



Commission for
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

**Strengthening the
role of local
councillors:**

an analysis of the
written evidence
arising from the CRC
participation inquiry

Strengthening the Role of Local Councillors: an analysis of the written evidence arising from the CRC participation inquiry

Dr Carol Kambites
Professor Malcolm Moseley

July 2007

Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the responses arising from the 'call for evidence' component of the CRC's inquiry into 'Strengthening the Role of Local Councillors'. There were 169 responses to the call for evidence, 100 of which were from parish councils or parish councillors.

Seven themes were identified based on the evidence received:

- Communication and Participation: councillors and their communities;
- Making the Links: communication within local government;
- Making Connections: the networking role of local councillors;
- Power and Resources: barriers to effective working;
- Encouraging Councillors: 'representativeness', red tape and the code of conduct;
- Training Councillors and Clerks and Educating the Public;
- The Way Forward: the White Paper and other Suggestions

The first theme concerns communication between councillors and their communities. Many methods of communication were identified, with newsletters being the most popular. In addition, there was considerable emphasis, especially amongst parish and town councillors, on informal methods of communication arising from living within the community. Whilst informal communication can be extremely helpful, there is a danger in over-reliance on this method as councillors may be only known to some sections of even a small community.

The second theme concerns the importance of links between the tiers of local government. Relations seem to be very variable and traditionally take place through ward councillors who, whilst they may be sympathetic to parish concerns, often have little influence on their own councils. However, a number of principal authorities, such as Staffordshire and South Somerset, are introducing schemes to keep in touch with and support and parish councils.

Local councillors at all tiers saw a large part of their role as networking and forming connections. In the case of principal authority councillors, they aimed to carry the views of their electors to their councils and also to put local organisations in touch with funding sources. Parish councillors similarly, saw themselves as the voice of their community, carrying views to principal authorities and other organisations. There was very little mention of parish and town councils as actors in their own right, using their own powers to improve their communities.

When asked for the barriers that made it hard to act as leaders of their communities, parish councils, and to a lesser extent principal authority councillors, most often mentioned lack of powers, lack of influence and lack of resources, lack of time on behalf of busy councillors. However, it seems that, in the case of some parish councils, lack of resources is linked to reluctance to increase a small precept. There were also some parish councils who did not want more powers as it would increase bureaucracy and demands upon councillor time.

It was pointed out that councillors are often not representative of their communities and tend to be male, white middle-class and retired. There is a need for more people to come forward as councillors, with many councils having empty seats and/or uncontested elections. Many councils co-opt to fill vacancies and it was pointed out that this is likely to make them even more unrepresentative.

It was apparent that there was a need and desire for training for both councillors and clerks. However, both were constrained by lack of time. There were a number of suggestions for small parishes working together and either sharing a clerk or having a trained advisor to support part-time clerks of small parishes. There also appeared to be a need for public education about the powers of the different tiers of local government.

Whilst there appeared to be some misunderstanding of some of the proposals in the White Paper, there was support for councillor budgets, community calls for action, a power of well being for Quality Councils and revisions to the code of conduct and councillor training, although all these also had detractors. Other suggestions for improvement most commonly involved increasing the powers of parish councils, particularly planning powers.

The report concludes that inter alia increased powers for quality parishes are to be welcomed, but there also needs to be a programme of councillor and public education to achieve a better understanding of the powers of the different tiers of local government and to encourage more people from a variety of backgrounds to take up the challenge of becoming local councillors and leaders of their communities.

Table of Contents

1	INTRODUCTION	5
1.1	BACKGROUND	5
1.2	THE RESPONSE	5
1.3	THE ANALYSIS	6
2	KEY FINDINGS BY THEME	7
2.1	COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION: COUNCILLORS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES	7
2.2	MAKING THE LINKS: COMMUNICATION WITHIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT	9
2.3	MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE NETWORKING ROLE OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS	10
2.4	POWER AND RESOURCES: BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE WORKING FOR EXISTING COUNCILLORS	12
2.5	ENCOURAGING NEW COUNCILLORS: 'REPRESENTATIVENESS', RED TAPE AND THE CODE OF CONDUCT	13
2.6	TRAINING COUNCILLORS AND CLERKS AND EDUCATING THE PUBLIC	15
2.7	THE WAY FORWARD: THE WHITE PAPER AND OTHER SUGGESTIONS	17
3	KEY FINDINGS BY HYPOTHESIS	21
3.1	HYPOTHESIS 1: 'RURAL COUNCILLORS FAIL TO MAKE FULL USE OF THE EXISTING POWERS AVAILABLE TO THEM'	21
3.2	HYPOTHESIS 2: 'THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RURAL COUNCILLORS AND OTHER FORMS OF DEVOLVED GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNITY INFLUENCE IS INEFFECTIVE.'	22
3.3	HYPOTHESIS 3: 'RURAL COUNCILLORS DO NOT REPRESENT THE COMMUNITIES THEY ARE ELECTED TO.'	23
3.4	HYPOTHESIS 4: 'THE WORKING BETWEEN DIFFERENT TIERS OF COUNCILLORS IS UNPRODUCTIVE'	24
3.5	HYPOTHESIS 5: 'THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RURAL COUNCILLORS AT HELPING THEIR COMMUNITIES INFLUENCE LOCAL DECISIONS IS CONSTRAINED BY POOR COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION FLOWS'	25
4	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	26
4.1	CONCLUSIONS	26
4.2	RECOMMENDATIONS	27
	APPENDIX 1: THE 'CALL FOR EVIDENCE'	29

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In the context of the Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities', published in October 2006, the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) is carrying out a 'participation inquiry' in order to assess the role and activities of rural councillors and the potential for developing that role. The inquiry has four components:

- Literature review
- Call for Evidence
- Inquiry panel visits
- Qualitative research involving focus groups and street surveys

The present report consists of an analysis of the submissions responding to the call for evidence. The questionnaire distributed as the main component of the call for evidence is included as Appendix 1. Thus, the task has been 'to identify key themes and issues emerging from the response and evidence submitted' (extract from the contract brief).

1.2 The Response

There were 169 responses, all received between the opening of the consultation period in March 2007 and 8th June 2007. Responses received after this date will be included in the overall analysis. The respondents were divided into six categories as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of respondents

Category number	Position of respondent	Number of respondents
1	National or regional bodies	14
2	Principal local authorities and councillors of such authorities	39
3	Parish and town councils and councillors and local associations of such councils	100
4	Voluntary and community organisations	5
5	Other local actors and partnerships	4
6	The general public and others (eg academic)	4
7	Unclear	9

Clearly therefore, the majority of respondents were parish or town councillors or representatives of such councils, the next largest group being principal authority councillors. However, it was not always made clear what, if anything, a respondent represented and some respondents represented more than one body or interest. Hence the figures in column 2 do not add to 169.

This 'imbalance' of respondents, particularly the preponderance of parish councillors and the smaller number of responses in categories 4, 5 and 6, made it difficult to compare responses between categories. Nevertheless, where it is possible that parish councillors for example, may take a different view from other respondents, the position of the respondent is mentioned when it is known. It is also important to be aware that the imbalance of respondents will inevitably bias the responses in favour of the views of local councillors as opposed to other local actors.

The responses varied both in length and in the number of people they represented. Some councillors responded individually, in some cases several from the same council, whilst other councils collated responses. In some cases a principal authority collated responses from parish councils as well as its own councillors. There were also two academic responses based on extensive knowledge of and research on parish and town councils.

1.3 The Analysis

Seven themes emerged from the evidence and between them cover the significant points raised. For each theme a number of examples of good, and usually innovative, practice relevant to that theme are included. The hypotheses arising from the CRC internal document '*Strengthening the Role of Rural Councillors: framework for Inquiry Panel Research*' are then discussed in the light of the findings.

Some tables are given showing the frequency of particular responses. However, three factors need to be born in mind. Firstly, and as already explained, a high proportion of responses were from parish and town councillors; secondly, these parish council responses contain individual responses from up to six councillors on the same council; and, thirdly, there is a geographical imbalance, with a relatively large number of responses from Cherwell District in Oxfordshire, where the inquiry was well publicised by the District Council.

It is assumed in this analysis that the term 'rural councillors', which appears several times in CRC's schedule of questions, refers to district, borough, county and unitary authority councillors representing rural areas as well parish and town councillors. However, there was some confusion amongst respondents about the meaning of the term. Some interpreted it as above but others took the term as referring only to parish and town councillors, some of these respondents complaining that it was not the correct term.

This ambiguity regarding the meaning of 'rural councillor' proved to be a problem in interpreting the evidence. As the analysis below suggests, the tier of council/councillor to which the respondent was referring was not always clear.

In the analysis below, the terms 'parish council' and 'parish councillor' are used to cover parish and town councils and councillors. 'Principal authority' and 'principal authority councillor' are used to refer to county, district and unitary councils and their councillors.

2 Key Findings by Theme

The following seven themes emerged from the submissions to the inquiry. Between them, they cover most of the points raised. However, the themes cannot entirely be separated and some cross-referencing will be made:

2.1 Communication and Participation: councillors and their communities

Councillors at all levels were aware of the importance of communicating with their communities. However, methods of communication varied greatly, with the most popular shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Most Popular Methods of Communication Between Councillors and Community

Method of communication	Number of mentions
Newsletters	54
Informal	47
Parish plans or similar	28
Public meetings	18
Surgeries	19
Website	13
Public time at council meetings	16

It can be seen that newsletters were mentioned most often. In some cases they were produced by the parish council, whereas in other cases the council or individual councillors include articles, council minutes etc. in an existing village newsletter. As might be expected, informal communication was mentioned more often by parish councillors who are more likely to live within their communities, and are often members of other local groups. Mostly, informal communication was mentioned in association with more formal methods but some local councillors thought other methods to be unnecessary due to the small size of the community. However, as Woods and Gardner point out, there is a danger in relying exclusively on informal communication even in very small communities:

'... the emphasis on informal communication can be exclusionary in that it gives greater voice to those residents who are part of the same social networks as councillors, and does not provide an obvious point of access for residents who are not. Indeed, the evidence suggests that many councillors are not as well known in their communities as they think they are. .
(Woods and Gardner)

Woods and Gardner also point out that recent population changes in rural communities have made communities less homogenous and some sectors harder to reach by informal means. At the same time, the closure of village shops and post offices has reduced the number of informal meeting places.

As well as variety in methods of communication, there appeared to be considerable variety in the thoroughness of communication, with some parish council respondents citing only the publication of their meeting dates and/or their contact details.

Parish and town plans and appraisals were also seen as an important communication tool, at least in the sense of local communities communicating with their elected representatives (and with others). However, one respondent made the point that involvement may be limited to certain sectors of society and that the role of the local council should be to represent those who do not get involved.

Community plans, local partnerships and other initiatives can have contradictory effects on parish councils and their relationship with their communities. Some parish councillors felt that there were too many consultation groups and that they can divide interest and dilute efforts. It is likely that, in some cases, they were seen as a threat to the power and influence of parish councils. Derounian and Skinner and Woods and Gardner both have interesting points to make on this issue.

'There is a conundrum here, namely that rural communities may be establishing ventures – parish plan groups, community buses, development trusts, village hall management committees and amenity groups, because the PTC [parish or town council] is weak, ineffective or obstructive. On the other hand it may be because it is more appropriate to form a community partnership (but with the PTC playing a lead or central role). It may also result from such partnerships having access to funds, where PTCs do not.'

(Derounian and Skinner)

'Our research has revealed both examples of local councillors playing an instrumental role in initiating and leading community partnership as an extension to their council work; and examples of councillors refusing to co-operate with, and in some cases impeding the work, of community partnerships because they perceive their authority and representational role is challenged by the partnership.'

(Woods and Gardner)

Some principal authority councillors emphasised that large rural wards make face-to-face communication with electors difficult for principal authority councillors, and one district councillor was concerned that a move to unitary authorities would result in even larger wards.

Other respondents emphasised that communication needs to be two-way, and several councillors complained of a lack of interest from their electors. In fact, at least two councillors had given up holding surgeries because of the lack of public interest. The problem of public apathy and disaffection with local politics is widespread and interrelated with a number of other issues dealt with here, such as the powers of local councils, the quality of local councillors and public education. It will be discussed in several of the themes below.

Although councillors overwhelmingly saw themselves as representatives of their local community, their 'representativeness' is open to question and will be discussed in Section 2.5.

Box 1: Some good examples of communication

'In our Ward my colleague and I hold Borough Council surgeries every other month, in the village church vestry, on a Saturday morning timed to coincide with the market stall held at the same venue. Some residents attend to discuss specific issues but others simply drop-in for a chat when they see us on their way to/from the market stall. Our surgeries are publicised in the village newsletter and local newspapers inviting residents to drop in to discuss their concerns with their Borough Councillors. On the rare occasion when one of us is absent we invite our County Councillor to come along.'

(Tonbridge and Malling Borough Councillor)

'Burstow Day' was a community event held by Burstow Parish Council in Surrey to aid the council in planning its budget.. The event was attended by 'over 80 stakeholders'. 'The attendants were made up of different sectors of the community as well as a good age range.'

(Surrey Community Action)

A number of parish councils have introduced welcome packs for new residents, facilitating their involvement in the community

2.2 Making the Links: communication within local government

Forty-six respondents cited relations between the tiers of local government as important, and the attendance of principal authority councillors at parish council meetings seemed to be both widespread and valued.

There were differences of opinion as to the effectiveness of the relationship between the tiers, and it is likely that it varies considerably from place to place. Many parish councillors complained that principal authorities did not listen to their views, particularly with relation to planning applications. Conversely, two principal authority councillors mentioned a reluctance of parish councils to work with them. The most common situation seems to be that ward councillors from both county and district have good relationships with the parish councils within their wards, but are felt to have little ability to influence their own councils.

Connections between neighbouring parish councils were also seen as important, although one councillor described them as 'a waste of time'. Two respondents saw the way forward as merging or grouping parish councils in response to the need for qualified clerks.

A number of principal authorities have innovative schemes for supporting and making links with parish and town councils. Some of these centre on involving parish councillors on area boards or committees, others on supporting individual councillors in their interactions with parish councils and yet others on the appointment of officers to support and develop parish councils. Some examples are given in Box 2. Additionally, relations between local government tiers can be formalised by charters, as has been done in Cumbria amongst other places

Reference was made to formal partnerships, such as Local Strategic Partnerships, and although some respondents found them useful, others, especially parish

councillors, saw them as based in neighbouring towns and not being very relevant to the villages.

Box 2: Some good examples of making links between parishes and principal authorities

‘Shropshire County Council has begun to pilot an area committee approach which will encourage greater local scrutiny of decisions and offer a choice of budget usage from a devolved allocation. This approach will embrace Town and Parish Councillors as equal partners to County Councillors.’

(Shropshire County Council)

‘Recognising the importance of Members working between levels of local government the County Council has appointed District Partnership Officers (DPOs) to support Members at a locality level.’

(Staffordshire County Council)

‘The Isle of Wight County Council has created a Parish Community Development Team to help build the capacity of the local council sector and increase take-up of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme.’

(Woods and Gardner)

2.3 Making connections: the networking role of local councillors

It was noticeable that parish councillors appeared to see themselves as representatives and advocates rather than as actors in their own right. When asked how they ‘help their local communities have a say and influence over local decisions’ the most common answer concerned contacts with principal authority councillors and MPs. Influence over planning decisions was also a common concern. There were also a few respondents who felt that they had no influence. In spite of the calls for more powers for parish councils, there was little reference to parish councils as actors in their own right. Principal authorities seemed to value parish councillors’ knowledge of their local communities.

Parish councils have specific roles at the very local level in identifying local pockets of deprivations; the ‘pester power’ they can exert on public authorities; and the power to connect local people with services (welcome packs are one practical way of achieving this). They are also able to join forces and, through their representative bodies, can raise issues nationally.

(Chester City Council)

Many councillors saw part of their role in terms of some form of networking, although the type of networking varied between different tiers of local government. Many parish councillors saw themselves and their council as a link between local communities and decision-makers, with two parish councillors describing themselves as ‘the voice of the community’. They were also seen this way by others:

‘The most important role of local Councillors is to link service providers and decision makers with the people who make up local communities ...’

(North West Rural Affairs Forum)

Typically, parish councils communicated with district councils principally over planning applications and with county councils over highways issues. There was a considerable amount of dissatisfaction amongst parish councillors with the response of principal authorities to their views, particularly with regard to planning applications.

Parish councillors also networked within their communities in a variety of ways. Most of these were informal and resulted from councillors' membership of local clubs, societies and churches as well as everyday contacts with friends, acquaintances and neighbours. Some parish councillors also belonged to larger-scale partnerships, but were thought by one respondent to be lacking the skills to be effective in this role. Initiatives such as Local Strategic Partnerships were thought by some to have limited relevance to rural areas as they tended to be in and to concentrate on nearby towns.

Principal authority councillors were seen to have a number of networking roles both within and outside their wards. Firstly, they were seen as representing their electors on their councils, although it was thought by some that this role was sometimes impeded by party politics, as party loyalties took precedence over the representative role. Additionally, in an authority dominated by one political party, it can be difficult for a councillor from another party to influence policy. Similarly, a cabinet system may make it harder for councillors who are not in the cabinet to be heard.

Secondly, they could act as a conduit for funds and as a source of advice for local communities about funding. Thirdly, it was suggested that principal authority councillors should be encouraging links between the parishes in their ward. And fourthly, they can network outside the boundaries of the local authority, making links with other authorities and bodies. Although much networking is a matter for individual councillors, it can be facilitated by principal authorities.

Communications can be greatly aided by individuals who are councillors at more than one level. However, several respondents expressed reservations about this practice and the code of conduct makes it difficult for councillors to function properly at both parish and district level (Woods and Gardner).

Box 3: Examples of Councillors' Networking Role

'In the West Devon Borough Council area in Devon we have established 3 locality Link Committees comprising elected members from that area (County Division, District Ward and a representative from each town and parish council in that area).'
(Devon County Council)

'Another method utilised by rural councillors (and perhaps urban ones too) to ensure that communities are confident that County Council officers understand the local issue and environment, is to invite the relevant officers out to a local meeting to explain their perspective and to listen to the community's perspectives. Joint meetings such as these are very informative and assist more rapid resolution of concerns.'
(North Yorkshire County Council)

2.4 Power and Resources: barriers to effective working for existing councillors

When councillors were asked for the most significant barriers or constraints to their leadership role, lack of powers was the most frequent answer, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Barriers To Councillors' Leadership Role

Barriers to Councillors' Leadership Role	Number of Responses
Limited powers	42
Lack of resources (especially money)	31
Red tape/bureaucracy	16
Lack of time	14

Of those concerned with lack of powers, several specifically mentioned planning powers, and it seems that parish councillors find it very frustrating when their comments on planning applications are not taken on board by the planning authority. In addition, a few respondents specifically mentioned the need for more influence over service delivery and principal local authority spending, and one respondent wanted parish councils to have power to allocate affordable housing in their parishes.

However, a minority of respondents felt that there were no barriers to rural councillors performing an effective community leadership role.

'There is nothing to stop them provided they have the will and determination.'

The question of the will and determination of councillors will be dealt with in section 2.6.

In addition, there were a small number of respondents who were ambivalent about increased powers, responsibilities and budgets.

'A change of role would involve adopting some areas of responsibility, which could make councillors more distant from parishioners' (parish councillor)

It was also felt by some that increased powers would bring increased bureaucracy and deter people from becoming councillors.

Lack of resources is closely linked to the reluctance of many parish councils to increase their precept, as identified by Derounian and Skinner and others.

'Raising a precept is a major issue for many parishes; many consider it an achievement that they haven't raised a precept for 25 years!'

(North Yorkshire county Council)

Other factors are parish councils' lack of access to many streams of community and voluntary sector funding (Derounian and Skinner), legal constraints on parish council spending and a reluctance to spend under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 (Woods and Gardner).

Red tape and bureaucracy was also seen as a major constraint and was seen as a deterrent to people becoming (and remaining) councillors. There were frequent assertions that councillors were volunteers and busy people. Lack of councillor time was cited as a barrier to councillor training as well as to leadership. One respondent referred to the problems arising from not being available during working hours.

Box 4 gives some examples of ways that barriers can be overcome.

Box 4: Overcoming Barriers

‘The Community Council of Northumberland has organised “meet the funder” sessions, where those considering projects can meet those who might be prepared to fund such ventures.’

(ex-parish councillor)

‘Chester City Council currently provides a facility for parish councils to obtain a grant to employ and manage a local street cleaner to give a service above the standard for rural areas. This is welcomed and used by a number of parishes and there is a demand for this to be extended.’

(Chester CC)

2.5 Encouraging New Councillors: ‘representativeness’, red tape and the code of conduct

There were a number of complaints about the quality of local councils and councillors, with one respondent describing his parish council as doing ‘a lot of damage’. This was linked to the difficulty of persuading people to stand as councillors, especially at parish level, and also to the fact that councillors did not usually reflect the diversity of their communities. These issues will be considered in this section.

A number of comments referred to the characteristics of parish and town councillors themselves, such as their inexperience, lack of time, lack of training, lack of understanding of their role, powers and duties, lack of will and determination, ‘small-mindedness’ and reluctance ‘to do anything outside the boundary of the parish’. It was thought that councillors should be:

- Accountable
- Knowledgeable
- Representative
- More professional in outlook
- Skilled
- More inclusive
- Initiating and less resistant to change

Whilst most councillors see themselves as representing the interests of their communities, other respondents have reservations about their ‘representativeness’ (the extent to which councillors reflect their communities in terms of gender, age, socio-economic background and other factors). Derounian and Skinner refer to ‘the issue of lack of representativeness that includes poor diversity amongst councillors; tending to be male, ‘straight’, white, middle class and older’. In particular, there appeared to be a shortage of young, enthusiastic councillors. This was linked to the time commitment, making it difficult for people with full-time jobs to be effective councillors. LGIU point out that only 35% of councillors are also employees.

‘The time demands for a modern councillor coupled with the lack of reasonable remuneration means that it is often only an option for retired people and therefore there is a lack of young councillors. The situation is worse for parish

councils where many parishes do not attract enough nominations to hold elections and are kept going by a dedicated old guard that is not replenished.'
(Tynedale Council)

Another factor discouraging representativeness is the reluctance of parish councils to hold elections. This may be because it gives more control over the composition of the council or may be because of the cost of holding a contested election.

'At present, many councils, particularly smaller councils in more rural areas, actively prefer to co-opt rather than elect new members, in order to have influence over the composition of the council. The potential cost of a contested election often discourages smaller councils with relatively low financial resources from actively seeking to attract candidates for election. The extent to which council elections are advertised varies considerably, and a significant number of councils do no more than the legal minimum. The practice of seeking co-option rather than election tends to reinforce the social and demographic imbalance of parish councils, with co-opted members often drawn from the social networks of existing councillors.'

(Woods and Gardner)

As Woods and Gardner point out 'the intentions of government to 'encourage...the co-option of people, by virtue of their role in the community, onto parish councils', as incorporated as clause 55 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, is likely to be counterproductive, as those co-opted are likely to reflect the characteristics of existing councillors rather than those of the community as a whole.

Not only was there a lack of diversity amongst councillors, some parish councils did not have enough councillors to fill all available places. From 1998 to 2000, there were fewer candidates than seats in 36.2% of parish, town and (Welsh) community council elections and a further 31.8% were uncontested as the number of candidates was equal to the number of seats (Woods and Garner).

A number of factors that deterred people from becoming councillors were mentioned. They included bureaucracy and slow speed of local government working, a reluctance to disclose personal details under the code of conduct and the time commitment required. It was also suggested that there is a high turnover of councillors because new members are discouraged by the bureaucratic way of working and decide not to serve a second term.

As well as being a deterrent to councillors the code of conduct was thought to be inappropriate to small parish councils. The latter was partly because the sums of money and the amount of influence are smaller but also because there are issues in small parishes in which almost all councillors will have an interest, making it impossible for the council to form a position.

It was also pointed out that a lack of public recognition and appreciation was dispiriting for some councillors. In addition, there are other structural factors that inhibit and discourage councillors. For example, some principal authority councillors feel disempowered by the cabinet system of local government. The centralisation of strategic planning from local authorities to the regional level has also made local councillors feel more powerless. Decentralisation of decision-making, not just service delivery, would be likely to empower councillors at both principal authority and parish level. However, there is some doubt about the capacity and desire of some parish

councils to cope with additional powers, reinforcing the need for the recruitment of enthusiastic parish councillors and for the provision of training to encourage them to use their powers to the full.

There is, therefore, an obvious need to encourage more people to become councillors. Whilst political parties encourage members to stand for election, most parish councils seemed to pride themselves on being non-political in a party sense. Parish plans and other community initiatives may provide a stepping-stone to local political involvement but there remains a need for a campaign to improve the image of local government and to encourage participation. This is linked to a need to educate the public about the functions and mechanisms of local government, which will be considered in the next section.

Some principal authorities have made efforts to empower their councillors, as described in Box 5.

Box 5: Empowering councillors

'South Somerset District Council has a Planning Scheme of Delegation that empowers locally elected representatives to make decisions on small-scale applications, with the ward member playing a pivotal role in applications where there is a conflict between the planning officer's recommendation and local opinion.'

(South Somerset District Council)

Staffordshire County Council has instigated personal development plans (PDPs) for councillors and PDPs have been completed by all 62 members. Councillors are also provided with computers and an intranet site has been set up to assist them to share good practice.

(Staffordshire County Council)

2.6 Training councillors and clerks and educating the public

As well as public education, the training of both councillors and clerks was an issue for many respondents. This section will deal with all three issues.

A number of councillors complained of public apathy and lack of interest, although others had had good participation rates in exercises such as local plans. Others pointed out that many people did not understand the powers and responsibilities of parish councils or the way that responsibility is allocated between the tiers of local government. It seems that a public education campaign is needed in tandem with attempts to encourage more people to become councillors.

Training for councillors was also a matter of concern, with more than twenty councillors saying that more was needed, although most respondents were not specific about the type of training that they would find most useful. However, from those few who were more specific it appears parish councillors are interested in training in financial matters and training that clarifies their own position and powers particularly in relation to the code of conduct. In addition, a county council response mentioned the need for training for leadership skills and another submission highlighted the need for improving [principal authority] members' skills generally. It was also pointed out that training needs to be at evenings or weekends and there

was one request for it to be on site. However, a number of respondents thought that lack of time deterred councillors from taking up training opportunities.

'Training in Norfolk is good but many councillors are working and find it difficult to juggle commitments.' (parish council clerk)

It is likely that many councillors, especially those that have been in place for a long time, do not recognise their own need for training and it was also suggested that training schemes may not reach beyond those already active.

'The capacity of councillors to represent their local communities effectively can be strengthened by training and networking. Since 2001, the National Training Strategy has invested significantly in the development of training infrastructure and the creation of resource packs for trainers (chairmanship and core skills) for example. This has gone some way to improve skills, knowledge and understanding among councillors but there is concern that this investment has not yet reached far beyond those who are already active.'
(Derounian and Skinner)

In addition, one respondent was concerned that too much training would make all councillors the same.

The problems that part-time parish clerks have in coping with new initiatives and requirements was also a concern.

'Government is [...] demanding that parish activities be managed using increasingly complex administrative procedures. Current legislation requires small Parish Councils to adopt the same prescriptive administrative and financial measures as apply to large municipal bodies.'
(parish council clerk)

The most commonly suggested solution was that there should be fewer initiatives and less 'red tape'. However, various ways of sharing expertise amongst small parishes were suggested.

'Perhaps we could develop the more professional clerk to service a number of smaller councils.'
(county councillor)

The idea of 'circuit clerks' providing technical advice and support to local teams of clerks could provide a solution.
(Chester City Council)

It was also suggested that there should be a way of accrediting the past experience of clerks. However, this would have to be combined with some proof of knowledge of current initiatives.

There are various ways in which principal authorities, particularly district councils, can provide technical, legal and accounting support to parish councils. This has been done where the power to decide on minor planning applications has been devolved to parish councils and planning officers have been delegated to support them.

Box 6: Training and Education

'It is vital that Members have effective training and development to enable them to perform an effective local community leadership role. The Leader of the Council champions Member development to ensure that all Members can fulfil their community leadership role. We also have a cross party Member Services Support Panel (MSSP) and a programme of training and development for councillors which has led to proven improvements in their development. A high-level Member Development Strategy guides support for Members.'

(Staffordshire County Council)

'SSDC has invested in significant training and development for its members, partners and the community through *Interact* facilitation training for over 40 community focussed staff, developing its own capacity building course called *Moving Parishes Forward* covering issues like consensus building and consultation techniques and the tailor-made *Management Development Programme* for officers and portfolio (and potential portfolio) members.'

(South Somerset District Council)

2.7 The Way Forward: the White Paper and other suggestions

A number of relevant White Paper proposals received support, although there was also opposition to most of them. In fact it is likely that the opposition to specific proposals was understated as respondents were asked which proposals would benefit communities most. There was also some general opposition to any changes or new measures, with some councillors thinking that they already had enough powers and others that changes would inevitably bring more bureaucracy and more work.

Of the White Paper measures mentioned in the CRC's 'call for evidence', the most popular, with 40 supporters, was the encouragement of individual budgets for principal authority councillors to solve local problems. This is already happening in several places, as can be seen from Box 7. There were a few respondents who opposed the measure, and one who supported with the proviso that it should not be a substitute for local authority action. Many parish councillors were also keen to have budgets to spend on their local community, although there may be some misunderstanding about the White Paper proposals, which simply encourage councils to give budgets to their own councillors. There is however a separate provision encouraging principal authorities to delegate service provision and corresponding budgets to parish and town councils.

Of the other White Paper proposals flagged up in the CRC's 'call for evidence', the Community Call for Action was supported by twenty-two respondents, although again there may have been some misunderstanding about the proposals. Whilst the central role of the principal authority ward councillor to the process is likely to empower those councillors, it is less likely to have a beneficial effect for parish councillors. Additionally, one respondent expressed worry that councillors might be put in a difficult position:

'Questions were raised around what to do with the answer, e.g. how do we deal with lobby groups that will not accept a decision or the reasoning for a decision? Some guidance on escalation of issues would be useful.'
(Cornwall County Council)

Giving a power of well being for Quality Parish Councils was also quite popular, with fifteen supporters, although it was opposed by five respondents. This may provide a welcome incentive to councils to meet the requirements for Quality Status but in the short term will only benefit the 3% of councils that are already Quality Parish Councils. There were a number of comments on the quality council initiative itself. In general, it was felt to be unsuitable for small parish councils, with the requirement for a trained clerk being the major barrier. As mentioned in the previous section, there are ways around this problem that might be encouraged, although there may be some resistance.

'Quality Parish Status – this can be a difficulty for smaller parishes. In North Yorkshire some are very small. Grouping parishes together could be a solution but there is a feeling that they don't want to work together in many cases. [...] The power of wellbeing does have the potential for positive change if people wish to engage with it.'
(North Yorkshire County Council)

Additionally, there was considerable support for councillor training, as discussed in Section 2.6 and for revisions to and simplification of the code of conduct, which was thought by many to be too onerous for small parish councils. It was also suggested that non-councillors who participate in Community Area Boards should be included in the Code of Conduct. There was also some support for the delegation of some service delivery to parish councils and the strengthening of scrutiny powers.

There were mixed views about the move to unitary authorities. One respondent welcomed it as an opportunity for parish as well as county councils, whilst other were less enthusiastic:

'North Yorkshire County Council's bid for unitary status was viewed as being one opportunity for improving interaction and engagement at a local level. . The unitary proposal includes a strengthened role for parish councils, community forums at a local level (like mini-LSPs) to engage all local groups and organisations, as well as a neighbourhood management model that would see improved access to senior officers for local problem solving.'
(North Yorkshire County Council)

'I understand that the wards would be hugely enlarged and the number of councillors reduced. The wards are about the right size at the moment, but if they became larger, then one person would be quite unable to cope and their role would, in consequence, be weakened.'
(principal authority councillor)

Table 4 summarises the response to selected White Paper proposals.

Proposal	Points in favour	Points against
Individual budgets for PA councillors	Working successfully in an number of places. Allows small problems to be solved quickly and easily	Does not apply to parish and town councillors Should not be a substitute for council action
Community Call for Action	Allows issues to be brought to the attention of the authorities Strengthens the role of ward councillors	Relies on co-operation of councillors May put councillors in a difficult position
Power of well-being for Quality Councils	Allows Quality Councils to meet local needs outside the constraints of Section 137. Provides an incentive to Quality status.	Many smaller councils consider Quality status to be unobtainable and inappropriate for themselves.
Councillor training	Can increase understanding, skills and capabilities of councillors	Councillors will only take advantage if they have the motivation to do so and if the sessions are convenient and affordable.
Revisions to the code of conduct	Feeling that it should be simplified and made less onerous for small councils.	
Delegation of service delivery to parish level	Would be welcomed by some councils	Other councils do not want increased responsibilities

Box 7: White Paper related initiatives

‘North Yorkshire County Council’s area committees (not individual councillors) are allocated a small budget with which they can carry out small-scale local projects and this is greatly valued. Each area committee manages its budget in a different way with some devolving part of its allocation to members for their use with their local communities.’
 (North Yorkshire County Council)

‘Councillor [...] attends the monthly parish council meetings in his Division, reporting on what is happening “at County Hall” and takes back local input, reporting issues into various county services as and when necessary. He also discusses with his parishes the best way to spend his local enabling budget.’
 (Devon County Council)

Most suggestions for improvements that were not directly related to the White Paper centred on increasing the power, influence and resources of parish councils, although there was also some opposition to this as detailed in Section 2.4. Planning powers were particularly popular, including pro-active planning powers. However, there were also suggestions regarding more power over service delivery and the spending of principal authorities, and for lower tiers of government to be able to call higher tiers to account. Some respondents simply wanted parish councillors to be listened to, and it was suggested that they should have a right to address meetings of

the principal authority. Increased power for local authorities in general was also suggested and the movement of powers to the regional level was opposed. The merging or grouping of parish councils was also suggested.

However, at least seven respondents felt that councils had all the power they needed and change was not necessary.

Increased use of IT was seen as another way forward (six responses), although it was pointed out that it should not replace face-to-face contact. There were a number of suggestions for increasing the quality of councillors and their ability to do their job, including having full-time councillors, paying them and providing a career path (five responses). In addition were requests for reduced bureaucracy and less government interference, changes to the cabinet system, better relations between the tiers of local government, more recognition by the public of councillors' achievements and better public understanding of local government by the public, especially by young people.

There were a large number of other suggestions for future changes, each mentioned by only one or two respondents, as listed below:

- More use of area committees
- Fewer councillors
- Increased involvement, responsibility and autonomy
- Mobile offices
- A public information point in each parish
- Better links between councillors and the community eg through Community Action Plans
- Innovative ways of communication between councillors and communities
- Active, engaged communities
- Strong leadership
- More power to individual councillors
- An "accessible and up-to-date publication and net resource of duties and powers and best practice techniques" for parish and town councillors
- More youth democracy
- Restore business rates to parishes
- Parish councils to be more inclusive and open to new members
- Sharing of good practice between parish and town councils
- A mechanism to bring parishes together
- Parish conferences organised by District Councils
- Local authorities to take on more responsibility for parishes
- "Seamless" teams
- Charter agreements between different levels of local government
- Abolish QUANGOs
- Stronger involvement in partnerships
- "Clear but flexible role definition" for councillors to distinguish between tiers
- Clear role for ward councillors to represent their residents
- More communication and interaction between the tiers of local government
- Controls on individuals who are councillors at more than one level
- The appointment of councillors as "champions" of local rural communities
- A reduced role for party politics
- Specific portfolios, training and mentoring and performance monitoring for councillors
- Greater access for councillors to the "upper echelons" of local government

- Principal authorities should have ring-fenced funding for rural needs
- Councillors to have influence over national policy-making
- Central government more in touch with rural affairs
- Government should listen to local authorities
- Less government interference

3 Key findings by Hypothesis

To provide another way of analysing the survey evidence, it may be helpful to relate the preliminary findings to the five draft hypotheses produced by CRC. These hypotheses were set out in an internal CRC briefing paper and take a provocatively critical view. They will be addressed in turn.

3.1 Hypothesis 1: 'Rural councillors fail to make full use of the existing powers available to them'

We have seen that rural councillors tend to see their role in terms of networking – bringing local concerns to the attention of those who have power to act, putting local actors in touch with funding sources etc - rather than acting or making policy decisions in their own right. Whilst, there are exceptions to this, especially where principal authority councillors have delegated budgets to spend locally or where a parish council is active and involved, rural councillors seem, in general, not to feel empowered to directly influence events. This could indicate either a lack of power or a perception of lack of power. In the case of principal authority councillors, what powers they have can only be exercised through their councils.

With regard to parish councils, a large number of respondents wanted more powers and resources. In particular, there was a demand for more powers over planning. Parish councils feel very frustrated when their comments appear to be ignored by the planning authority. However, this may be partly due to a lack of knowledge of the planning system and the factors that have to be taken into account when making planning decisions. There was a minority view that councils already had enough powers but did not adequately use them. Significantly, there were also a considerable number of parish councillors who did not want more powers or responsibilities, as they were perceived to increase bureaucracy and red tape and make more work for councillors and clerks.

There was also some specific criticism of the lack of knowledge and experience of councillors and it would therefore seem quite possible that they do not fully understand their own powers. This problem is likely to be exacerbated by a lack of trained clerks, as well as reflecting the reluctance of some councillors to undergo training. As Woods and Gardner point out, there is also a reluctance to use the powers provided under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 to spend up to a prescribed amount per elector on the good of their communities, outside of their specific powers. This reluctance is likely to stem from a combination of lack of understanding and fear of subverting the rules. A power of wellbeing, as proposed for Quality Councils, would remove that fear and make it easier for councils to operate.

Reluctance to precept, as identified by Derounian and Skinner also discourages councils from using their powers to the full as the exercise of powers almost always costs money. As well as a lack of councillors' time, a lack of officer time is also likely

to be a factor, with reluctance to precept leading to reluctance to increase clerks' hours or employ new staff.

A number of respondents also complained about a lack of initiative and willingness to try new ideas amongst their fellow councillors. However, whilst parish councils are perceived to have fewer powers than they do have, there is often little interest in their activities and few people wishing to become councillors. Conversely, when electors over-estimate the powers of parish councillors, they may blame them for things that are outside their control, which can be dispiriting for councillors. There is a need, therefore, to educate of the public as well as training councillors and clerks.

It seems then that where councillors are not using their powers to the full, there is a need for both training and motivation and, possibly, for attracting more dynamic councillors. Training should be available to all councillors at convenient times and at reasonable cost. Parish clerks also need to be trained and motivated and there may be scope for parishes to share a trained clerk. In the case of principal authority councillors, there is a role for the local authority in providing training and motivation, with some authorities, such as Staffordshire County Council, having apparently done this very successfully. It is likely that Principal Authority support, such as that provided in South Somerset, can also encourage parish councils to make better use of their powers.

3.2 Hypothesis 2: 'The relationship between rural councillors and other forms of devolved governance and community influence is ineffective.'

There seems to be a significant variation in relations between councillors and other initiatives. Concerns that were raised centred on two points. Firstly, two respondents referred to the dissipation of community efforts on a number of initiatives and the consequent dissatisfaction with the limited results. Secondly, one respondent referred to the lack of understanding of where responsibilities lie between parish and town councils and other initiatives.

Thus, it seems that elected representatives can feel threatened by community governance initiatives. Indeed, as these initiatives often rely on people volunteering their views and their time, they may be less representative of the diversity of electors than are the local councils, who at least have a duty to represent all views. One respondent saw the council as a representative of the views of those who did not take part.

It was also pointed out that the code of conduct can raise problems for councillors who are members of other organisations as they need to declare an interest and cannot take part in council discussions pertaining to that organisation.

On the other hand, parish plans and similar initiatives were cited by councillors as effective ways of assessing the views of local communities and many councillors claimed involvement with a variety of groups within their communities, although some of these are likely to have been clubs and societies.

Woods and Gardner refer to two towns in the west of England, studied in previous research:

In one case members of the town council as individuals have taken a leading role in building the regeneration partnership; in the other, fractious relations

have developed between certain activists in regeneration initiatives on the one side, and town councillors and the local county councillor on the other (Woods et al., 2006). Whilst in both cases the regeneration initiatives have been largely successful in achieving their specific aims, the former has been clearly more successful in empowering the community to act than the latter.
(Woods and Gardner)

Councillors' involvement in larger scale partnerships, such as Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), also appears to vary from place to place, with only a small number citing them as an important relationship. Partnerships such as LSPs tend to be based in towns and, although they are intended to cover surrounding villages, some parish councillors felt that they concentrate on the towns and are not very relevant to the needs of small rural villages. This lack of involvement is likely to be exacerbated by lack of representation of the parish council on the partnership, as many partnerships cover too many parishes to include representatives of them all.

The relationship between rural councillors and other forms of local governance appears to be very variable. It is likely that it works best where councillors are involved but not necessarily dominant. For example, some parish plans were instigated by parish councils who then took a back seat during the preparation of the plan and adopted it when it was finished. Whether this can be done with larger scale initiatives and partnerships is less certain. If councils were to be given a stronger role and perhaps access to funding to implement community plans, it might not only empower existing councillors but also encourage more people to become councillors

3.3 Hypothesis 3: 'Rural councillors do not represent the communities they are elected to.'

There are two aspects to this hypothesis. Firstly, there is the 'representativeness' of the councillors i.e. the extent to which they reflect the composition and diversity of their communities in terms of age, social class, ethnic background, gender and other variables. Secondly, there is the matter of how effectively they perform the act of representation. Whilst the two are separate factors it is less likely, but not impossible, that a council that is not representative of its community will represent it well.

The representativeness of councillors has been discussed in Section 2.5 above. To summarise, councillors tend to be 'male, 'straight', white, middle class and older' (Derounian and Skinner). In rapidly changing rural areas, there is also a question of whether councillors represent both incomers and the established community. One parish councillor said that he got other people to propose his ideas so that they came from 'old village people', implying that in this community the views of established residents were valued above those of incomers. In other communities, the reverse may be true.

In terms of the act of representation, most councillors who responded to this consultation saw themselves as representatives of their community, with one councillor going so far as to say, regarding his or her role: 'it's representation not leadership'. However, in a study of 120 parish councillors in four areas of southern England, Woods and Gardner found that 'only 18% said that across all their community activities, they were most actively involved in representing the interests of the community' (Woods and Gardner).

Of course, the extent to which councillors actually do represent the interests of their community will not necessarily accord with their perceptions and it seems likely that

personal interests will play a part as well as political and other loyalties. Whilst most parish councillors claimed to be non-political this was not generally seen as being the case with principal authority councillors and it was alleged (by several parish council respondents) that party politics prevented ward councillors from effectively representing their electors on the principal authority.

In order to encourage 'representativeness', it is necessary to encourage a wider variety of councillors from different sections of the community. This would include more people of working age and a better gender balance, as well as representatives of different social and ethnic groups. This is more likely to be achieved by election than by co-option and will require a greater number as well as variety of individuals to come forward. For councillors to better represent the interests of their community they need to have good communication with that community and to know how to use their power and influence to the full. A power of wellbeing for parish councils and a delegated budget for principal authority councillors would also help them to meet the needs of their community and might also encourage others to become councillors.

3.4 Hypothesis 4: 'The working between different tiers of councillors is unproductive'

As we saw in Section 2.2, relations between the different tiers of local government were seen as very important and overwhelmingly the most important relationship outside of the immediate community. There were differing views on how well the tiers work together and the likelihood is that it varies from place to place.

However, the most common response was that local ward councillors listened to and worked well with parish councils but that they had little influence in their own councils. Attendance of principal authority councillors at parish council meetings was particularly valued. Several respondents blamed the lack of influence of ward councillors on the dominant role of party politics within principal authorities, where policy decisions are made by political groups. The cabinet system of local government was also thought to make it harder for individual councillors to operate effectively. Separately from the role of the individual ward councillor, there were a number of complaints about principal authorities not listening to parish councils. Many of these complaints seemed to involve planning applications, and it would seem likely that some of them may be due to a lack of knowledge of planning law by parish councils. Conversely, a few principal authority councillors complained of parish council reluctance to work with them.

The attitude of principal authorities appears to be the most significant factor in relations between parish councils and other tiers. There were many good examples of initiatives by authorities such as South Somerset District Council, West Devon Borough Council and Isle of Wight County Council to communicate with and support parish councils. As shown in Box 2, Isle of Wight County Council has created a Parish Community Development Team 'to help build capacity of the local council sector and increase take-up of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme'. South Somerset District Council's Area Committees host Parish Workshops for representatives of parish councils to discuss subjects of mutual concern. West Devon Borough Council has established three locality link committees comprising ward councillors and representatives of each parish or town council. In Wiltshire, parish and town councillors are invited to dinner and a discussion in the County Council Chamber with the Leader and Cabinet of the County Council.

Dual-hatted (or triple-hatted) councillors, i.e. those individuals who are councillors at more than one level, can make a significant contribution to relations and information flows between the tiers, perhaps especially when they are parish councillors. However, the code of conduct is thought to make it difficult for councillors to operate effectively at more than one level. Additionally, the power these individuals hold can cause problems, and two respondents felt that there should be controls on individuals being councillors at more than one level.

There were several references to the lack of understanding by the public of the roles of the different local authorities. In particular, parish councillors were concerned that the public did not appreciate what they could and could not do. When the public expect parish councillors to deal with problems that are not within their powers, it can be frustrating for both councillors and the public. This points to a need for more public education. Simplification (and perhaps standardisation) of the system would also aid public understanding, although it might be undesirable for other reasons.

3.5 Hypothesis 5: 'The effectiveness of rural councillors at helping their communities influence local decisions is constrained by poor communication and information flows'

Communication is crucial to the effectiveness of local councillors in helping their communities influence local decisions. Firstly, they need to communicate with all sections of their communities to find out what their views and needs are; and, secondly, they need to communicate those views and needs to others. In each case, as one respondent pointed out, communication has to be two-way. There has to be a flow of information down from decision-makers to communities as well as up from communities to decision-makers, in order that local people should know what decisions are being considered.

A considerable number of ways in which parish and town councils communicate with and listen to local people were mentioned, with newsletters being the most popular. However, there was little reference to the success of this communication, other than as a reason not to undertake a particular form of communication because the public did not respond to it. For example, a councillor had stopped holding surgeries because they were so badly attended and there were references to the public not reading newsletters and not attending council meetings to bring up issues of concern.

There were several references to the general availability of parish councillors within their communities, and there is a danger that this is seen as a substitute for other more formal communication. Apart from informal communication, some councils seemed to achieve only the minimum legal standards of information provision such as advertising council meetings and publishing councillors' details, and it is likely that some did not even do that. One parish councillor said:

'Every year I have to remind the clerk to put up our contact details on the notice board – currently without phone numbers'

And with regard to communication and information flow, there are also variations with tier of councillor and size of community as well as whether a parish council has Quality Status. Woods and Gardner found that:

The use of formal mechanisms by parish and town councillors is more limited than by district and county councillors. Our survey of parish councils in 2006 suggested that on fewer than one in ten councils did any councillors hold regular surgeries with residents, although the practice is more commonplace on

larger councils and councils with Quality status [...]. More commonly, mechanisms such as newsletters and surveys are employed corporately by the parish or town council rather than by individual councillors. The publication of a regular newsletter is a requirement of councils in the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme, but is also practiced by almost half of non-accredited councils. Nine in ten Quality councils and three-quarters of non-accredited councils have also consulted their community through surveys or public meetings since 2000'.

In addition, the responses on this issue in particular may be biased by the nature of the respondents, most of whom were councillors. It would have been interesting to find out how members of the community view communication with their local councillors. However, part of the onus must be on community members to find out what their local councillors are doing and to seek to inform or influence them.

Councillors also need to communicate with decision-makers, who might be principal authorities, national government or other bodies. Here the onus may be on these decision-makers to listen and take into account what local councillors have to say, before balancing this against other needs and priorities. It seems that even within their own councils, ward councillors may find it difficult to be heard, especially if they are not a member of the ruling group or not in the cabinet. Parish councillors, unless they have useful contacts, may find it even harder to be heard. A general raising of the profile and perceived status of local councillors might help individual ward councillors and parish councils have more influence.

In addition, lateral communication, for example between parish councils or between neighbouring local authorities, can also be helpful in spreading good practice and working together on matters of common interest.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

There were a wide variety of responses to the consultation, ranging from individual councillors at parish and principal authority level to responses compiled from a number of different individuals. The responses also reflected the different experiences of rural councillors in their communities. Many of the responses were extremely thoughtful and insightful and all were interesting and helpful.

Looking at them in the round, the first impression is of the variety of experiences and views expressed, ranging from rather negative views of the situation to some very positive examples of good practice and ideas for the future. Many of the good practice examples demonstrate what principal authorities can do to aid both their own councillors and their constituent parish councils in taking a leadership role within their communities. There are also things that national government could do to simplify the system and make it easier for parish councils, especially the smaller ones, to operate.

As reflected in the policy recommendations below, the responses indicate a need for educating and empowering both local councillors, especially parish councillors, and community members. In particular, there appears to be a lack of knowledge of the powers that parish councils can use in the service of their communities, as well as a shortage of good enthusiastic councillors to make use of those powers. However, this

is not to say that all parish councils are underperforming or that they should not be given more powers, influence and resources.

Whilst the Quality Parish initiative has highlighted the potential of parish and town councils and encouraged some councils to take up the challenge to meet the criteria, the majority do not seem to have been affected. However, a power of well being for quality councils, as proposed in the White Paper, may well encourage more councils to achieve the Quality status.

Although it is difficult to accredit councils for performance that does not reach quality status, the responses to this consultation indicate a pressing need to improve the performance and the profile of small parish councils, many of whom consider quality status to be out of their reach. Whilst one possible solution might lie in parishes working together to share expertise, ideas and a trained clerk, councils may not want to do this.

In conclusion, it seems that there are a number of problems in empowering councillors to become leaders of their communities, to do with practicalities, education and motivation, which need to be tackled simultaneously by local authorities and by national government.

4.2 Recommendations

In our view, the following flow from the mass of evidence analysed and are worthy of close consideration.

- 1. The good practice initiated by principal authorities such as Staffordshire County Council and South Somerset District Council should be publicised and other principal authorities should be encouraged to introduce similar schemes adapted to their own circumstances.*

Justification: Co-operation between the different tiers of local government is highlighted by parish councillors as a very important relationship. The success of this relationship appears to be largely under the control of the principal authorities and, in particular, the ways in which they relate with and support parish councils. The responses include a number of examples of good and innovative practice, which could be more widely introduced.

- 2. The White Paper proposals for a power of well being for quality councils, for councillor training and for devolved budgets for principal authority councillors should be implemented and well publicised.*

Justification: There was considerable support for these proposals as having the potential to allow councils and councillors to operate more effectively and meet the needs of their communities.

- 3. There should be an incentive for Parish Councils to increase their precept, perhaps in the form of matched funding or other support from principal authorities or from central government.*

Justification: The responses showed a desire for more resources for parish councils. However, in many cases this was coupled with a reluctance to increase the precept, with the result that many small rural councils have low precepts but very little money to spend on anything other than running the council. Rather than spending time

applying for grants, they should be encouraged to use the precept to meet the needs of the local community.

- 4. There should be an incentive for small parish councils to improve their performance and democratic accountability that is perceived by them as less insurmountable than the Quality Council scheme. Such improvements could perhaps be seen as a step towards Quality status, but would need to be rewarded in their own right.*

Justification: Whilst Quality status can be seen as the minimum standard of performance that might be expected of a parish council, many small parishes consider it to be totally out of their reach and unsuitable for small councils, with the need for a trained clerk and elected councillors being the main stumbling blocks. If these councils are to improve their performance, they need a target that is seen as achievable and attracts a reward, such as increased powers and or resources.

- 5. The funding of parish council elections should come from principal authority or national budgets rather than from the parishes themselves. This would remove one of the deterrents to contested elections.*

Justification: At present the cost of holding contested elections to a parish council usually falls on that council. Consequently, councillors, especially those who do not wish to increase the precept, are deterred from encouraging an election and prefer to co-opt someone they know. Arguably, this results in less democratic and less representative councils and may be an added deterrent to seeking Quality status.

- 6. There should be a public education campaign on the role of the three tiers of local government in rural areas.*

Justification: Several respondents mentioned the lack of understanding amongst the public of the role and responsibilities of different tiers of councils and of councillors. This makes it difficult for the public to make their views known and may lead to councillors becoming dispirited when they are blamed for things over which they have no control. A better understanding might also lead to more people considering becoming councillors.

- 7. Where unitary authorities are introduced, wards should be kept as small as possible to enable ward councillors to remain in touch with their communities.*

Justification: Several principal authority councillors mentioned the difficulty of keeping in touch with electors in a ward that covers an extensive rural area. This is particularly a problem for county councillors and in sparsely populated areas where wards can be physically very large and public transport poor.

- 8. Employers should be encouraged to give employees time off in order to serve on local councils, including parish and town councils, and should encourage them to do so.*

Justification: Councils, particularly rural parish councils, appear to be dominated by the retired and those with time on their hands. A number of respondents commented that councils needed more working people, particularly people with business and financial skills. It was also pointed out that those who were councillors as well as having a full-time job did not have time for training and other activities and found it harder to network informally in the community.

Appendix 1: The Call for Evidence



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

Commission for Rural Communities' Inquiry: Strengthening the role of local councillors

Purpose of this inquiry

Rural England's population is represented by shire county, unitary and district councils, over 8,000 parish and town councils, plus a wide variety of local groups and partnerships.

We recognise the valuable work that locally elected representatives and voluntary partnerships undertake on behalf of the rural communities of England, but we also know that nearly half¹ of rural people do not feel involved in local decision making even though they would like their views to be heard, with only 25%² of rural people saying they would channel their views through their local councillor.

In October 2006, the Government published its White Paper, *Strong and prosperous communities*. This sets out measures to encourage more accountable and responsive local government, to benefit people wherever they live. A key element towards making these aspirations happen are the proposals to strengthen the role of locally elected councillors as democratic champions. The Government wants to see:

A clearly defined role for locally elected representatives to champion the interests of their communities;
Greater diversity of locally elected representatives, to make them more representative of their community; and
Capacity building and support for locally elected representatives to take on their enhanced role.

We agree that the role of local elected representatives should be strengthened. But we also know that there may be important challenges and barriers that stand in the way of councillors making sure that their communities can influence the decisions which affect them most, as well as new opportunities. Some of these challenges may be specific to rural areas with smaller communities and scattered settlement patterns.

Tell us what you think

¹ 46% of rural people do not believe that they can influence decisions. *Rural Insights Survey* CRC / IPSOS MORI, 2006

² *User satisfaction an local government service provision: a national survey* DCLG, 2006

In many rural areas, there can be several types of local councillors, at the parish, town, district, county or unitary authority level. In addition, councillors can represent communities on National Park Authorities, on Police and Fire authorities, and on a wide range of other important local bodies from school boards to Primary Care Trusts.

We are interested in the role these councillors play – what they do now, how they relate with others organisations and individuals, what role these councillors might play in the future, and how they can be supported and encouraged to continue to develop their role as community leaders.

Between now and mid May, we're asking people to answer the following questions to help us explore the challenges faced by locally elected representatives and to help us understand what the proposals in the White Paper might mean for rural people.

Thinking specifically about the role and activities of rural councillors, please can you answer the following questions, providing any examples and information to support your answers:

1. **What are the most important ways that rural councillors currently successfully help their local communities have a say and influence over local decisions?** *For example, by holding regular surgery meetings, issuing local newsletters, fixing meetings with the local MP, undertaking community plans, being part of other partnerships and groups etc.*

Please illustrate your answer with examples. What factors helped make this a success? *For example access to the right information, personal qualities of the individuals involved, membership of particular partnerships.*

2. **Which partnerships and relationships are most important for a rural councillor to be effective? Please explain your answer.** *For example, membership of Local Strategic Partnership, relationships with local community (e.g. church, WI, rural hubs, local development trusts etc), ways of working with the principal authority (district, unitary or county council).*

How effective are rural councillors in your area at networking? How visible and accessible are they to local people? How closely tied are they seen to be to party politics?

3. **What do you think are the most significant barriers or constraints that get in the way of rural councillors performing an effective local community leadership role?** *For example, lack of money, inadequate training provision, insufficient leadership from national, regional or county organisations, limited powers.*

What do you think needs to be done to overcome these barriers and constraints?
Who should be responsible for making these actions happen?

4. People influence the decisions that affect their area in many ways, not just through their local councillors. **What do you consider to be the other important ways that rural communities influence local decisions? In what circumstances would you choose to use these ways, rather than going through your local councillor?**

For example people may try to influence decisions through specific interest groups, a local trust, area forums. What makes these alternative ways to influence decisions effective?

5. **Please describe the role you would like to see rural councillors play in the future. What would you like rural councillors to do more or less of? Or do differently?**

What changes are needed to enable councillors to fulfil this role in the long term? Are new powers or mechanisms needed? What support and investment is needed? How would you make sure that change is secured for the long term?

6. The Local Government White Paper "Strong and prosperous communities" proposes a range of measures to strengthen the role of local councillors. These include a power of well-being for parishes with Quality Parish Council status, a Community Call for Action to demand answers to local questions, giving councillors small budgets to tackle local issues, and more training and revisions to the code of conduct for local councillors.

Which of the white paper proposals do you think has the potential to benefit rural communities most? Why? What will help make the implementation of these proposals effective?

What will happen to the views you submit?

The Commission for Rural Communities acts as the voice for rural people, businesses and communities, giving evidence based, objective advice to government and others, and monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

During spring 2007, we will be conducting a series of inquiry panel visits to examine and explore in greater depth the issues people tell us about.

Our inquiry panel will be chaired by Dr. Stuart Burgess (the Commission for Rural Communities' Chairman and Rural Advocate), supported by four of our Commissioners, Richard Burge, Alison McLean, Professor Mark Shucksmith and Professor Michael Winter. They will be advised by a group of experts drawn from different organisations. Details of the inquiry panel and the expert advisory group are set out in the document, *The Inquiry Panel Members and Expert Advisors*, which can also be viewed on our website www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk.

We will use all the information we gather to identify and promote a range of solutions to government and key organisations, to help locally elected councillors make full use

of existing powers, successfully adopt their new powers and responsibilities and help rural communities have more influence over local decision making.

How to submit your evidence

Please complete a reply form and send it to us, with your evidence, by 19 May 2007 or sooner, in one of four ways:

- **FREEPOST** Evidence: Commission for Rural Communities Inquiry, FREEPOST, Commission for Rural Communities
- **FAX** Evidence: Commission for Rural Communities Inquiry to 01242 584270
- **E-MAIL** Evidence: Commission for Rural Communities Inquiry to participationinquiry@ruralcommunities.gov.uk
- **ONLINE** at our website www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

We are also pleased to receive visual and audio material, for example photographs, recordings, film footage, to support your submission.

It is our intention to make all the evidence submitted to us publicly available on request when we publish our inquiry findings and recommendations. If you do not wish your information to be made available, you can indicate this on your reply form. All information submitted to us in personal capacity (for example views from a ward councillor, a member of a community), will be anonymised, unless you specifically tell us otherwise. All personal contact details will be removed from any evidence that is published before publication

If you publicise or publish your evidence yourself, please indicate that it was prepared for the CRC's Inquiry into strengthening the role of rural councillors.

We'd like to keep in touch with you and invite some people who submit written evidence to discuss their views and ideas with our inquiry panel. Please indicate on the reply form below if you're happy for us to keep your contact details on file.

Any questions?

If you have any questions or want any further information, please

e-mail: participationinquiry@ruralcommunities.gov.uk

or call: Lorna Joseph, Inquiries Administrator, tel: 01242 534087

**Commission for
Rural Communities**

Head Office

John Dower House Crescent Place
Cheltenham Glos. GL50 3RA

Telephone 01242 521381

Facsimile 01242 584270

London Office

20th Floor Portland House
Stag Place London SW1E 5RS

Telephone 0207 932 5800

Facsimile 0207 932 5811

Email info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk

www www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk