

**Strengthening the role of rural councillors:
An overview of information, policy and debate**

“The extent and character of the relationship which exists between the central departments and local authorities have been subjects of considerable controversy. There are those who have looked upon the control of the central departments as bureaucracy and desire complete autonomy. On the other side have been those who have distrusted local administration so much that they would have them superseded or controlled in every direction.”
(Clarke 1939 p154).

**Prepared for the Commission for Rural Communities
by Gordon Morris and Claire Nichols**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose

1.1 This overview was commissioned by the Commission for Rural Communities' (CRC) Participation Inquiry team in April 2007. It provides a context for analysis and some background information to help the work of the Inquiry Panel and the Expert Advisers' Group. The overview is one of a number of ways that the Inquiry Panel is gathering and collating information before reaching its conclusions and making recommendations.

1.2 The authors were asked to review existing academic literature, 'grey literature', and information from a wide range of other sources, and to highlight relevant themes. Inquiry team staff identified a number of specific elements for consideration as part of the review, including:

- the roles and responsibilities of rural councillors,
- the broader policy and governance frameworks in which councillors operate,
- their current support mechanisms, and
- ways in which their roles may be strengthened or hindered.

1.3 The underlying theme of the Inquiry's work is **"how rural councillors help their communities achieve greater involvement, influence and ownership of local decisions"**.

Approach

1.4 To prepare this review, the authors individually gathered information from various sources, including the British and university libraries, general web searches and material provided by the CRC. Information was also obtained from individuals, books, academic journals, the media, policy documents and information leaflets written by think tanks, practitioners, interest and lobby groups, government departments and opinion formers. The information was selected and collated, then presented according to a structure discussed and agreed with the CRC.

1.5 It should be noted that this overview is not a 'literature review' as such. It aims to provide a broad overview of the subject in terms of current research, policy and opinion, set within an historical context. Nor is it an attempt to deal with the theory of local government, for as Mackenzie (1961 p5) noted, albeit perhaps contentiously, *"There is no theory of local government."*

1.6 It was agreed with the CRC that the overview should be fully referenced, less than 12,000 words and supported by a detailed bibliography.

1.7 In sorting out the material and preparing this overview the authors have inevitably undertaken their own analysis. However, at no point do they attempt to draw their own conclusions about the material; nor do they suggest how the role of rural councillors might be strengthened.

1.8 Councillors operate in a complicated and changing environment. There is much written material and a diverse debate about the structures and roles of local government. Although little of this addresses the specific issue of *how the role of rural councillors might be strengthened*, the material does provide insights into the issues that the Inquiry's participants are likely to consider.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Although the authors have focussed primarily on material published since 2000, it is illuminating to note that much of the current debate would have been familiar to previous generations.

2.2 C S Orwin, for example, who was writing in the 1940s, asserted that, *“The attitude of the countryman to rural administration is one of almost complete detachment.”* (Orwin 1945 p74). He noted, however, that in villages with active organisations (such as a Women’s Institute), *“... a more constructive attitude is often to be found.”* (p75). Similarly, if a local concern, such as, *“... deficient transport services...”* raises local hackles, *“... public interest is assured.”* (p75). He also noted that a desire to keep down rates animated local people (p76). Orwin went on to cite as problems the holding of district and county council meetings during the working day (p77) and confusion about the sources, distribution, and control of finance (pp77-80).

2.3 There has also been much debate over the decades about the diminution of councillors’ powers. For example, in the 1940s, Orwin referred to *“... a tendency, recently, to reverse the principle of decentralization ...”* (p72) established by Local Acts in 1888 and 1894. In the 1970s, Keith-Lucas and Richards (1978) asserted that *“At no stage of English history has any government held a consistent and logical policy on the range and limits of municipal services.”* (p35). More recently, according to Helen Sullivan (2000), the tendency towards centralisation has continued under both Labour governments (1945-1951) and Conservative governments (1979-1997).

2.4 Sullivan (pp326-327) defines the challenges facing local government as follows:

- The diminution of power and latterly respect afforded to local government by central government and citizens, which effectively call into question the legitimacy of local government.
- The historically poor relationships that many local authorities have with their communities and the relationships that other agencies have with these communities, which call into question the basis of local government’s authority.
- Issues of accountability that arise from the operation of partnerships. Specifically, the role and function of local government in being itself accountable and in securing the accountability of others.

2.5 Recent debates concern how best to distribute power and responsibility, be it through David Miliband’s ‘double devolution’ *“... of power from the central government to local government and from local government to citizens and communities...”*¹ (Miliband 2006), or through, *“... the localisation of decision-making*

¹ For example, *“... to extend the power of well-being to all parish and town councils ...”* (DCLG 2006 p45), and to encourage, *“... parish and town councils to use their powers in relation to promoting energy saving measures ...”* (DCLG 2006a p51).

...” suggested by David Cameron (Richards 2007). Underlying these debates are concerns about disaffection with, and disengagement from, the political process (Hay 2007). From this it would seem that discussion is less about how to strengthen the role of councillors, than how to allocate power between the tiers of government and increase ‘citizen participation in decision making’.

2.6 Orwin was writing at a time when the debate was largely about the roles and responsibilities of each tier of government. Sullivan’s work was undertaken at a time when matters of **governance** as much as **government** predominated. The former debate has continued as the latter has evolved. The environment in which local government finds itself today is one in which the tensions associated with both are clear.

2.7 A stronger role for rural councillors implies a strengthening of their powers to create and implement policy and to raise and spend money on these policies. The reductions in power and authority and, consequently, local influence, resulting from the post-war centralising trend under all governments (Stevens 2006 pp107-109), lie at the heart of this debate. The timing of the debate is all the more appropriate, given discussions about, for example, the role of the voluntary and community sector (Vyas 2006), the implications for councillors of the Barker Report on the planning system (Barker 2006), Gordon Brown’s intention to create eco-towns (Brown 2007), and the recommendation of the Quirk Review Team relating to the ownership of public assets (Quirk 2007).

3. COUNCILS AND COUNCILLORS

3.1 This chapter describes each of the four categories of rural council. It also contains information about the number of these councils and the councillors who serve in them.

Categories

3.2 The four main categories of rural council in England are:

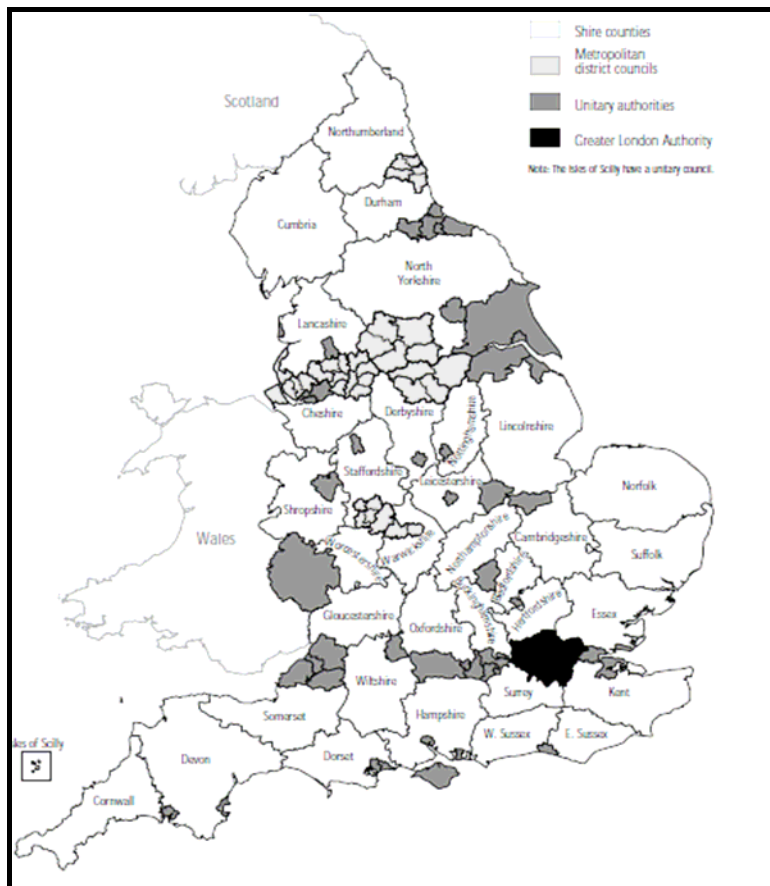
- unitary;
- shire county;
- shire district; and
- parish and town (both have the same powers, and both are known as parish councils²).

3.3 These categories are not, however, clear cut. There are rural areas within metropolitan authorities (that is, large urban areas such as Manchester), within Greater London (for example Bromley), and within unitary authorities (such as Bath and North East Somerset).

3.4 There are 238 shire district councils within the 34 shire county councils (ONS 2005 pp9-12). As Figure 1 shows, they cover the majority of England's land mass.

² This can be an area of confusion, in that parish councils – the most local tier of government – represent communities that vary in size from the smallest village to towns with relatively large populations (such as Weston-super-Mare) and with budgets to match. Irrespective of size, rural parish councils are the tier below unitary and district councils.

Figure 1: Local government areas of England (ONS 2005 p10)



3.5 In April 2003 there were 10,397 parishes in England (ONS 2005 p11), ranging in size from a few hundred to, “*Weston-super-Mare, with a population of almost 72,000.*” (Stevens 2006 p78). Parish councils are confined within local authority boundaries, but are not contiguous with electoral wards.

3.6 Not all parishes have a council. If there are fewer than 200 parishioners, or if the parishioners do not want a council, decisions can instead be taken at ‘parish meetings’. In some cases small parishes may come together to elect a joint council (ONS 2005 p11). According to NALC (CRC 2006) more than 150 new community, parish and town councils have been created since 1997³.

Numbers of councillors

3.7 It is difficult to be certain about the total number of councillors in each kind of authority. It is not possible, therefore, to determine the number of councillors who specifically, or mainly, serve rural areas. However, an estimate by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Employers’ Organisation for Local Government states that there were 19,657 councillors representing the shire counties

³ Community councils are the Welsh equivalent of English parish councils (http://www.nalc.gov.uk/About_NALC/What_is_a_parish_or_town_council/What_is_a_council.aspx).

and districts (ie including metropolitan and unitary authorities, but **excluding** parishes), in England in 2004 (EO 2005 p4).

3.8 According to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), there are, “... over 80,000 town, parish and community councillors throughout England and Wales ...” in some, “... 10,000 community, parish and town councils ...” (NALC 2007), with around 8,500 of these, served by some 70,000 councillors, in **England** alone (NALC 2006 p11). Definitive numbers are difficult to come by. For example, according to NALC figures in another publication, “*In all, there are over 100,000 community, parish, and town councillors throughout England and Wales.*” (CRC 2006).

Resources

3.9 With the exception of members of Executives, most councillors (ie including parish councillors) are unpaid, although they can receive an annual allowance and expenses in line with government guidance (DETR 2001).

4. HOW RURAL COUNCILLORS WORK

4.1 This chapter describes rural councillors' duties, roles and responsibilities, and gives examples of the work they do, both directly for their councils and as representatives of their councils on other authorities. A brief explanation is given of the freedoms they have and of the nature of the structures within which they work.

Their duties and roles

4.2 All councillors, irrespective of whether they represent the smallest parish, the largest district or shire county, or a city, *“are elected to represent a number of local residents in an area ...”* (Leicester City Council 2007). They work together to serve their community (NALC 2006 p12).

4.3 A councillor's job, according to The Good Councillor Guide, is, *“... to bring local issues to the attention of the council, and help it make decisions on behalf of the local community.”* (NALC 2006 p12).

4.4 This view is supported by Gardiner (2006 p2), who notes, *“...numerous studies demonstrate that the majority of councillors believe that their main role should be to represent their wards – acting as community leaders in their communities.”*

4.5 In addition to their primary duty to represent their constituents and their locality, councillors compete for a range of offices, usually within financial or power-related limits set by central government (Table 1).

Table 1: Range of offices held by councillors (Stevens 2006 p93)

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mayor and Deputy Mayor (in non-elected mayoral cities and boroughs)• Chair and Vice-Chair of Full Council (in elected mayor or county and district councils)• Chairs and Vice-Chairs of quasi-judicial regulatory committees (ie planning and licensing) (in district and unitary councils) and Overview and Scrutiny Committees• Places on the Council/Executive, Overview and Scrutiny Committees/Panels and regulatory committees• Other panels and sub-committees

The characteristics of their roles

4.6 If the roles of councillors featured in an IDeA publication about councillors are typical, many of their achievements stem from their ability to consult and enable, and to act as advocates, and catalysts for action (IDeA 2007).

4.7 A number of publications point to the role of parish councillors as ‘local champions’ (Simms, Oram, MacGillivray, and Drury 200? p47, ARHC 2006 p5, Steel, Jochum, Grieve and Cook 2006 p17). People look to their councillors – as elected representatives with status, connections and authority – to act for them. They act, in effect, as ‘bridges’ between communities and other agencies and authorities, carrying out representational functions similar to those of their unitary, county and district council non-executive colleagues (Gardiner 2006 p2, Rao 2006 p21).

How rural councillors perform their roles

4.8 There appears to be relatively little recent academic analysis about how councillors’ roles are performed. A study about Devon County Council (Cole 2002 p22) notes that although work was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, recent studies, “... *have considered the effectiveness of the new [political management] arrangements rather than evaluated the [management] reforms in the context of the role(s) of members ...*”. Cole refers to, “... *a substantial urban bias in the literature*” (p29), with only two studies about county councillors conducted between 1963 and 2002 (p29).

Unitary, county and district councillors’ responsibilities

4.9 District and county councils – and their councillors – have statutory responsibilities:

- County councils are wholly or partly responsible for large-scale services in their areas including education, strategic planning, transport, highways, social services, fire services, libraries and waste disposal.
- District or borough councils are responsible for more local matters including environmental health, housing, local planning applications, local taxation, waste collection and leisure.
- Broadly speaking, unitary authorities are responsible for the services previously provided by their predecessor county and district councils.

All three tiers have powers to provide facilities such as museums, art galleries and parks. The arrangements governing these depend on local agreement.

4.10 Police and fire services are run separately, although they do include local councillors on their governing bodies and their civilian employees are often employed by one of the nearby local councils. For example, although some shire areas have a police authority made up of local councillors, magistrates and independent members, police authorities and fire and rescue services may cover more than one county (ONS 2005 p9)⁴. Ambulance services, which were once, like the fire and police

⁴ For example, the Dorset Fire and Rescue Authority covers rural Dorset and the unitary boroughs of Bournemouth and Poole. www.dorsetfire.co.uk/topic.asp?TopicID=12 .

services, essentially locally-based and controlled, now have National Health Service Trust status and cover much larger geographical areas⁵.

4.11 Other services have been removed from local authority control over the years. Two examples are hospitals, which became part of the National Health Service in 1948, and further education colleges, which were ‘incorporated’ (ie given independent status) in 1993.

Parish councillors’ responsibilities

4.12 Parish councils have fewer responsibilities and greater freedom than county and district councils to choose what action to take (ONS 2005 p12). Parish councils represent community views and can provide very local services and facilities such as village halls, war memorials, cemeteries, leisure facilities and playgrounds. They maintain public footpaths and may also spend money on cultural projects, community transport initiatives and crime prevention equipment. In addition they must be notified of all planning applications and consulted on the making of certain by-laws.

4.13 Parish councillors operate the smallest unit of government and, as such, have long been understood to be the tier of government that is closest to its electorate, “... *able to give expression to the village mind ...*” (Martin 1955 p30), while suffering from a “... *lack of appetite for devolving substantial decision-making powers and resources to the community level.*” (Pearce and Ellwood 2002 p 50). Parish councillors represent more than 15 million people in England and can, according to NALC, “... *be identified as the nation’s single most influential grouping of grassroots opinion-formers.*” (NALC 2007).

4.14 The responsibilities of each tier of local government are summarised by type of council in Table 2, and by responsibility in Table 3. It should be noted that some responsibilities – such as fire and emergency services⁶ – are shared with other organisations. Similarly, some parish/town councils have, by negotiation, taken over some of the responsibilities of higher tier authorities (see ‘The impact of changing structures’, below).

⁵ For example, South Western Ambulance Service NHS Trust covers Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Somerset, and Dorset <http://www.was.co.uk> .

⁶ For example, see <http://www.bracknell.gov.uk/berkshire-integrated-emergency-structure-2006.pdf> for an explanation of the arrangements in Berkshire, a unitary authority.

Table 2: Summary of local government responsibilities (after BBC 2006)

<p>Unitary councils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social services • Education • Housing • Libraries • Transport (except London boroughs) • Planning applications and development • Leisure, recreation and the arts • Fire and emergency services • Environmental health • Highways • Waste collection • Revenue collection 	<p>County councils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social services • Education • Libraries • Transport (public and planning) • Leisure, recreation and the arts • Highways • Fire and emergency services • Refuse disposal <hr/> <p>District councils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing • Planning applications and development • Leisure, recreation and the arts • Environmental health • Waste collection • Revenue collection
<p style="text-align: center;">Parish and town councils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community centres • Allotments • Cemeteries and churchyards • Clocks • Commons, open spaces and playing fields • Street lighting • Litter • Parking places • Public lavatories • Road verges • Seats, shelters and signs 	

Table 3: Summary of local government responsibilities (after BBC 2006)

Responsibility	Unitary Councils	Shire Councils	County Councils	Shire District Councils	Parish Councils
Social services	•	•			
Education	•	•			
Housing	•			•	
Transport	•	•			
Car Parks	•			•	
Planning applications and development	•			•	
Leisure, recreation and the arts	•	•		•	
Environmental health	•			•	
Highways	•	•			
Fire & emergency services	•	•			
Refuse collection & disposal	•				
Refuse collection				•	
Refuse disposal		•			
Revenue collection	•			•	
Libraries	•	•			
Community centres					•
Allotments					•
Cemeteries and churchyards					•
Clocks					•
Commons, open spaces and playing fields					•
Street lighting					•
Litter					•
Parking places					•
Public lavatories				•	•
Road verges					•
Seats, shelters and signs					•

Councillors' freedoms and duties

4.15 The freedoms that councillors have in determining policy and its implementation vary between tiers. Councillors at district and county levels have statutory responsibilities (such as waste disposal at the county level, waste collection at district). These responsibilities both constrain (via duty, budget and inter-authority relationship limitations) and enable (via the powers delegated to the authority and its committee).

4.16 Parish/town councillors, on the other hand, are both constrained by their relatively small budgets and few responsibilities, and enabled by their, albeit often little-used, powers to raise money and spend it (James 2006 p16).

4.17 The duties of councillors are not legally defined. They can do a lot, or very little. Members of councils have a complex role and may act in a number of capacities: as committee member, constituency representative and party activist. Councillors have personal, individual and collective responsibilities for their council's activities.

The impact of changing structures

4.18 The Local Government Act 2000 led to a move away from the committee-based decision-taking that was the norm between 1930 and the mid-1970s (Snape 2004) to the adoption of one of three executive and backbench councillor models proposed by central government (DETR 1998 Chapter 3). The intention of this change was to increase the responsiveness of local authorities to their communities (DETR 1998 Ch.3, DCLG 2006 p26).

4.19 However, Cole (2002 p44), having recorded that many councillors argued that the removal of some councillors from decision-making committees *"weakened their capacity to represent their electoral division ..."* concluded that, *"... the changes had not led to an increased focus on work in the community."*

4.20 If this is the case, it suggests that the Act's intentions have yet to be realised. This is possibly because new responsibilities have replaced the old. For example, *"From January 2003 all councils have had to be ready to report on the way health services are being delivered in their locality."* (IDeA 2003).

4.21 According to the IDeA, *"All the evidence suggests that scrutiny is the most demanding role in the new political structures. For both officers and members new skills and new ways of working are needed to make this new role a success."* (IDeA 2007a). Given its similarity to the parliamentary backbencher's role, this is perhaps not surprising.

4.22 The Government, in its recent Local Government White Paper (DCLG 2006, 2006a), argues for further adoption of executive-style structures. This is considered in Chapter 5.

4.23 The changes have mainly affected county and district councillors, although there appears to be little in the literature about how these changes have affected either the motivation of councillors, or the willingness of people to stand for election. The roles of parish/town councillors are largely unaltered, although some town councils have taken on work that was previously the responsibility of higher tier councils. For example, Yate Town Council in Gloucestershire now manages and maintains the town's parks (Tubey 2007), as does Penwortham Town Council in Lancashire (CRC 2006 p9).

4.24 In recent years there has been a move towards the setting of local budgets and community grants. In Lancashire, for example, four pilot local committees were set up in 2004 to give people a greater say in how their services are developed and delivered (LCC 2004). In West Wiltshire, a small community grant scheme is available on a partnership basis between local authorities and five community area partnerships (WW 2007).

4.25 Similarly, South Somerset District Council has four local areas with each serving as a full planning committee, with grant giving powers and operating both revenue and capital budgets. South Somerset also goes further in delegating council functions to town councils, including street cleaning, taxi licensing and street trading. In Surrey, where transport budgets have been devolved, decisions are taken jointly by district and county councillors. In addition, each county councillor has individual discretion over £17,500 for individual projects and partnership funding (IDeA 2007b p3).

4.26 The structural and operating changes taking place within local authorities is but one part of the larger structural shift towards partnership working during the last 30 years (DCLG 2006 p18). This way of working – nationally, regionally and locally – has resulted in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), Market Town Partnerships, Community Strategies (CA 2004) and a variety of other initiatives, such as those led by or involving Primary Care Trusts and a whole host of LEADER+ projects.

4.27 The Young Foundation (Hilder 2006 p3) recommends, “... *that universal elements of neighbourhood governance – empowered frontline councillors, responsive services and opportunities for direct initiative and participation – are combined with options for greater bottom-up empowerment, in particular via **reformed parish councils** (authors’ emphasis) and recognised neighbourhood bodies relating constructively to councils and services.*”

4.28 The implication of this appears to be that devolution of powers brings with it the need for parish councils (and, therefore, parish councillors) to assume new responsibilities. This, in turn, suggests that councillors will not only have more to do, but that what they will have to do could be more difficult and more time-consuming. The extent to which this will encourage or dissuade people to become councillors is a matter for debate, and is briefly considered below. It should also be noted that, according to Taylor and Wilson (2006 p11), in some communities, “... *ward councillors are seen as the problem not the solution.*”

4.29 The pros and cons of partnership working are well known. The broader debate about democratic accountability (Tomaney 1999, Shaw and Davidson 2002 p14, Daly and Howell 2006 p4) and bureaucracy is contrasted with the financial and professional, skill-related benefits that can arise from joint working to achieve a common goal (IDeA 2007). Perhaps the most pertinent question that could be asked in the context of the present Inquiry is, “... *do such partnerships empower and assist active citizenship?*” (Shucksmith 2000 p38).

Partnership charters

4.30 The prospect that powers may be devolved has raised concerns about the difficulties associated with their devolution. According to Pearce and Mawson (2003 p56), *“There are signs that the government recognises these concerns in its consultation paper, ‘Quality town and parish councils’, which refers to the need for increased local discretion over support services and expenditure, ‘charters’ to encourage partnerships between principal and local councils and a new, ‘lighter touch’ audit regime.”*

4.31 The Local Government Information Unit’s ‘Charter Checklist’ (LGIU 2005 p20) suggests that Charters should, *“... contain provision for the relationship between local councils and various governance structures in the area (these could be LSPs, Area Committees, or neighbourhood management structures) ...”*. They should also be *“... clear about the role of councillors at all levels in the relationship...”*.

4.32 The LGIU document also states, however, that although the study has shown support for Charters *“... among a majority of local councils...”* (LGIU 2005 p11), the, *“...most important barriers ... are a lack of interest, misunderstanding of what a Charter is and who it is for, low capacity, and scepticism that ... a Charter would bring additional benefits. Many local councils believe that Charters are only of relevance to Quality Councils.”* (p11).

4.33 This could be significant caution given that, according to a study of the Quality Town and Parish Council scheme in September 2006 *“... only around 4% of parish and town councils had achieved Quality Status ... [although] ... Quality councils now represent 17% of the population of parished areas.”* (Woods, Gardner and Gannon 2006 p13), with only a quarter of these in more rural wards (p15). Also, the larger the population served, the greater the likelihood that a council will have achieved Quality Council status (p15).

4.34 The debate about the place and value of Charters and Quality Parish status as a means of empowering councillors does not yet appear to have been totally won despite the fact that, *“Various written agreements between some local councils and principal authorities have existed for at least a decade.”* (LGIU 2005 p11).

5. POLICY AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS

5.1 This chapter considers the broader policy initiatives that influence the role of rural councillors, as well as the changing governance structures in which they operate.

The Local Government White Paper

5.2 Emerging policy is strongly influenced by the recent Local Government White Paper (DCLG 2006, 2006a) which refers to, *“a stronger role for councils to lead their communities, shape neighbourhoods and bring local public services together.”*⁷

5.3 The White Paper outlines the Government’s intention to introduce, *“ ... stronger, more stable models of local authority leadership to build on the progress made so far, including elected mayors where people want them, directly elected executives and council leaders with four year terms ... combined with a permissive approach to whole council elections, single member wards and restructuring in county areas.”* (p4).

5.4 The White Paper identifies the following topics as priorities (DCLG 2006a p1):

- community safety;
- health and well-being;
- vulnerable people;
- children, young people and families;
- economic development, housing and planning;
- climate change; and
- the third sector.

5.5 The White Paper states that government will strengthen the role of councillors (DCLG 2006 p2) and proposes new powers, including the following:

- Control of a small local budget (p5), a view supported by NCVO (Steel et. al. 2006 p56) and the LGA (LGA 2006 p2).
- Increased effectiveness when dealing with problems or complaints, either individually by a ‘Community Call for Action’⁸, or collectively, through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (p19). In either case, when developing a Community Call for Action, local authorities will be expected, *“... to consider what powers or budgets it would be appropriate to devolve to their councillors to help them in solving minor problems.”* (p35). The potential of a Community Call for

⁷ The *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill*, the Bill that will enact the White Paper’s recommendations, was given its first reading in the House of Commons on 12 December 2006.

<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2007/rp07-001.pdf>

⁸ The Community Call for Action is a mechanism proposed in the Police and Justice Bill, allowing members of the public who are dissatisfied with service provision to ask their local councillor to call for action from the local authority and its partners. Issues that cannot be resolved through normal mechanisms can be referred to Overview and Scrutiny committees for consideration. <http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=5126878> .

Action as a, “... *mechanism to draw attention to a proposal for asset transfer ... through any elected councillor, ...*” is recognised, and referred to, in the recent Quirk Review report (Quirk 2007 p25).

- Devolving the power to create parish councils to district and unitary authorities, with a presumption in favour of setting up parish councils.
- The vesting of all executive powers in the leader (p8), with local authorities using one of three choices of leadership model:
 - a directly elected mayor,
 - a directly elected executive of councillors,
 - or a leader elected by his/her fellow councillors with a clear four-year mandate.

5.6 These three leadership models are a development of those embodied in the Local Government Act 2000 (www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/20000022.htm). Underlying each is the notion that the majority of councillors should play only a representational role, with only a small executive group providing community leadership (Rao 2005 p47).

5.7 By early 2003, according to Snape (2004 pp64-65), 316 English authorities were operating the ‘cabinet with leader’ model, 59 (mainly smaller district councils) were operating a streamlined committee system, and only 11 had adopted mayoral systems (the first two were considered to be the ‘least change’ models).

5.8 According to Rao (2005 p58), and based on research by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), most councillors have been marginalised by the introduction of executive and scrutiny functions, although this way of operating has, “... *at the same time, the primary aims of reform – to sharpen the decision process – [and these] may well have been achieved, at least in part.*” (p58).

5.9 Stoker and Wilson (2004 p256) noted that some councils are exploring ways in which “...*non-executive councillors can again become engaged in making decisions for, and with, their local communities in area or neighbourhood committees of various sorts.*”

5.10 ‘Neighbourhoods’ are not defined, beyond being referred to as, “... *very local areas...*” (Stoker and Wilson 2004 p253). However, this is perhaps in keeping with Stoker’s and Wilson’s view that, “*The future of local governance in different areas will be tailored to the needs of that area rather than being based on a uniform administrative blueprint.*” (p262).

5.11 The implication of this is that agreed administrative structures will have to be sufficiently flexible to cater for a variety of truly local circumstances (although it is difficult to see how a rural neighbourhood could, geographically, differ markedly from a parish). If this proves to be the case, then, by definition, the role of rural councillors may be strengthened but may also be different in different places.

5.12 Stoker's and Wilson's discussion about a shift towards neighbourhood governance implies that such a shift would take place, *"If there was a move towards... unitary local government ... across the whole of Britain ..."*. Given the limited moves in this direction called for in the Local Government White Paper (DCLG 2006b p3), this seems unlikely.

5.13 The Local Government Association's response to the Local Government White Paper was broadly supportive of its aims. The LGA noted, however, that the White Paper did not reflect the Association's call to, *"... devolve national and regional powers to cities, towns and counties."* Consequently, the LGA saw the White Paper as, *"... a first step..."* towards its aim, which is, *"... to see devolutionary power made a reality."* (LGA 2006a p1). The implication of this is that progress is being made towards devolution of powers, that local authorities welcome this progress, and that, as a consequence, councillors' roles will be strengthened.

5.14 While this may be the case for some councils, it is not universal, according to research in Suffolk by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (not yet published). The report's author (James 2007), states that there, *"... were marked differences in opinion between rural/urban areas, in particular around the terminology, 'frontline councillor', attitudes to the various White Paper proposals (specifically delegated budgets), concerns about councillor capacity and member diversity (specifically that rural communities may face greater challenges in recruiting more diverse [sic] range of candidates)."*

5.15 According to an IDeA publication about councillors' roles, many of their achievements are due to their ability to consult and enable, and to act as advocates, and catalysts for action (IDeA 2007a), in short to be the 'local champions' referred to on page 11. That councillors' achievements are associated with the – presumed – familiarity with their areas implicit in IDeA's publication is not surprising. Given that the relatively recently adopted term, 'frontline councillor', implies localness, James's finding is interesting, suggesting, perhaps, that 'frontline' carries with it connotations of warfare, and as such jars in a rural context. The term, 'local champions' is, therefore, likely to be more acceptable. Neither term, however, is as well-known and clear-cut as 'councillor'. It could also be said that both are potentially contentious, suggesting that there may be councillors who are not in the 'front line', and locals who are not 'champions'.

Current governance structures

5.16 In 1999, Andrew Coulson, in an article about the Local Government White Paper, wrote, *"It is a mistake ... to equate councils solely with service delivery. Fundamentally, local government is as much about democracy, representation and local influence – **whoever makes the decisions and holds the budgets** (authors' emphasis)."* (Coulson 1999 p118). Often, in today's world of partnerships, local authorities do not hold entire budgets and do not, therefore, have the right or the freedom to an independent decision-taking role.

5.17 With the possible exception of parish councils, local authorities are increasingly but one partner amongst the many involved in **governance**. This is a

consequence of the, *“Major changes ... taking place in the realities of the governance of local communities ...”* (Skelcher 2004 p41). These changes could be seen as part of a process that is weakening, rather than strengthening, the powers of local councillors.

5.18 In fact, a government report (Widdicombe 1986, cited in Stevens 2006) noted that local government has no independent right to exist, although it also noted that, *“... it is doubtful that any government would seek to sweep aside centuries of traditions of local representation ... local government’s power continues to decline as more complex forms of governance give oversight to local public services, with the scrutiny role being pushed as a new duty in lieu of the oversight once enjoyed.* (Stevens 2006 p175.)

5.19 Not only has the authority of councils over services such as education been reduced, but so too have other aspects of their involvement. For example, school building and management projects are now generally Private Finance Initiative schemes, whereby the private sector designs, builds, finances and operates schemes on behalf of contracting authorities (Stevens 2006 p127). Responsibility for social housing and bus transport provision has also largely been removed from many authorities. Similarly, Business Rates have not been set by local government since 1990 (p126), although they have been collected by local authorities and redistributed by central government. The Lyons Review recommended both that the present system should continue, and that a measure of local flexibility to set a supplement should be introduced (Lyons 2007 p368).

5.20 The development of multi-agency LSPs, three-year Local Area Agreements and Public Private Partnerships indicates the extent to which the governance structures within which councils operate have changed. Although smaller parish councils have largely been unaffected, larger town councils involved in, for example, the Market Towns Initiative, have become involved in partnership working (CA 2005). These partnerships, coupled with the growth in influence of the regions, and grant programmes specifically for local implementation by locally created partnerships (such as parish plans), have affected the roles of rural councillors and their councils, and the relationships and dependencies between them and other organisations.

5.21 According to research by the University of Hull (Wilkinson and Craig 2002) councillors recognise the value of partnership working but fear that their democratic role is being downgraded by the growing number of partnership policies introduced by central government. Executive and backbench councillors were concerned that too many powers of decision had been ceded to external bodies. They felt that the role of local authorities and local democracy had been downgraded as a result.

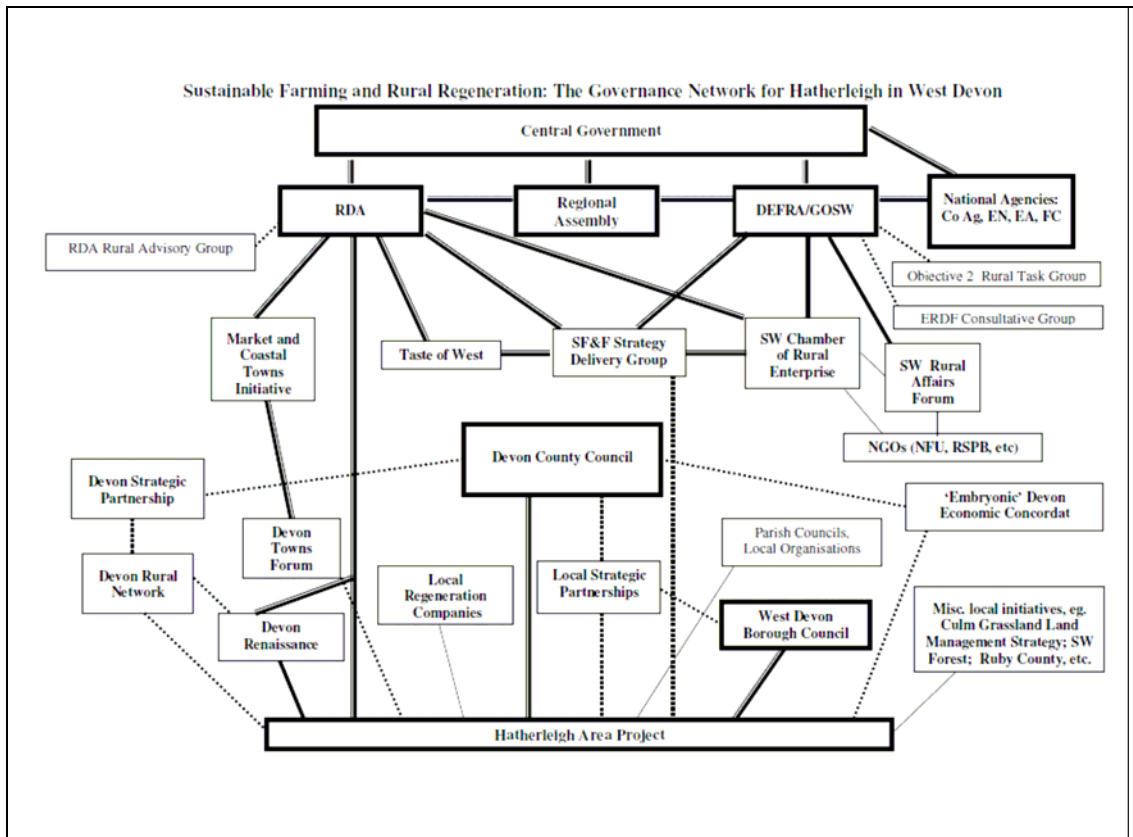
5.22 The complicated nature of governance is illustrated in Table 4, which lists the regeneration programmes on the Isle of Wight, the organisations responsible for them, and the areas affected. In terms of the effect of these programmes on rural councillors, the authors of the report from which the information is taken note that the, *“... capacity-building projects have produced ... [people] ... with a good track record of putting together successful funding bids ...”*. Furthermore, these people, politically, *“... form a lobby that can and does put pressure on council officers and members ... to support their projects ...”* (Clark, Southern, and Beer, 2007, p265).

Table 4: Regeneration programmes, their areas of operation, and councils affected (after Clark, Southern and Beer, 2007, Tables 1 and 2)

Programme	Lead central government body	Lead regional agency	Area covered and councils
Rural Development Programme	Rural Development Commission	South East England Development Agency (SEEDA)	The island, excluding Ryde and Newport, were designated as an RDA, 1994-2004.
Single Regeneration Budget	Department of the Environment / Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (now DCLG)	SEEDA	Two island-wide, and two area-based (Cowes & East Cowes Town Councils)
Market Towns Initiative	The Countryside Agency	Government Office for the South East (GOSE)	Sandown, Shanklin, Ventnor, Brading and Wootton Bridge Councils (2002-2005)
LEADER +	Defra	GOSE	Western & central areas, 2002-2008.
Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders	ODPM (now DCLG)		Newport (Pan Estate), 2005-2012.
Healthy Living Programme	Dept. of Health / Big Lottery Fund		All island, 2001-2005.
Sure Start	Dept. for Education and Skills	GOSE	Ryde, 2004-2010.

5.23 The impression of a complicated governance network given in Table 4 is reinforced by the network for Hatherleigh, in Devon, illustrated in Figure 2 (on page 23). All of the local councils are involved with the project, as are many other organisations. While this undoubtedly provides some benefits (such as funding from the Regional Development Agency), “... *the institutional complexities are daunting and may well inhibit development.*” (Winter 2006 p15).

Figure 2: Governance structure associated with a rural project (Winter 2006 p14)



5.24 The information in Table 4 and Figure 2, although only illustrative, suggests that the role of rural councillors, if not marginal, is somewhat limited by the complicated nature of these typical examples of current governance structure.

5.25 John Benington clearly summarises the current situation. He wrote: *“The government’s traditional sources of leverage through the use of legislation and taxation remains in the hands of the state”*. He then goes on to assert that *“...the policy initiative ... will increasingly have to be shared with informal networks of users, neighbourhood associations, community groups, and minority ethnic organizations as well as with more formal partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors.”* (Benington 2006 p16-17).

5.26 This has implications for councillors in all tiers of local government. As Benington notes, they must learn how to lead and cooperate within a complicated world (p17) that appears both to have increased their importance and reduced their power to determine outcomes directly (Hart and Doak 1994 p202, Whitehead 1997 p1, Pearce and Mawson 2003 p52).

5.27 Although government intentions, according to Helen Sullivan (2004 pp190-191), can be summarised as encouraging community leadership, participation in the democratic process, and the modernisation of local public services, central government remains ambivalent as to the amount of trust (and, by extension, power

and influence) that it is prepared to cede (Pearce and Mawson 2003 p57). Sullivan noted (2004 p182) that, “... *friends of local government may feel that they have little to be comfortable and confident about as they survey the institutional terrain. Among national politicians ... local government continues to be viewed at best with scepticism ...*”.

5.28 Central government’s unease about the effectiveness of local government is, however, coupled with a stated desire by some politicians to devolve some aspects of government to the local level. The varying willingness by, and the ability of, local government to participate, suggests that government has still not been ‘joined-up’ (Gains 2004, Hetherington 2006, Wilson 2004 p12).

The move towards unitary status

5.29 The three traditional ‘units’ of parish, district and county are, in the main, long established areas, based on a variety of boundaries. These include the ecclesiastical, the shire system mentioned in the Domesday Book, and workhouse areas. For example, Hampshire was mentioned in 757, and the shire system south of the River Tees, was “... *almost completely established as it was to remain until the major revisions of 1888 and 1974.*” (LGA 2007).

5.30 Although there was a move to unitary local authority status in some areas in the mid-1990s, the three-tier system is still the norm in most of rural England. Consequently, the roles of councillors, and the relationships between those representing each tier, have remained relatively unchanged over the years, at least in terms of the hierarchy of power and responsibilities. The tensions or allegiances associated with party political affiliation in district and county authorities, and some larger parish (town) councils⁹ remain unchanged.

5.31 Concerns about the sometimes confusing roles of district and county councils, their relative remoteness and the potential for duplication that exists in two organisations that overlap geographically and operationally, have prompted central government to state (DCLG 2006 p62) that, “*in two-tier areas – where each place has a county council and a district council – local authorities face additional challenges. Strong leadership and clear accountability is harder to achieve where for the same place there are two council leaders each with a legitimate democratic mandate and often having different, sometimes conflicting agendas.*”

5.32 Central government’s desire to improve efficiency within the public sector has also affected local government, requiring it to move, “... *towards increased rationalisation of back office and transactional services.*” (Gershon 2004 p56) and a commitment to, “*continue to explore opportunities for increased freedoms and flexibilities, through strengthening the conversation between central and local government, further deregulation, and devolving decision making to authorities, for example through testing Local Area Agreements.*” (p57).

⁹ For a discussion about the effect of party politics on local democracy see Copus (2004 Ch.7).

5.33 The Government, in addition to, *“inviting local authorities in shire areas to make proposals for unitary local government...”* by January 2007 (DCLG 2006 p63) is also calling on two-tier councils in areas where unitary status is not being sought, *“...to find new governance arrangements which overcome the risks of confusion, duplication and inefficiency between tiers and can meet the particular challenges faced by small districts with small budgets or tightly constrained boundaries.”*

5.34 It also states that, *“It will ... be important for councils to develop new models of working, which should also involve collaboration between councils and other public bodies, if they are to achieve ambitious further efficiency improvements.”* (DCLG 2006 p64).

5.35 The reason given for promoting these changes is that the shire county-district arrangement is remote (for example, *“Many district boundaries reflect artificial communities with little significance for local people”* (DCLG 2006 p62)) and inherently inefficient, with two leaders and possibly conflicting priorities in the same area. The comparison is made between two-tier – rural – Cumbria, with 7 council leaders, and 62 other executive members, and – urban – Sheffield, slightly bigger in population terms (but smaller in area), with 1 leader, and 9 executive members (p62). However, the point is also made that, *“Of course, these areas are far from comparable in many respects and each faces their own challenges.”* (p62).

5.36 In inviting authorities to apply for unitary status, the White Paper states, *“Proposals will also need to reflect the diverse communities which may be found in the area of a proposed unitary, ranging, for example, from small villages, through market towns, to a major urban centre with its own neighbourhoods. Proposals will need to show the contribution that councillors, town, parish and community councils, and community forums can make to representing, leading and empowering local communities within the unitary’s area.”* (DCLG 2006 p63). In this it appears to recognise the danger that unitary status could exacerbate, rather than solve the problems of local representation and identity, *“in shire areas where economy of scale has in some cases led to services being organised over areas with little connection to recognised communities.”* (p62).

5.37 This aspect of the debate is broadly encapsulated in the proposals submitted by county and district councils seeking unitary status. In the main, unitary councils are likely to be based either on an historic shire county area, or on a district or combination of district council areas. For example, Somerset County Council’s application stresses the county’s long history as an administrative unit, and the potential for achieving economies of scale. It states that, *“the benefits of bringing together the activities for economic development and promotion of inward investment across all six councils ought to be obvious ...”* (SCC 2007 p5). This contrasts with South Somerset District Council’s view (SSDC 2007) that a county-wide unitary authority would be, *“... remote ... impersonal ... inflexible ...”*.

5.38 Northumberland County Council’s (NCC) proposal states that, *“The current structure of Northumberland’s local government – 6 districts and one county (‘six plus one’) – is unsustainable.”* (NCC 2007 p3). NCC is also supporting a proposal by the

county's six district councils for two unitary councils in Northumberland, one covering the rural area, the other the more urban south east of the county (Northumberland 2007).

5.39 Four types of 'natural community' have been identified in Northumberland (NSP 2005 p4¹⁰). One of these, 'belonging communities'¹¹, embraces the whole of the county, and is based, in part, on LSP community partnership and Market Towns Initiative areas. The adoption of these as, "... *inclusive mechanisms for local communities to work directly with delivery agents within their patch...*" (p8) has implications for councillors. Their roles in, "... *county, district, and parish/town councils with regard to the various natural community layers would need to be clearly defined, particularly given their democratic accountability and statutory responsibilities.*" (p8). Although it is not clear from this that councillors' roles will be strengthened, it can be seen both that their roles will change, and that their special – ie elected – status and responsibilities have been recognised.

5.40 As the case of Cumbria shows, unitary status is likely to reduce the number of councillors overall and could make for more difficult representation and a heavier workload for councillors (this may be particularly true in Cumbria's case, given its geography). Nevertheless, reducing the number of councillors and the overlap in council services would bring about cost and efficiency savings. The role of parish councillors, as the only elected representative tier below those in a unitary council could be crucial in maintaining a truly local voice. Given the range of populations served by parish councils, however, it might be difficult to define these councillors' roles.

5.41 The debate about structures, efficiencies, organisational simplification and overall effectiveness is, as has been discussed, an old one. The fact that it has continued for so long suggests that working out how to combine change with continuity, whilst ensuring democratic legitimacy and accountability, is far from easy. It may also occur to some that the emphasis on structures does little to address the transfer of power from one tier to another.

¹⁰ These are:

- 'neighbourhood' communities – places that local people have an affinity with as forming part of their home;
- 'belonging' communities – places that local people would regard as where they come from if asked by others who had some knowledge of the patch;
- 'characteristic' communities – places that have similar socio-economic and geographical characteristics and as such portray an element of community cohesion among local people;
- 'association' communities – places that local people are traditionally happy to associate themselves with or be associated with.

¹¹ By October 2006, 25 communities had been identified

(<http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&q=Northumberland+Strategic+Partnership++%22belonging+communities%22&btnG=Search&meta=cr%3DcountryUK%7CcountryGB>)

6. SUPPORT MECHANISMS

6.1 This chapter explains how councillors in the principal and parish tiers are provided with support and training, and identifies the main training providers and sources of support.

The need for training

6.2 Gardiner (2006), in a debate about how to enable non-executive councillors to communicate effectively with their communities (p32) noted both the need for training and support, and the fact that, *“Councillor training for the area/neighbourhood community leadership role remains weak [although] there are some examples of activity.”* (p37). Gardiner quotes, as an example, the training associated with the delegation of planning decision powers in South Somerset, and, *“... training in chairing and facilitation skills [for] area community committee chairs”* in East Hampshire (p38).

6.3 The need for training is considered to be as important for parish councillors and clerks. The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU 2005a p15) notes that, *“Qualified clerks are essential if local councils are going to uniformly ‘professionalise’ their activities.”* However, as the report confirms, *“Resistance (usually owing to time restraints) is not just from the clerks themselves but sometimes from councillors, reluctant because of the implication for the precept...”*. The report adds that, *“The low status of the clerk, together with the reluctance to precept, is another instance of low capacity perpetuating itself...”* (p16).

6.4 James (2006 pp32-33) reiterates the LGIU’s views, that qualified clerks are felt by parish councils *“...to be essential if they are to progress”*, noting that, *“few councils employ a professional clerk, and many are volunteers.”* It was also noted (p32) that, *“Time pressures prevent clerks from attaining the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CILCA), which is an obstacle to achieving Quality Status. Time pressures also limit the take-up of councillor training programmes. LGiU’s research identifies the need for training in member roles – in particular the role of the chair – and for greater emphasis on training in employment law.”*

6.5 Work undertaken in Wiltshire by the Young Foundation identified a need for more training for parish councillors and clerks about community cohesion and the implications of equalities legislation (James 2006 p33). Given the sensitivities associated with the former, and the technical – and sensitive – nature of the latter, combined with the acknowledged practical difficulties arising from the fact that parish clerks are volunteers, it is possible that clerks will recognize the need for training, but will find it difficult to attend courses. They may also, in view of the difficult subject matter, consider that the associated responsibilities are daunting, and are more than they, as volunteers, are prepared to accept.

Some examples of the training available

6.6 Shropshire's County Association¹² offers training in Freedom of Information, planning, budgeting, and health and safety, as well as training specifically designed for new councillors. Similarly, in 2003-04 Lancashire County Council held "40 training sessions on 31 unique topics, such as chairing skills, dealing with the media, public speaking, speed reading, and understanding local government finance"¹³. Gloucestershire County Council offers a range of guides, including, 'An introduction to being a county councillor'¹⁴.

6.7 According to NALC (2001 p4), training is also available from the Society of Local Council Clerks¹⁵ (SLCC), the University of Gloucestershire¹⁶ and other further and higher education establishments, Rural Community Councils, and the Local Government Employers' Organisation. County associations of local councils also provide training.

6.8 To complement the many training opportunities available, a National Training Strategy for Parish and Town Clerks (NALC 2001) was written. Its purpose is to, "... determine new ways in which parish clerks and councillors work, including:

- *An emphasis on measurable performance and quality initiatives.*
 - *A continued focus on competence and lifelong learning.*
 - *A need for a flexible approach towards continuing professional development."*
- (p3).

6.9 In conclusion, training for councillors appears to be considered necessary. There are a range of options available, and no shortage of organisations providing help and advice (see below). In essence, the principal authorities appear to provide both general (eg introductory) and bespoke (eg public speaking) training for their councillors, whilst the needs of parish councillors are met by county associations.

6.10 While there appears to be a lot of training available, much of it is, understandably, local. There may be potential to capture and share good practice not only in terms of approach but also in terms of course content.

6.11 District and county councillors, whose council duties tend to take place during the working day and who may be paid for their work, may find it easier to attend courses. However, for parish councillors, the group most likely to be unpaid and who are often supported by volunteer clerks, it is more difficult. The question for them is as much about the time and responsibilities demanded of them as about the availability or acceptance of the need for training.

¹² <http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/SALC.nsf/open/D62010E76483A0F880256E830036C417>

¹³ www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/performance/page136.asp

¹⁴ www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/adobe_acrobat/1/4/Information%20sheet%20-%20website.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.slcc.co.uk/Contents/Text/Index.asp?SiteId=716&SiteExtra=11997241&TopNavId=716&NavSideId=9572>

¹⁶ <http://www.visionwebsites.co.uk/Contents/Text/Index.asp?SiteId=716&SiteExtra=11997241&TopNavId=759&NavSideId=9948>

Support, professional bodies and good practice

6.12 The DCLG outlines its role in support of councillors as, *“Working with the LGA, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Leadership Centre for Local Government and through regional improvement partnerships to promote: a clearly defined role for local councillors in championing the interests of their communities; greater diversity of councillors, making them more representative of their community; and capacity-building and support for councillors to take on their enhanced role.”* (DCLG 2006 p52).

6.13 In addition to this political support from central government, a number of national associations support councillors. These include NALC, the SLCC, the LGA¹⁷, and the Society of Local Government Chief Executives (SOLACE)¹⁸. In addition, the Rural Community Councils and the 50 or so county associations also offer support and day- to-day advice.

6.14 SLCC is leading the development of good practice¹⁹ among local councils with respect to clustering and the sharing of resources. For example, it has published research into how parish and town councils can do more in partnership, citing a range of examples of collaboration between councils – from sharing staff and other resources, to raising issues of joint concern. The research also examines grouped parishes, clustering and development trusts. Details of all of the SLCC’s publications are available on its website²⁰.

6.15 Other approaches to the identification and dissemination of good practice are those of, for example, the IDeA’s Councillors’ Mentoring and Beacon Council schemes (<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=1>), the joint NALC and CRC’s Community Empowerment Awards scheme (CRC 2006), and the CRC’s best practice case studies on the use of second home Council Tax discount (CRC 2006a).

The Quality Parish Scheme

6.16 Quality status is intended to equip parish councils to take on a stronger role in their communities (DEFRA 2003). In order to achieve Quality status, parish and town councils must pass a number of tests relating to:

- their electoral mandate,
- the qualifications of the clerk,
- council meetings,
- communications,
- annual reporting,
- accounting, and
- the application of a code of conduct.

¹⁷ <http://www.lga.gov.uk>

¹⁸ <http://www.solace.org.uk>

¹⁹ For some recent examples of innovative practice, see <http://www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk/imp/core/page.do?pageId=1050854>

²⁰ www.visionwebsites.co.uk/Contents/Custom/SLCC/Books/Index.asp?SiteId=716&SiteExtra=11997241&TopNavId=736&NavSideId=972

7. BARRIERS

7.1 This chapter explores the limits and barriers that constrain councillors' powers.

Introduction

7.2 As explained in previous chapters, councillors' powers are limited, and the extent to which current and proposed structures and legislation has strengthened, or will strengthen their roles, is debatable. Inevitably, given the essentially hierarchical nature of English government, there are limits to their powers. Similarly, the changes that have taken place in approaches to government and governance – such as the move towards partnership working discussed above – can be said to represent barriers to councillors' autonomy.

Limiting factors – the trend towards centralisation

7.3 Barriers, or limits to autonomy, are invariably set by central government. If a stronger local role equates to the right to determine policy and action, or to raise and spend money, a consequence of this is a weakening of central power.

7.4 As outlined in earlier chapters, the post-war trend has been one of centralisation, at least as far as county and district councils are concerned. This, together with an increased emphasis on joint working with other public sector bodies, and with private and voluntary sector organisations²¹, further complicates and – it could be argued weakens – the role of councillors.

7.5 In a discussion about community leadership and participation in relation to governance, Gaventa (2004 p3) notes that, “... *confusion and tension is emerging in many LSPs regarding the respective roles of community representatives, elected councillors and local officials. It is not uncommon for each to claim to represent the community and each have responsibilities to ensure that communities have a strong voice in local decision-making. Beneath this particular tension lie broader issues about the nature of democratic representation, who advocates for whom, how legitimacy in leadership is derived, and the links between participatory and electoral forms of democracy.*” (Gaventa 2004 p3). It is this ‘tension’, between the right of elected representatives to decide (in other words, to govern), and the desire to include others in matters of **governance**, that lies at the heart of the debate.

7.6 In his conclusion, which does not challenge the legitimacy of the new forms of governance, Gaventa notes (p32) that, “*Conflicts between community participation and elected representation have been part of community regeneration initiatives for decades. At their heart are fundamental questions about the nature of democracy, and the degree to which representative forms of democracy may be augmented by other more participatory forms of citizen engagement.*”

²¹ The ChangeUp Programme (<http://www.changeup.org.uk/index.asp>) gives some indication of the importance attached to the voluntary and community sector by central government.

7.7 It could be argued that broader issues about the nature of representation referred to by Gaventa imply that the need for inclusivity in partnerships inevitably means less power for councillors. If, however, strength is equated to influence, rather than power, then councillor involvement in partnerships could result in a stronger role for councillors. This is particularly the case given that much of the responsibility for strategic leadership, implementation and financial probity remains with local government as enabler and banker (Pearce and Mawson 2003 p52).

A stronger role for parish councils?

7.8 There is, therefore, some uncertainty about whether today's governance structures strengthen or weaken the role of councillors. Although attempts to modernise local government are intended, "... *to provide local authorities with strong leadership, community responsibilities, whilst also revitalizing local democracy ... expectations of democratic renewal and new opportunities for community participation may not fit comfortably with notions of strong leadership.*" (Brooks 2000 p610).

7.9 Most of the material referred to above refers to district and county councils, and perhaps to some of the larger parish councils. As far as councillors in parishes are concerned, much of the discussion relates to providing support in their current roles, rather than strengthening them. In other words, for parish councillors there may be barriers of capacity and a lack of will to take on more responsibility. Indeed, as far as parish councillors are concerned, there may be no great public desire to see their roles strengthened.

7.10 For example, two online surveys of public perceptions of parish councils conducted in 2004 and 2006 (Griggs and Moor 2006), revealed **both** that, "... *councils should be tackling the local quality of life issues and championing local people's views (including on local planning matters)*" (p22), **and** that activities such as the promotion of local business and finding affordable housing were not considered to be of primary importance (Table 5).

Table 5: Parish council activities ranked in order of importance (Griggs and Moor 2006 Table 1)

Parish council activity	2004	2006
Represent local peoples' interests	1	1
Improve the local environment	2	2
Submit views on behalf of local people on planning applications	3	3
Support voluntary and community groups for the benefit of the parish	4	6
Provide local services	5	4
Attract government, lottery and other grants into the local area	6	7
Lead their communities	7	5
Keep local taxes low	8	9
Promote local business growth	9	8
Help local people find affordable housing	10	10

7.11 In another paper, Griggs and Moor (2006a) called on government, “... to consider carefully how the capacity of the parish sector can best be supported and managed.” (p12). They suggested that the role of parish councils could be strengthened by conferring upon them ‘well-being powers’ (p4). These powers, which are to be extended to Quality Parish Councils (DCLG 2006 p8), will allow councils to raise more money, and would, according to Griggs and Moor (2006a p4), “... help many parish councils engage more in addressing the needs of local children and young people.”

7.12 According to the Young Foundation (Hilder 2006a p11), the well-being powers should be given to all community councils, “... as an affidavit of [their] place-shaping role, and a stimulus for them to innovate in often quite small-scale ways.”

7.13 Whether this is what parish councillors and respondents to the surveys referred to above want is, however, a moot point. As noted in a discussion about how to encourage people aged between 55 and 70 to become involved in community work, the Government may need to consider how to reduce the, “...administrative complexities borne by, for example, parish councillors ...” (Moseley, Clark, Curry, Hayes, Ingram, Johnson, Kambites, Milbourne, Owen, White, and Wragg 2005 p67)

Barriers to democratic involvement

7.14 As elected representatives, councillors ought to have democratic legitimacy and, consequently, strength. However, because of increased centralisation through a variety of agencies the public realises that local councils are not responsible for main services.

7.15 According to Stoker (2005 p6), “*The basic problem with our local government system is that not enough of us really care about what it does.*” Bracey (1959 p77) gave three reasons for apathy towards council elections (and, by extension) to councils:

- that services such as highways, health and education are, “... carried out for the Government, and everyone knows that [these services] will be reasonably efficiently attended to whoever is elected.”;
- that, “... the county council is ... remote and the rural district ... impersonal so that the countryman has not the same loyalty to these areas ...”; and
- that, “... few rural district council areas are based on modern social association and business organisation.”

7.16 Bracey’s concerns are present today. Davis and Geddes (2000 p19) question whether, “... new political management structures ... will improve public perceptions of democratic accountability ... not least because they do little or nothing about the formal accountability arrangements of major local services, such as police, hospitals and colleges... Accountability to local communities, citizens and service users still depends heavily on the ways in which new structures actually engage with electors, local political parties and local communities.”

7.17 Skelcher (2004 p29) notes how the, “... *grandeur of town and county halls ...*”, which hark back to, “... *the concept of the sovereign council ...*”, contrasts with how, “... *the strategies of both Conservative and New Labour governments have undermined the functional and political foundations on which the town halls were built.*” He also refers, however, to the idealistic view of local government as ‘sovereign’, given, “... *the problem of the adequacy of the electoral mandate in an era of ‘reluctant voters’...*” (a problem which could presumably also be applied, in some measure at least, to central government’s mandate).

7.18 According to Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2001) (cited in Morgan 2003 p22) barriers to participation are based as much on perceptions of local councils as on actual experience and knowledge. According to Morgan, “*This suggests that not only are people disengaged from local government, but that they may also be actively hostile to it, believing it to be remote, unresponsive and elitist.*” The similarity of this view to Bracey’s is striking. Morgan goes on to state that, “*This is compounded by the lack of knowledge about council powers and areas of activity (for example, people believed that councils should be dealing with NHS matters) and the general sense of disappointment with local councillors*” (p22).

7.19 An additional complication is central government’s attempts to involve local people via, “... *a succession of pilot programmes and special projects ...*” (Benington 2006 p8). These attempts often leave questions in people’s minds as to whether anything has changed.

7.20 Public confusion about local government powers and the roles of councillors appears, in part at least, to be a consequence of the structural changes that have taken place (ie local government reorganisation, increased control by central government, removal of powers, and developments in governance mechanisms involving partnership working). As indicated above, these changes have reinforced the belief that local government is remote and relatively powerless, and give credence to Stoker’s view (2005 p6) that, “... *for the last quarter of the 20th Century local government was pushed to the margins of our governance in the drive for public expenditure control, and central oversight and control over core services.*”

7.21 Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2001a) noted in their work with 30 focus groups in 11 contrasting local authority areas that although people’s views of councils and councillors were negative (p450), this did not equate to apathy (p454). The study revealed (p454) that people judged a local authority’s success against three easily understood criteria:

- Has anything happened?
- Has it been worth the money?
- Have they carried on talking to the public?

7.22 The study also identified (p454) potentially valuable ways that local authorities can encourage participation (Table 6).

Table 6: Strategies to encourage participation by local people
(Lowndes *et.al.* 2001 p454)

- Ground consultation in good 'customer care'.
- Address the stated priorities of local residents and involve all relevant agencies.
- Mobilise and work through local leaders (informal as well as formal).
- Invite or actively recruit, rather than waiting for citizens to come forward.
- Employ a repertoire of methods to reach different citizen groups and address different issues.
- Recognise citizen learning as a valid outcome of participation.
- Show results – by linking participation initiatives to decision-making, and keeping citizens informed of outcomes (and the reasons behind final decisions).

7.23 Part of the discussion about democratic legitimacy concerns the need to find sufficient numbers of candidates from the widest possible range of backgrounds. The Government is encouraging the LGA and political parties, “...to work together to improve the recruitment of candidates for local elections from non-traditional backgrounds.” (DCLG 2006a p25). Particular barriers are the difficulty in attracting candidates of working age (LCLG 2007), “... together with an apparent inability to attract councillors of the right calibre ...” (Rao 2005 p42).

7.24 A national survey for IDeA and the LGA (LGAR 2006) showed that the average age of a councillor is 58, with more than 86% over 45 (compared with 55% of the adult population). The same survey revealed that approximately 69% of councillors are male, and nearly 96% are white. Ruth Kelly, announcing the creation of the Councillors Commission²², noted that 50% of councillors are over 60, less than 8% are under 40, and just 0.3% under 25. Also noted was the fact that, “... today, 100 years since women won the right to stand for town hall elections, fewer than 3 in 10 councillors are women.” (DCLG 2007a).

7.25 A New Local Government Network survey (NLGN 2007) uncovered strong support from young councillors for better pay and conditions. The survey also found that over three-quarters of those interviewed admitted to finding it difficult simultaneously to hold down a full-time job and perform their duties as councillors.

7.26 The capacity of councillors to take on a stronger role is also an issue, specifically the amount of time that they are already devoting to their work. Although various service functions and responsibilities have been removed from county and district level local authority control, in his Devon study Cole records (2002 p42) that county councillors worked an average of 151.1 hours each month, whilst those with dual responsibilities (district and county) worked an average of 181.9 hours per month. Stoker and Wilson (2004 p260) quote 73 hours a month for non-executive

²² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1508087>

councillors, and 113 for executives (see www.elgnce.org.uk). Anecdotal evidence from the chairman of a small parish council gives time devoted to council business as 26 hours per month (Bugler 2007), whereas a West Dorset District Councillor gives 10 days a month (Friar 2007).

Is finance a factor?

7.27 As was noted at the beginning of this review, there is much about today's circumstances and debates that would have been familiar to previous generations of inquirers. For example, Orwin (1945 p84), writing about the 1945 Local Government White Paper, stated that, "*The fundamental change called for in the present administration of local government is not so much in the administrative machine as in the principles underlying its finance.*" Is finance, rather than any one administrative arrangement, the determining factor in strengthening the role of rural councillors?

7.28 If councillors do not have the authority to raise and spend money then, although they may have influence within today's complicated governance world (Tomaney 2004 p168), it is difficult to see how they might gain a stronger role. In short, it is difficult to envisage effective representation unless the representatives have the ability to raise taxes.

7.29 In other words, and to coin a phrase, is it possible that there can be no representation without taxation?

7.30 The quotation used at the beginning of this review (Clarke 1939 p154) captured, in the authors' view, the essence of the debate. The sentence that follows this quotation, "*In practice, the happy medium is in operation whereby a large measure of independence is left to the local authority and a certain standard of uniformity is maintained.*" (p154), suggests a degree of satisfaction with the then balance of powers between central government and county councils.

7.31 Much has changed in the years since Clarke wrote his book, and it would be interesting to know whether he would feel the same sense of satisfaction today.

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