engagement exercises, the Community Councils have helped to arrange community consultation events such as Open Space consultation with the community. They have also been invited to submit their own views on the issues that the Community Strategy should include - this was done by questionnaire. In so doing, playing a key role in the engagement process.

The Strategic Director Performance and Engagement & Assistant Chief Executive have been to individual Community Councils (by invitation) to discuss the Community Strategy and the next stages which are concerned with the implementation of the strategy. The approach is consistent with looking to create an ongoing partnership based dialogue as the Torfaen Partnership evolves into a Local Service Board.

Contacts:

Mark Sharwood, 01495 766323
mark.sharwood@torfaen.gov.uk

Case Study 4 - Cluster meetings

Aims/Objectives:

To enhance existing formal and informal channels of communication and consultative links with Denbighshire's Town and Community Councils through the establishment of 'cluster' meetings. This forum brings representatives of Town and Community Councils together to meet County Council Officers to discuss new initiatives and explain in detail new policies and legislative changes.

Where?

Denbighshire.

How was it done?

Three geographically based 'cluster' groups of town and community councils were created which meet County Council Officers to discuss in depth new policies or issues pertinent to them. The meetings are targeted towards Council Clerks in particular although the invitation is also extended to the Chairs or Mayors.

Who is involved?

The Strategic Policy Unit of the County Council has a liaison role with Town and Community Councils and takes the lead on developing the 'Cluster' meetings. Town and Community Councils were consulted at every stage of the development in terms of the number of 'clusters', which geographic group they wished to join and how often they met. Each cluster will meet twice a year and are evening meetings.

Denbighshire County Officers attend to make informal presentations with the opportunity for discussion. The agenda may vary depending on the issues pertaining to that area of the County. The majority of the 37 Town and Community Councils in Denbighshire have attended one of the 'clusters'.

What is being achieved?

Officers of the County Council have the opportunity to reach and communicate with several Councils in one location and receive valuable feedback. The Town and Community Councils who attend have a more detailed explanation of new policies and have the opportunity of asking questions for clarification.

The first series of 'cluster' meetings took place in February and March 2006 and the varied agenda included:

- A presentation from the County Council's Procurement Team offering Town and Community Councils the opportunity to purchase stationery, services and equipment from contracts already negotiated by the County Council.
- A presentation from the County Council's Enforcement Unit outlining the new initiatives to deter fly tipping, litter, dog fouling and no smoking ban through a Fixed Penalty Ticket system.
- The attendance at one of the 'cluster' meetings of representatives from the Welsh Assembly's Local Government Unit. The Unit 'piggy backed' on the meeting to directly consult with a group of Town and Community Councils.
- A presentation on youth centres and youth services specific to each area.

Contact:

For more information on this initiative please contact David Davies, Strategic Policy Officer, Denbighshire County Council on 01824 706146 or david.w.davies@denbighshire.gov.uk

Case Study 5 - Code of conduct

Aims/Objectives:

To reduce the instances of inadvertent breaches of the Member Code of Conduct by community and town councils.

Where?

Wrexham.

What was done?

The County Borough Council Monitoring Officer holds regular meetings with Clerks to Town and Community Councils in Wrexham to raise awareness of current Code interpretation and to allow discussion on ethical standards which are of common interest across Town and Community Councils.

What did it achieve?

Reduced the instances of breaches of the Member Code of Conduct and encouraged better understanding of the Code requirements and more robust standards arrangements at Town/Community Council meetings.

Contact:

T Coxon

Tel: 01978 292202

e-mail: trevor.coxon@wrexham.gov.uk

More ideas ...better governance/framework:

- Dedicated community and town council liaison officer within local authority. If this is not possible, a nominated officer helps to provide a focal point and some continuity.
- Establishing joint committees between the unitary authority and the community and town councils to discuss local strategic issues and matters of mutual interest eg the Local Service Boards.

Communication

The exchange of information should be two way and lead to a balanced understanding of views of all involved in an issue. Ideally a variety of communication means should be used.

Case Study 6 - Dedicated community council liaison officer

Aims/Objectives:

To enhance communication between the unitary authority and community and town councils.

Where?

Caerphilly County Borough Council.

How was it done?

There is a dedicated officer who deals with community/town councils generally - receiving their correspondence and seeking responses on their behalf.

The Community Council Liaison Sub-Committee, which comprises of two representatives from each of the community/town councils and sixteen county borough members, meets on a quarterly basis. The representatives meet one month before the scheduled meeting to discuss which items they wish to include on the agenda. In this way, the Community Council Liaison Officer is able to ensure that the relevant information is available and the respective Officer is present to answer any queries that are raised at that time. The minutes of those meetings are a public document. Special meetings are arranged as and when required (more recently to provide details on the implications of the Licensing Act 2003).

Details of reports to be presented to Scrutiny Committees and which may be of interest are also forwarded to Clerks on a regular basis in order that they are aware of activities within their area or throughout the county borough. There is also a formal procedure whereby community/town councils are consulted on each planning application received and their comments are incorporated within the report and considered at the time the application is determined.

The county borough also has an agreed charter with community and town councils which defines the liaison arrangements and highlights the required exchanges of information as well as a list of specific subjects that should be consulted on. The charter is reviewed by officers and representatives of community and town councils on an annual basis and amended or updated as necessary.

Who was involved?

Community Council Liaison Officer, clerks of all community and town councils and relevant officers from the county council.

What did it achieve?

Having a central point of contact has proved to be an effective way of ensuring that all queries received are responded to within a specified time. Additionally, the charter has provided a consistent approach to consultation.

The quarterly meetings have become more productive because the liaison officer is based within Committee Services and also serving Corporate Management Team, so she has an oversight of items which are due to be deliberated on and an awareness of which should be referred to the community/town council.

As a general rule officers who consult with the respective community/town council over various issues advise the liaison officer so that she can keep her file up to date and is aware of any such consultation being undertaken.

Contact:

Helen Morgan, Community Council Liaison Officer on 01443 864267 or e-mail morgah@caerphilly.gov.uk

Case Study 7 - Using a questionnaire to consult with others

Aims/Objectives:

To identify whether clerks of community and town councils would be interested in attending liaison meetings with officers of the unitary authority. These meetings have in the past been between councillors of both tiers.

Where?

Vale of Glamorgan Council.

How was it done?

A questionnaire was prepared by officers at the authority that asked for information such as "Would you welcome the opportunity to attend a meeting with officers from the Vale of Glamorgan Council? What topics would you like to cover at the session? Which departments of the council do you contact on a regular basis?"

Who was involved?

Officers of the unitary authority and all clerks of community and town councils.

What did it achieve?

Has encouraged debate and good working relationships.

Contact:

Karen Bowen, Democratic Services Section, Civic Offices, Holton Road, Barry.

Tel 01446 709856

e-mail: kBowen@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Case Study 8 - Liaison meetings

Aims/Objectives:

To devise a mechanism whereby matters of common interest may be discussed between County Borough Council and Town and Community Councils.

Where?

Wrexham County Borough Council.

What was done?

The County Borough Council hosts a Town/Community Council Forum once a quarter at the offices of the County Borough Council. The County Borough make one or two presentations on items of mutual interest usually suggested by participating Community Councils. Examples of such presentations are local government finance; Freedom of Information and Data Protection; process of scrutiny etc. In addition Community Councils are invited to put forward in advance of the meeting questions of the County Borough Council which they would like answering and the County Borough ensures that there are officers present to respond.

Who was involved?

It is chaired by the Leader of Wrexham County Borough Council and each Community Council is invited to send two members or a member and Clerk to each meeting.

What did it achieve?

It affords the opportunity for the County Borough Council to alert communities to issues of strategic significance, e.g. crime and disorder; corporate plan etc. and similarly allows Town and Community Councils a forum to raise issues with the County Borough Council of more local significance. It has helped to improve relations between the two tiers of local government immensely.

Contact:

T Coxon

Tel: 01978 292202

e-mail: trevor.coxon@wrexham.gov.uk

More ideas ... for encouraging communication:

- Establish day to day contact channels.
- Exchange of organisational charts with job titles.
- Information about functions and duties.
- Establishing communication and consultation protocols between the unitary authority and community and town councils.
- Exchange of good practice.
- Links on websites to each others sites.
- E-mail addresses.
- Joint press releases/media information where relevant.

Problem Solving

Overcoming obstacles and finding solutions very often brings people together. If the process is outward looking, it can very often result in closer working relationships and innovative ways of achieving results.

Case Study 9 - Looking outside established networks

Aim/Objective:

Resolve a policing issue raised by community council during a liaison meeting. Unitary authority unable to provide answers since this was outside its remit.

Where?

Vale of Glamorgan Council.

How was it done?

Initially a representative from the police force was invited by the unitary authority to address the next meeting about that particular issue. Several other police issues were raised at this meeting.

Who was involved?

Community Liaison Committee, consisting of representatives of the Vale of Glamorgan Council and the 26 town and community councils; South Wales Police.

What did it achieve?

The committee have found it so helpful that now the police attend every meeting. This means that community and town councils are able to engage directly with the police over matters which are of importance within their community.

Contact:

Karen Bowen, 01446 709856, kbowen@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Case Study 10 - Bringing remote services to the door step

Aim/Objective:

Burgess Hill Town Council to resolve problems to delivery of local services caused due to the three tier make up of local government in Sussex, by co-ordinating these services for their residents.

Where?

Burgess Hill, Sussex.

How was it done?

A one stop shop was created as a single point of contact for town, district and county services in the town. Following advanced publicity for the project, the town council was contacted by a number of other agencies who were interested in joining the project. A true partnership was created between local authorities, public service agencies and the business sector working together under one roof to provide a comprehensive "help point" facility.

Who was involved?

Burgess Hill Town Council, West Sussex County Council, Mid Sussex District Council, West Sussex Health Authority, New Downland Housing Association, Sussex Enterprise and the Enterprise Centre and many others.

What did it achieve?

Residents are able to gain direct access to specialised officers for instant advice or a response to their enquiry. One of the successes of the Help Point is the development of surgery sessions by specialised staff from principal councils.

Contact:

David Carden, Town Clerk, Burgess Hill Town Council. Tel 01444 247726 or e-mail: david@burgesshill.gov.uk

More ideas ...problem solving:

- Network with a wide spread of unitary authorities and community and town councils across Wales.
- Share good practice widely.
- Work together with partners to find a solution which benefits all.

Developing Skills and Expertise

The National Training Strategy for Community and Town Councils in Wales is addressing the training and development needs of the sector as a whole. However, unitary authorities can do a great deal by assisting the community and town councils in their areas with specific requirements. This may be done quite simply by extending resources or capabilities thereby exploiting "economies of scale".

Case Study 11 - Complying with legal requirements

Objective/Aim:

Ensuring that community and town councils meet legal obligations.

Where?

Vale of Glamorgan Council.

Who is involved?

Community and town council clerks with the unitary authority human resources department.

How is it done?

Employment law is complex and without expert advice, community and town councils could be at risk. The Vale of Glamorgan Council provides professional human resources advice and support to community and town councils. This service is provided on a fee paying basis.

What did it achieve?

Assists councils to manage their staff within legislative requirements.

Contact:

Adrian Unsworth

Tel 01446 709746

e-mail alunsworth@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Case Study 12 - Communicating in the 21st century

Objective/Aim:

To modernise the working practices of community and town councils by incorporating their communication links into Torfaen County Borough Council's modern ICT infrastructure and providing them with ongoing value for money support, training opportunities and partnership.

Where?

Torfaen.

Who is involved?

Leader of Torfaen County Borough Council and Head of ICT Operations working with community and town council councillors and clerks.

How is it done?

Torfaen County Borough Council has established one of the most highly specified ICT networks in Wales with a high speed, resilient, modern infrastructure which enables the authority to transform the way in which it delivers services.

The Leader of Torfaen County Borough Council is actively working with the local community and town councils and their councillors to encourage the uptake and usage of Torfaen's modern ICT infrastructure within the community council environment. Presentations have been given on a variety of proposals including plans to introduce low cost video conferencing in each community council which will facilitate participation in the unitary authority meetings and enhance interaction on a wider scale. There are also intentions to secure Broadband connection for small community councils; for every community council to have its own web identity and e-mail address; plans to extend working from home to all community council councillors and much more.

What did it achieve?

There are many benefits arising from this initiative. It is improving the speed of decision making when the unitary authority and the community and town councils are required to make joint decisions; it is also facilitating knowledge transfer and developing key ICT skills amongst elected members.

Contact:

Richard Edmunds, 01495 766382, Richard.edmunds@torfaen.gov.uk

More ideas ...developing skills and expertise:

- Run joint training sessions for councillors in unitary authorities and community/town councils.
- Encourage job shadowing.
- Hold regular liaison meetings between community and town councils and their unitary authority.
- Training and development plans.
- Look across unitary authority borders for good practice in other parts of Wales and beyond.

Agreeing a Formal Charter

The charter process may be initiated by the unitary authority or by a community or town council or a group of such councils. It is advisable to have a single charter document in each unitary authority area and so the charter formation process should be collectively and equally owned and agreed before a draft document is produced.

Case Study 13 - Enhancing engagement

Objective/Aim:

To consistently be more engaged with communities. The three main drivers in 2005 from central government were the Comprehensive Performance Assessment; the Local Government White Paper; the Local Government Review.

Where?

Gloucestershire.

Who is involved?

Gloucestershire County Council, Gloucestershire District Councils, Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils and Gloucestershire Rural Community Council together with parish and town councils.

How was it done?

In March 2005 the Gloucestershire Local Government Association endorsed the production of a joint county/district/borough/parish and town councils charter.

The draft charter was developed by Gloucestershire County Council through informal collaboration with parish and town councils.

During this time, some of the observations made by the county council included a perception that the parish and town councils were keen to be more involved in the consultation process and to improve communications; most councils had little desire to take on any further service delivery at that stage; working more closely with parishes would help the county council councillors to represent their communities by having a fuller picture of local priorities and needs.

The draft was launched at the Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils annual general meeting and formally consulted on for three months. During this time five meetings were held at venues across the county. Contributions from over a quarter of all the parish and town councils were used to re-draft the charter. The Gloucestershire Association of Parish Councils was also involved.

The updated draft of the charter was sent out by the county council to all parish and town councils with a request to sign up to the charter. Over a quarter of the 263 parishes in the county, committed to the charter that was published on 1 April 2006.

What did it achieve?

The process of developing a charter encouraged interaction between the county council and parish and town councils. The councils that signed up provide a foundation for further relationship development and agreement of the charter with those who did not commit to it first time around.

One hundred parishes were signed up to the charter by May 2007.

Contact:

For further information, please contact Hester Hunt at the Chief Executive Support Unit, Gloucestershire County Council.

Tel 01452 426563 or e-mail hester.hunt@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Delegation of Services

Case Study 14 - Improving quality of life for town

Aims/Objectives:

Newtown Town Council has been involved in a number of initiatives to improve the appearance of the town centre for residents and visitors. These include a hanging basket scheme for retailers and planting of open spaces in the town with summer and winter bedding.

Over the years the road-side planting in the town, which was undertaken by Powys County Council as Highway Authority has suffered from successive budget cuts which has meant that the beds had become low maintenance shrub beds which were only being maintained once a year.

Town Councillors agreed that planting these road-side beds would make a significant improvement to the town and discussions were undertaken with Powys County Council for the Town Council to take over the maintenance with appropriate funding from the Unitary Authority.

Where?

Newtown, Powys.

Who was involved?

Powys County Council and Newtown Town Council

How was it done?

A formal agreement was reached whereby the Town Council would take over the maintenance of the town centre flower beds and funding was provided by the Unitary Authority in the first 3 years, on a sliding scale.

What did it achieve?

The road-side flower beds are now planted with summer and winter bedding plants which have significantly improved the visual environment of the town centre. Councillors and staff receive many favourable comments during the year and the improvements have been welcomed by residents, visitors and residents associations.

Since the road-side initiative the Town Council has been successful in receiving grant funding for the re-planting of flower beds and the refurbishment of public benches in the town park, which again have not been maintained by the Unitary Authority for a number of years. These improvements now provide residents and visitors with a colourful area in which to relax and enjoy the park.

Contacts:

Town Clerk, Steve Geary on 01686 625544 or at towndclerk@newtown.org.uk

Case Study 15 - Re-connecting with the unitary authority

Aims/Objectives:

Community and town councils seeking to strengthen their role and sense of purpose.

Where?

Bala, Gwynedd.

Who is involved?

A group of five community and town councils around Bala and the Environment Directorate at Gwynedd County Council.

How was it done?

The community and town councils got together to discuss the possibilities of working together and approaching their unitary authority, Cyngor Gwynedd to find out if they could take on some of the local services themselves, and provide added value and increased quality of life for local citizens. They felt that this would also enable the councils to strengthen their role and credibility and give them an increased sense of purpose.

Cyngor Gwynedd, on the other hand, through one of the county's Community Strategy Projects - A Quality Environment, had also been exploring ways of working more closely with town and community councils, looking for new, creative ways of delivering services which were more citizen centred.

As a result, the five councils and Cyngor Gwynedd agreed in principle to consider running a pilot project. The purpose of the project was to establish an effective mechanism of communication between them and other key agencies and bodies and also to trial devolving some local services to the community/town councils.

The discussions are being conducted through the unitary authority's Environment Directorate Strategic Director, and the clerk of Bala Town Council who is also employed as Community Regeneration Officer by Cyngor Gwynedd in this area. This has formed a very helpful connection between the unitary authority and the community and town councils and as a consequence has been a key lever in the development in the locality. One Voice Wales Development Officer in North Wales has been acting as an independent facilitator to assist with talks between the five councils and the unitary authority.

What did it achieve?

A work programme has been agreed to concentrate on establishing a working group to agree the arrangements for managing the process; agreeing the work areas and partners for the project; agreeing a work programme; identifying resources need to implement the work.

Discussions up to now have considered working together in some form of partnership, however, various models will need to be considered in depth to decide which one would work best

Contacts:

Huw Antur Edwards, Community Regeneration Officer,
Cyngor Gwynedd/Clerk to Bala Town Council 07786662905

Dewi Rowlands, Strategic Director, Environment Directorate,
Cyngor Gwynedd 01286 679 055

Jane C Evans, Development Officer, One Voice Wales 07917 846510

Funding/Money Matters

Case Study 16 - Allocating funds

Aims/Objectives:

To discuss the county council's budget setting process

Where?

Denbighshire.

How was it done?

Before the county council sets its budget for the next financial year, a series of meetings was held with Denbighshire's town and community councils. At the meetings there were discussions about pressures on certain council budgets eg Single Status and the potential Small Business Rate Relief.

Who is involved?

The meetings are arranged by the Strategic Policy Unit and are led jointly by the Lead Member for Resources and the Corporate Director (Resources).

What did it achieve?

Community and town councils gaining a better strategic understanding of how funds are allocated through the unitary authority. This has led to an appreciation for the decision making behind service delivery.

Contact:

David Davies, Strategic Policy Officer, Denbighshire County Council
on 01824 706146 or david.w.davies@denbighshire.gov.uk

And More ...

Further reading:

- A Shared Responsibility, 2007, WAG.
- Parish and Town Council Clustering (June 2006) - LGiU and SLCC.
- Joining Forces (June 2006) - LGiU and SLCC.
- Charters for Town and Parish Councils and Principal Authorities: A Good Practice Guide April 2005 LGiU and Commission for Rural Communities.
- County and Parish A report on working together for the future of Essex Final Report February 2004.

Examples of existing charters:

- Caerphilly.
- Gloucestershire.
- Lancashire.
- Torfaen.

Helpful websites/links:

- www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk
- www.jrf.org.uk
- www.LGiU.gov.uk
- www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
- www.wcva.org.uk
- www.communities.gov.uk

Useful contacts:

- **One Voice Wales**

Simon White, Chief Executive Officer
24 College Street, Ammanford,
Carmarthenshire SA18 3AF
Tel 01269 595400
e-mail simon.white@onevoicewales.org.uk
website: www.onevoicewales.org.uk

- **Society of Local Council Clerks**

Ruth Tucker, Regional Adviser for Wales
3 Kemys Street, Griffithstown,
Pontypool, Torfaen NP4 5DJ
Tel 07739 558254
e-mail: tucker.r@sky.com

Jim Griffiths, Co-ordinator for Wales
1 Old Coach House, Tanybwllch, Rhydfelin,
Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 4PY
Tel 07875 527005
e-mail: jimgriff@aol.com

- **Welsh Assembly Government**

Shyam Vining, Policy Officer, Local Government Policy division,
Crown Buildings, Cathays Park, Cardiff CF10 3NQ
Tel 029 2082 5532
e-mail: shyam.vining@wales.gsi.gov.uk

- **Welsh Local Government Association**

Daniel Hurford, Communications and Corporate Policy Officer,
Local Government House, Drake Walk, Cardiff CF10 4LG
Tel 029 2046 8638
e-mail: daniel.hurford@wlga.gov.uk

- **National Association of Councillors**

Cllr Peter J Mole, Civic Centre,
Gateshead NE8 1HH,
Tel 0191 433 3000

A Shared Community - Guide to Charter Process

Whether you already have good working relationships or are hoping to develop a more productive liaison, you may have the view that developing charters or agreements will merely be a bureaucratic process. In fact, the process of developing a charter can be extremely beneficial if both parties engage with each other in a positive and collaborative way. Charters are an important way in which community and town councils and unitary authorities can meet the needs of their local area in a joined up way as well as demonstrating public service reform and the requirements of “Making the Connections”.

A few points to consider:

- The decision to have a charter needs to be mutually agreed.
- A working group with representation from both unitary authorities and community and town councils may be an effective as well as democratic way of taking the process forward.
- Networking with other unitary authority areas in Wales and districts and counties in England will help to form a good practice/ support network.
- It is advisable to develop a single charter for a unitary authority area. This will help to foster relationships amongst community and town councils as well as with the unitary authority. It will also help to make the process straightforward and manageable.
- Items relating to a specific community or town council may be noted as an appendix to the over-arching charter. This could relate to delegated services.
- The issues that are to be featured in the charter may include consultation and communication, community planning, joint working and engagement and how the charter will be monitored and evaluated. These are only a sample of suggestions. Issues chosen should be those where it is expected that co-operation will result in a significant improvement in performance and outcomes.

- There also needs to be a sense of scale when identifying the level and type of agreement made. There needs to be an awareness of risks, liabilities and impacts that may result from the agreement.
- The process of agreeing a charter is a valuable exercise in partnership working in itself. It gives validity and recognition to both community and town councils and their unitary authority as equal partners with reciprocal functions.
- Where good relationships already exist, the process of agreeing a charter provides the opportunity to extend and develop it further. It is vital that the process is used constructively and creatively in such a way that good liaison is strengthened and not undermined.
- Since it is a process that embraces the whole unitary authority and very often a large number of community and town councils, it must definitely not be a tick box exercise, but rather an opportunity that gives everyone the time to commit to joint working.
- Consideration should be given to the period of time covered by the charter and when and how it will be reviewed. What circumstances may lead to the termination of the charter?

The model charter:

- A model charter is enclosed overleaf. This has been produced by the Welsh Local Government Association, One Voice Wales, Society of Local Council Clerks, the Welsh Assembly Government and other partners from local government and the Wales Audit Office and is based on collaboration and good practice.
- **It is essential to note that the model is not prescriptive. It is an example that you may adapt to suit individual circumstances. It may also be that having looked at the model, you decide to formulate a different type of agreement that better suits your needs. The model therefore is a flexible document that may be used either as a prompt or a template.**
- The charter must not be used as a tool for blame, but rather as a problem-solving vehicle. It may be useful to build this principle into the charter. At the same time, there need to be mechanisms for resolving conflict and the misuse of agreed procedures.

Benefits:

- The process helps to improve communication through clarity of commitments from both parties. This has a knock-on effect of reducing misunderstandings between partners.
- The charter is evidence to the community that the two tiers are working efficiently and collaboratively together. The document may be publicised to the community to demonstrate citizen-focussed delivery of services.
- The charter gives validity and recognition to both community and town councils and their unitary authorities as equal partners.
- Charter documents are very useful for inducting new staff and councillors and in their ongoing training and development.

A Shared Community - Model Charter

Introduction

The community and town councils of X and the X county/county borough council have agreed to publish a charter which sets out how we aim to work together for the benefit of local communities whilst recognising our respective responsibilities as autonomous, democratically elected statutory bodies.

The charter is designed to build on existing good practice and embrace the shared principles of openness, respect for each other's opinions, honesty and our common priority of putting citizens at the centre. This charter is based on equality of partnership and is not a top-down arrangement.

Partners to the Charter

[names to be listed individually here]

Recognition

We accept the legitimacy and benefits of partnership working whilst at the same time recognising and respecting each other's roles.

We aim to work together as a partnership of equals rather than tiers.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Acknowledges and recognises that community and town councils are the grass roots level of local government. In their role as democratically accountable bodies, community and town councils offer a means of engaging with local people, of decentralising the provision of certain services, and of revitalising local communities.	Recognise the strategic importance of the unitary authority and the economy of scale and equitable distribution of certain services they are able to achieve.
Recognise and respect the diversity of community and town councils and that their needs varies according to size, and the extent to which they participate varies.	Recognise that community and town councils come within the common umbrella of the unitary authority.

Local Governance

We will be clear about the expectations that we have of each other in order to facilitate a smooth working relationship. In this regard, we will define the way in which we interact with each other. We will be clear about the role of councillors at all levels in the relationship and in community leadership.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will hold liaison meetings with representatives of all community and town councils that wish to take part. Charter to include details of when, how often and where such meetings are to take place.	Will contribute towards the agenda of liaison meetings and contribute proactively to the attendance and discussion.
Will appoint a nominated member of staff to be a liaison officer between the unitary authority and community and town councils	Will contact the nominated officer on the agreed issues and make them aware of any difficulties being encountered.
Community and town council councillors/officers (as appropriate) will be formally represented on key local partnerships and committee meetings. The unitary authority will seek to ensure that these arrangements are regarded as suitable and sufficient.	Will invite councillors/officers (as appropriate) of the unitary authority to meetings and will provide a space on its meeting agenda for presentations.
Will administer the holding of community and town council elections.	Will notify the need for elections in a timely manner.

Consultation

We appreciate the importance of meaningful consultation and set out a genuine commitment among all parties to consult on matters of mutual concern. We will agree clear, specific and time limited procedures and processes for consultation.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
<p>Will aim to give community and town councils the opportunity to comment before making a decision that affects the local community [specific issues may be named] In furtherance of this, the unitary authority will make available a copy of its public reports to Cabinet, panels, committees etc; will advise all clerks of the dates of its public meetings; and make copies of its agendas available on the Council's website as soon as possible</p>	<p>Community and town councils will respond to consultation opportunities in a timely manner, addressing the key issues in the consultation document. Will make full use of the papers available to them to inform local decision-making.</p>
<p>Officers of unitary authorities will attend meetings with community and town councils (or groups of councils) at a mutually agreed time to discuss matters of common interest when requested to do so and given sufficient notice.</p>	<p>Unitary Councillors and officers will be given an opportunity to speak at community and town council meetings on matters of mutual interest.</p>
<p>Will encourage scrutiny committees to liaise with community and town councils on relevant local issues.</p>	<p>Will respond to requests to input views to scrutiny committees.</p>

Information and Communication

We appreciate the need for timely, clear and relevant information and communication in fostering good relationships and better joint working for the benefit of local people.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will provide to community and town councils a list of named contacts, telephone numbers and where possible e-mail addresses.	Will utilise the agreed contact points and respond in the most appropriate and timely method.
Will communicate by providing sufficient numbers of documents for members of community and town councils.	Will ensure that all town and community councillors have access to the appropriate documents.

Joint working and engagement

The Charter defines 'Partnership' as working together towards a common set of goals, based on equality in terms of ownership, decision-making and recognition of each party's distinctive contribution. It is recognised that an equal and effective partnership brings benefits and responsibilities to all those involved. Local government at both tiers must work together to promote the economic, social and environmental well being of our area. If doing things differently achieves a better service, we will seriously examine these methods.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will provide opportunities for clerks of town and community councils to meet to discuss common concerns and resolve issues.	Will encourage participation by clerks in opportunities to network and share common concerns.
Will be clear about how devolved services can be discussed and agreed.	Will use the agreed procedures if there is a wish to progress devolved services.
Will give due consideration to devolving services that would provide better value for money and/or enhanced services.	Will be clear about how any devolvement of services will provide better value for money and/or enhanced services.
Will encourage accountability for all acquired activities.	Will take responsibility for aspects of joint working that are signed up to.

Land Use Planning

Community and town councils know and understand their local area and must be able to comment effectively on planning matters. The unitary council is able to take an overview of the needs of the whole local area and make decisions, taking local views into account.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will uphold its statutory duty to consult community and town councils on all planning applications in their communities	Make appropriate responses to the unitary authority recognising the parameters imposed by planning law and agreed planning policy.
Invite representatives from a community council or town council to participate in site visits relating to planning applications in its area.	Ensure that councillors receive training on planning issues and have a sound understanding of how planning law works.
Inform a community or town council in writing for the decision made with respect to a planning application in its area within seven days of the decision being made, and, if necessary explain why the decision is different from the point of view put forward by the community/town council.	Maintain an objective and professional approach to planning matters at all times.
Give community and town councils information about relevant planning committee meetings so that they may attend as observers.	Councillors to take up the opportunity to attend planning committee meetings at the unitary authority.

Practical Support

In order to be effective, elected members and officers must be well-trained and have the support they need to carry out their roles.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
The Unitary Authority will, where practical, offer community and town councils access to support services, to enable them to take advantage of facilities such as printing, IT, purchasing at a mutually agreed price.	Will follow procedures set out to access unitary authority support services, but also have opportunity to make own arrangements.

Expertise

We will encourage continuous development of officers and members in both unitary authority and community and town councils, either in their individual groupings or together. Improved expertise leads to professionalism and more effective joint working.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will offer member induction training to town and community councillors to enable them to understand the role and function of the unitary council.	Will provide an induction to newly elected councillors to enable them to undertake their role effectively.

Ethics

We will provide an ethical service to local people, following the appropriate standards and Codes of Conduct. We will encourage links between community and town council clerks and unitary authority Standards Committee.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
The unitary authority will, through the appointed Monitoring Officer, support community and town councils in the timely consideration and provision of advice in relation to the application of the Members Code of Conduct.	Community and town councillors shall not make vexatious complaints under the Code and will provide all such information as required by the Monitoring Officer to enable him/her to carry out his/her function effectively.

Financial arrangements

Both the unitary authority and town and community councils recognise the need for clarity and transparency in financial arrangements. In developing and implementing financial arrangements, relevant national and local priorities will be taken into account.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
The unitary authority, in setting the level of council tax for the area, will have regard to services being delivered by community and town councils in its area, and the funding thereof. This will be with a view to avoiding double-taxation.	Community and town councils, in setting the annual precept, shall have regard to the plans for service delivery of the unitary authority for the coming year.

Delegating responsibility for service provision

Services should be delivered in the most appropriate manner, with regard to value for money and added value for local people.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
The unitary authority will give due consideration to all reasonably argued cases for the delegation of service delivery to community and town councils, basing its consideration primarily on the improvement of service delivery for citizens whilst ensuring value for money is retained or enhanced.	Community and town councils will recognise that there are certain instances where it is not appropriate or desirable for the unitary authority to delegate service delivery.
Where it is not appropriate or desirable to delegate service delivery, the unitary authority will seek ways in which local information from communities might be used to enhance service delivery to better meet citizen needs.	Community and town councils will engage with the citizens in the communities they serve to understand better their needs and convey these needs in a coherent and constructive manner to the unitary authority, such that they can be taken account of in service design and delivery.

Sustainability

We will work in ways that are sustainable, reconciling the long-term needs with those of the present; and protecting and improving the quality of life of current generations without compromising the quality of life of future generations.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will assist town and community councils with information on sustainable practices.	Will proactively assess the sustainability of current practices and processes.
Will outline how the unitary authority is actively pursuing sustainable development.	Will investigate projects which contribute to sustainability where beneficial to the community.

Community Strategy

We recognise the strategic importance of the Community Strategy as the overarching strategic vision and priorities for the local area. Furthermore, we recognise that the Community Strategy will only be fully effective if it is informed by the grass roots experiences from within our communities.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
The unitary authority will invite a representative of community and town councils to sit on the Community Strategy Partnership in recognition of the local knowledge and experience this will bring.	Community and town councils shall together nominate a councillor to be their representative on the Community Strategy Partnership. This individual shall proactively represent the sector, raising matters of general concern appropriate to the agenda of the Partnership.
Will involve town and community councils in the development of the local community strategy.	Will contribute to the development of the Community Strategy in its development stage.
Will involve town and community councils in the implementation of the Community Strategy.	Will respond actively and fully to consultation of the draft Community Strategy and participate in the partnership monitoring and the implementation of the Community Strategy.

Local Elections

Fair and open elections are the bedrock of local democracy. We will ensure that elections are freely and fairly contested, and encourage local people to become involved in local democracy.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will involve community and town councils in the local election planning process.	Will encourage participation in the local election process by members of the local community.
Will involve community and town councils in any awareness raising/ publicity to encourage nominations for candidacy at local elections.	Will ensure wide publicity of vacancies on community and town councils to maximise community representation.
Will help to publicise forthcoming local elections on behalf of community and town councils.	Will facilitate public participation at all relevant meetings of the council and its committees to encourage community involvement.
Will brief community and town council clerks on the nomination process so that they are equipped to assist any potential candidates who come forward for local elections.	
Will provide help and assistance with the local election legal and administrative processes and procedures.	

Action Plan

This Charter will be supported by the development of an annual Action Plan addressing each of the individual topics contained herein. The Action Plan will be developed on a joint basis and shall attribute responsibilities to each partner. Actions will be accompanied by a timescale and will be reported on at least quarterly during the year concerned.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
The unitary authority will nominate a lead officer for the development and monitoring of the Action Plan.	Community and town councils will collectively agree priorities for inclusion in the Action Plan.
Responsible officers of the unitary authority will have due regard to the Action Plan and include relevant actions in their workplan for the year.	Community and town councils will have due regard to the Action Plan and include all actions relevant to them during the course of the year.

Monitoring and Review

The Charter will be fully reviewed every four years or more often if there is a need to do so. The Community Liaison Committee will measure progress annually in achieving the measures set out in the Charter through the setting and reviewing of actions contained in an action plan.

Unitary Authority	Community and Town Councils
Will arrange for the Charter to be reviewed every four years or as agreed.	Will actively contribute to the review of the Charter.
Will arrange for the development of an action plan linked to the Charter and will actively contribute to achieving the action plan.	Will actively contribute to the development and delivery of the Charter action plan.

Conclusion

The undersigned community and town councils and unitary authority are committed to the principles and statements with the charter, for the benefit of local people.

Appendices:

[to be attached where relevant]

Further copies of this document can be obtained from:

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