One Community

A guide to effective partnership working between principal and local councils

Foreword

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Principal and local councils are at the heart of our local communities. We share the same ambitions: to create prosperous places, enhance civic life and improve the quality of life for our residents.

Councils across all tiers are increasingly recognising the added value that greater partnership working between the principal and local levels of local government brings to the vital services we provide and the communities we serve. Across the country there are examples of councils of all types working together: to strengthen local decision-making, improve engagement with residents, enhance and devolve services to the lowest appropriate level, and much more.

The Local Government Association (LGA) and National Association of Local Councils (NALC) continue to have a shared commitment to spreading good practice and learning amongst our members, and helping them improve. We have produced the following guide to highlight some of the excellent work already taking place between principal and local councils and to provide help to those looking to kick start new partnerships in their area.

The case studies throughout this guide show some of the practical and innovative solutions to the real challenges that are faced at a local and national level. They highlight that by working together and thinking of those we serve as 'one community' we can better address them despite limited resources.

We hope that this guide supports our members to create strong and enduring partnerships and that it helps them better serve the interests of residents and make a real difference at the grass roots level of community life.

Lord Gary Porter
LGA Chairman

Councillor Sue Baxter
NALC Chairman

Why work together?

The need for cooperation between tiers of local government has never been greater.

Budgets are smaller, creating pressure on councils to be more commercial, efficient, preventative and also encouraging them to help residents to do more for themselves. However, the needs and expectations of residents have increased too. It is more important than ever that principal and local councils (ie parish and town councils) empower local people, reflect communities' sense of 'place', and provide tailored, responsive services.

In this context, the potential opportunities of partnership between principal and local councils should not be underestimated. As the title of this guide suggests, the different tiers of local government are not in competition with each other. They represent the same people and their duty is to the same communities. Most of those they serve do not differentiate between tiers of government, but between the quality of services and the ability to have their voices heard.

Hence, principal and local councils are united, from the smallest parish to the largest unitary council, by a common purpose: to do the best for the people they represent. The aim of this guide is to set out some of the key ways in which councils can partner within and between tiers, to achieve these shared goals.

This is not a lofty aspiration or a 'nice to have'. Rather it provides many of the solutions to the major challenges areas face. In this guide, we include examples of partnership working aimed at tackling the care crisis and the challenges of an ageing population, for instance. We have examples of parish-level engagement creating participatory budgets. And we have instances of partnership helping to build social capital and community values.

Indeed, the vast differences in scale and size – between small local councils and large principal councils, creates countless opportunities for working together. Local councils have a depth of insight into the needs of their communities and local areas that might not be possible for principal councils. Meanwhile, principal councils can provide the scale and resources to make local goals a reality.

This guide sets out a series of core principles. It explains how, by partnering with different levels of local government, councils can be more representative of place, more responsive to citizens, more efficient in continuing to deliver services, and hence more able to fulfil their common purpose.

In particular, partnership between principal and local councils plays three important roles.

First, it makes democracy more local. After all, town and parish councils and other community groups are the lifeblood of many neighbourhoods. Principal councils cannot be in touch with every citizen. But better relationships between them and local councils can help them respond to concerns more quickly – giving residents genuine influence.

As an example, the Government's Industrial Strategy and the planned delivery of Local Industrial Strategies in the coming years, led by local areas, provide local councils with an opportunity to discuss with their principal tier how local government can work together to deliver inclusive growth that genuinely connects to the needs of local communities.

Secondly, partnership helps to get communities working together. It can build citizenship and create a stronger sense of place – as well as stronger bonds between different places. Working together offers more ways of empowering local people and creating capacity, as well as a means of identifying resources and opportunities that would not otherwise exist.

Thirdly, in an era of financial pressure on services, better relationships between local and principal councils can help local government to find creative ways of delivering outcomes. This is not just about 'efficiencies' or passing costs downwards. It is about town and parish councils using their local knowledge, community ties and better grasp of local needs to design and deliver services.

The sections on **community influence**, **local participation** and **service delivery** – cover these three areas. You can go to them directly by clicking the tabs down the left-hand side.

The section on **different perspectives** highlights the range of responsibilities that different tiers of councils have. It gives some pointers about which parts of the guide might be a useful place to start, depending on the characteristics of your organisation.

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Understanding how other types of councils function is central to working together. The pressures and considerations are clearly very different at a large unitary with several thousand staff and an executive cabinet, than at a small parish with a part-time clerk. And there are many sizes of council between these two extremes.

This guide offers broad principles for how organisations of different sizes and with different capacities can work together to fulfil a common purpose. It obviously cannot set out rules for every conceivable type of partnership between tiers. But the four boxes below offer a core explanation of how other councils work, to help think about partnership from others' points-of-view.

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	Two-tier principal council areas	Single-tier principal council areas	Larger local councils	Smaller local councils
How many exist?	27 upper tier (eg county) and over 200 lower tier councils (eg district)	57 unitary councils, plus 68 London and metropolitan boroughs	Around 700, mostly town councils but a few larger parish councils	Over 9,000 nationally
How many people do they serve?	Upper tier councils have around 400,000 to 1.5 million residents; lower tier principals usually have under 200,000 residents	Between 200,000 to 800,000 local residents	3,000 residents to around 60,000 residents – sometimes bigger than a district council	Between a few hundred residents to around 2,000
How do budgets work?	Cabinets approve spending and full council ratifies	Cabinets approve spending and full council ratifies	Council approves spending; flexibility to spend through Section 137 and Power of General Competence	Council approves spending; precept often supported through external grants
What are the key officer roles for partnership?	Ideally an officer centrally located at both councils – at districts this will often be part of a role, at counties a full-time position	Ideally an officer within a centrally located/corporate department (eg member services)	Clerk or CEO with core staffing team which can vary from two or three to 80	Clerk – usually only paid staff member, often part-time (sometimes just one day a week)

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What are the key political structures?	No single decision making system for all councils. Could be: a leader and cabinet system, where councillors of the cabinet (referred to as portfolio holders) have decision making powers, with a responsibility for a certain service area; a mayoral system, where a council has a directly elected executive mayor with decision making powers; or a committee system, which makes decisions via committees made up of councillors from all parties.	No single decision making system for all councils. Could be: a leader and cabinet system, where councillors of the cabinet (referred to as portfolio holders) have decision making powers, with a responsibility for a certain service area; a mayoral system, where a council has a directly elected executive mayor with decision making powers; or a committee system, which makes decisions via committees made up of councillors from all parties.	Corporate structure with Chairman of the council; sometimes a non-executive Mayor/Leader; more politically partisan than smaller local councils but with cross-party cooperation, with a minimum of five councillors	Corporate structure with Chairman of the council; with a minimum of five councillors
How do electoral timescales operate?	May to April, elections 'by thirds' each year (with a fallow year)	May to April, often 'all out' elections every four years	Electoral cycles are every four years, often aligned with principal council elections	Electoral cycles are every four years, often aligned with principal council elections
How regularly are decisions usually made?	Weekly to monthly Cabinet meetings, full council sessions every six to eight weeks	Weekly to monthly Cabinet meetings, full council sessions every 6-8 weeks	Council and committee system, with a minimum requirement of four council meetings per annum	Council and committee system, with a minimum requirement of four council meetings per annum
What support and membership bodies do they have?	LGA, County Councils' Network (CCN), District Councils Network (DCN), SOLACE	LGA, SIGOMA, Core Cities, Key Cities, London Councils, SOLACE	NALC, the Associations of Local Councils (ALCs) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)	NALC, the ALCs and the SLCC

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Each of the three subsequent sections apply to councils of every size and experience level. However, depending on the characteristics of your council and your prior experiences of partnerships, there may be certain places where it is more useful to start.

For readers from councils in urban or unparished areas, the chapter on creating new grass roots partnerships might be useful. Likewise, the section on developing a vision for the local area may come in handy, in starting to think about the core reasons for partnering.

If your council has a long history of partnering between principal and local tiers, then the service delivery tiers section, may be of particular use. It looks at how best to improve outcomes via practical partnerships that enable asset and service transfers, more localised staffing, the division of capital and running costs, and the delivery of value for money. These may be of particular use when discussing types of longstanding service cooperation between larger local councils and principal councils.

In regards to partnership working and smaller parishes, the chapters on how to join forces with other local partners so as to do more (ie 'clustering') and on making the case to residents for more local representation should be most useful.

For larger principal councils with experience in this area, a useful place to start might be the chapters on building community capacity and engaging better with residents through partnering. These chapters are about the sophisticated ways in which cooperation between tiers can help develop the localism agenda. The chapter on designing channels so that principal and local councils can liaise also outlines a key way to make partnerships function better.

Highlighted text also links to the relevant section.

Partnership
and community influence

One goal which unites local and principal councils is the importance of giving a greater voice to residents. Parish, town, district, unitary and county councils aspire to more effective engagement, and want local government to be democratic and representative. This is what makes local government important; it is what makes it local.

Positive relationships between local councils and principal councils can support better democratic engagement of communities across local areas.

This part of the guide looks at how strong partnerships between local councils and principal councils can deliver this. The four short chapters explain how to:

- develop a long-term vision for an area

- make the case to residents for more local representation

- engage better with residents through partnering

- create new grass-roots partnerships in unparished areas.

Each provides a checklist or step-by-step guide, and an example of partnership in action. By clicking on the links above you can go to any chapter that is especially relevant to your council.

How to develop a long-term vision for a local area

Strong partnerships often take place when the local council has developed a strategic vision for their area, which the principal council can endorse and support. This creates mutual trust in each other.

A strong vision, based on the identity of a place and the priorities of its residents, can give a town or parish council the organisational confidence to take on devolved powers. It can present a democratic calling for the area: a clear sense of what they want to do, why they want to do it and how it can be achieved.

For local councils, developing a local vision starts with some clear thinking about goals and narratives on how best to meet the needs of residents. What are the opportunities and challenges for the area? What is the big picture ideal? This needs to include voices of residents, via a short survey or public meeting.

This feeds directly into a two or three year plan, with a set of priorities. The goals might be modest. But once they are in place it is easier to think about what is needed to achieve them – so it feels like there is less of a risk of it failing to work out.

Principal councils, meanwhile, have a big role to play. They may have their own ideas for a local area – based on insights about socio-demographic changes and challenges, for example – and want to work with the local council to identify shared priorities. Equally, principal councils can provide capacity for local engagement, and help develop and endorse narratives.

In terms of resources, principal councils might be aware of opportunities on the horizon, which could tally with the goals of local councils. New funding or opportunities for pilot projects can be flagged to relevant parishes, as pre-emptive ways of starting to talk about vision.

By working together to fashion a vision for the town or parish, both parties can therefore represent the views and values of local people. And, in so doing, they can build mutual trust and allow the community's voice to be heard.

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Case study
Cornwall Council and Falmouth Town Council

Falmouth Town Council has built the views of local people into forward planning, to present a clear vision for the area. As part of this, they underwrote a 2030 neighbourhood plan and an economic strategy. These documents involved local stakeholders, and have added clarity and coherence to Falmouth's plans. This has in turn instilled Cornwall with the confidence to devolve assets and services.

Each stage of devolution between principal and local council has involved significant consultation around services and the precept. This has seen Falmouth take charge of library and information services, which they run alongside an art gallery and an outreach centre. In order to facilitate the vision, Cornwall Council's community link officers, who are team members of the localism service, are tasked with supporting the town council. Their role is to ensure that the relevant Cornwall council officers understand the devolution aspirations of the town council and can make the devolution proposals work.

All of this was driven by the initial development of an underlying vision. This created a clear path into the future, building mutual confidence between local and principal.

For more information email Mark Williams, Town Clerk markwilliams@falmouthtowncouncil.com or Mark James, Community Link Officer, mjames2@cornwall.gov.uk

Checklist

☐ Think about a top-line narrative for the area

☐ Test ideas for this vision with residents

☐ Set out goals for the area that can be measured

☐ Decide what is needed to fulfil the goals and vision

How to make the case to residents for more local representation

One of the most important aspects of partnership and devolving services is explaining to the community what local councils do. This is especially true if a new partnership requires a local council to ask for more from residents in terms of money or time commitments.

An important thing to recognise is that most residents do not distinguish between local and principal councils, at least when it comes to knowing exactly who provides which services.

Spelling this out is essential. By creating a narrative and policies to back it up, local councils can make what they are doing tangible, so people start to understand what they are getting for their precept. Is their grass being cut where previously it wouldn't have been, for example?

It is preferable for both the local and principal council to partner up so as to communicate this, so residents do not feel they are paying two organisations that are not talking.

An important part of making the case to local residents is demonstrating the extra flexibility, accountability and value that more grass roots services can deliver. So, as the next chapter, 'How to engage better with residents through partnering', explains, communicating this should ideally involve engagement with the community.

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Case study
Castle Donington Parish Council, North West Leicestershire District Council

Castle Donington Parish Council wanted to deliver extra services in light of smaller budgets at principal level. There was a strong local desire and business case for creating a community hub to bring together a range of services, including the parish council, community library and volunteer centre. It was important to explain to residents the 50 per cent increase in the precept that this required.

The principal authority, North West Leicestershire District Council, was keen to support this. In particular, they had the infrastructure in place to help understand residents' priorities in the new financial context – following a village appraisal engagement exercise a few years before.

Castle Donington therefore ran an online survey to get an update on community priorities. This was promoted widely through leaflets, public meetings about the precept, Q&A sessions, and visits from councillors at principal and local level. And the results revealed broad support for the community hub, as a long-term, cost-effective base for service-providing organisations.

When a building became available for the hub, the council held a snap poll with support from North West Leciestershire, winning majority support for the purchase of the building as a community hub. North West Leicestershire also backed the plan. They advised Castle Donington on planning issues and match-funded a community fund grant from Roxhill Development towards the hub.

This example of devolved working came about through external pressures, and the efforts to sustain services could have been seen as asking for 'more for less'. But by making sure the plans for spending the extra revenue were tangible, clearly communicated and attuned to the needs of local people, Castle Donington and North West Leicestershire instead helped deliver a more localised form of government.

For more information email Fiona Palmer, Clerk, clerk@cdpc.org.uk.

Checklist

☐ Think about what you are offering from a resident's perspective

☐ Work together – between local and principal – to look at what extra benefits the partnership is bringing

☐ Communicate this in coordinated ways, linking tangible benefits brought by the added precept to a wider vision for the area

How to engage better with residents through partnering

Rather than partnerships between principal councils and local councils only being about delivery, there is a great deal of potential in those built around dialogue with local people and their involvement in decision-making. Local partnership between principal and local councils takes decision-making a step closer to local people. This helps create trust in decision-making, and opens up new channels of communication between the principal council and the community.

The case of Choppington Town Council, below, shows that on a complex issue like participatory budgets, there is a significant role for local councils. Indeed, by taking decisions a step closer to the grass roots, engagement around decisions can sometimes be easier. Communities often find it easier to engage and identify a common purpose when the process feels more local and tangible.

This is an aspect of partnership where there is still potential. Fulfilling this often starts with principal councils. Most have teams or individuals responsible for consultation and engagement; local councils are key stakeholders in decisions and should be

considered as such. Ideally, a member of the engagement team will be able act as a champion for the area's local councils to ensure a dialogue is always open.

For local councils, the aim is to increase capacity to reflect local views. This can be fairly simple – eg online surveys with representative samples, or discussion groups with parish councillors. But the more that local councils are able to act as a barometer for opinion – collecting, analysing and keeping information safe – the more they can play a role in engagement. Principal councils can help local councils by providing frameworks and protocols for doing this well.

Another good example of this is the partnership between Horninglow and Eton Parish Council and Staffordshire County Council. In this example, the local council and county council highways team engaged with residents on traffic and parking issues. Their work to introduce a one-way system involved the parish leading on resident engagement and the county council leading on statutory aspects of the consultation.

The LGA's New Conversations guide includes a range of key principles of community engagement – including tips for including local councils.

Case study
Northumberland County Council and Choppington Parish Council

Choppington Parish Council comprises 5,000 households in seven communities. The local council engages residents in decisions through surveys, meetings with service users, and engagement with local groups. They use participatory budgeting to understand priorities, and they have a Residents' Panel who approve expenditure, scrutinise budgets and set the level of the precept. This ensures that the parish council's resources are used to achieve the community's strategic objectives and cost criteria.

This all began in 2011, and a local partnership between Choppington Parish Council and Northumberland County Council now covers all aspects of local delivery.

A 'partnership team' jointly funded and directed by the two authorities delivers Northumberland's standard baseline level of services, and this is enhanced and tailored to meet the specific priorities of the local community.

Northumberland support the approach adopted by Choppington Parish Council and draw on the community intelligence Choppington has gathered, so as to improve standards and to deliver value-for-money.

Choppington consulted, for instance, on grass-cutting standards and provision of floral displays, and were able to feed insights back to the principal council on local priorities. This has resulted in Northumberland re-equipping the type of machines used and increasing its staffing resource for grass-cutting – as well as providing new floral displays on several main roundabouts to provide distinctive gateway features when entering the parish. This approach was then adopted by many of the other town and parish councils in the area.

For more information, email David Nicholson, Clerk, at dln@choppingtonparishcouncil.org or Paul Jones, Director of Local Services and Housing Delivery, at paul.jones01@northumberland.gov.uk

Checklist

☐ Include local councils in principal council engagement decisions on consultation/ and planning issues

☐ Build local council capacity to accurately gauge opinion

☐ Start by consulting on the big picture vision – but feed this into specific choices

☐ Give local people maximum information to make informed choices

How to create new grass roots partnerships in unparished areas

Local councils do not cover the whole of the country. In fact, whilst some areas will have had them for many years, others, such as London Boroughs and other urban areas may have never had a parish or town council in their area before.

Yet far from being a relic, town and parish councils can play a vital role in the future of localism. For a metropolitan borough, for instance – where existing partnerships often tend to be with higher tiers, like combined authorities – some communities are considering the role a newly created local council could play in helping deliver services in their area.

The key to establishing local partnerships is to think through some of the challenges that establishing new parishes might throw up.

People might not be familiar with the practice to begin with, so start out by working with what already exists. Flexibility is vital, as the process might involve different local organisations (and different names, like 'community councils'), rather than a traditional parish model.

Another important factor is establishing a vision (already discussed in our first 'How To…'). 2007 legislation made it possible for any area to set up a Neighbourhood Plan, based on their local vision. And the most effective approaches, whether with the establishment of a new town council or a whole new parish tier, are underpinned by a sense of purpose.

The final thing to consider, particularly in urban areas, is socio-economic diversity. For instance, a more deprived area will bring in a smaller precept than a larger one and will often have less citizen capacity. Equally, difficulties may arise in areas which contain business districts which need more resources and have fewer residents. There are no perfect answers to these questions, but they still require significant consideration.

Interesting examples range from Birmingham, which is looking to develop a new town and parish policy framework, through to Milton Keynes, which has historically worked with parishes that pre-date the town. Meanwhile, Queens Park Community Council in Westminster remains London's only local council, and shows the potential of urban partnerships.

Case study
Birmingham City Council

Birmingham City Council's Corporate Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee set up an inquiry group to gather together the lessons that could be learned from how the two local councils within Birmingham, New Frankley in Birmingham Parish Council and Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council, have been working with the city council.

What the inquiry group found was that the majority of the issues raised by the town and parish councils were operational: a lack of a more formalised structure and an effective working relationship with Birmingham City Council meant that they were encountering delays in getting projects off the ground and in getting problems resolved. The inquiry group recognised this to be a significant concern because delays and blockages may lead to cynicism about the ability of local councils to achieve their goals and about the willingness of the city council to engage at a local level.

The inquiry group recommended a number of processes to be put in place in order to facilitate successful partnership working between the city council, local councils and local residents. These include a cross-party council policy on local governance, a charter or framework between the city council and local councils, and a set of local 'devo deals'.

Since the scrutiny report was published, the city council has published a draft policy statement ('green paper') on 'Working with Neighbourhoods', to respond to the recommendations and other issues. This proposes a more detailed approach to engaging with stakeholders (over summer 2018); sharpening up operational response; and developing guidance and principles for working with parish councils. This will be supported by joint work with NALC to support the process, drawing on national best practice.

For more information email Iram Choudry at iram.choudry@birmingham.gov.uk

Checklist

☐ Start flexibly, with pre-existing organisations

☐ Get staff onboard – who might not have previously worked with local councils

☐ Put vision and purpose at the heart of what you do

☐ Remember social and economic differences in urban areas

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Participation is central to successful partnerships. The more citizens, communities, and councils recognise common goals and develop a shared sense of a purpose, the more that can be achieved.

Many of the shared challenges which local and principal councils now face can be solved by building strong relationships. Joined-up approaches allow potential to be released among citizens and capacity to be built in communities. By working together local councils can combine forces with each other and coordinate with principal councils to build a stronger, more inclusive sense of place.

This part of the guide looks at the essential role that partnership and cooperation plays in doing this. The four short chapters explain how to:

- build community capacity and citizen power through partnership

- design channels so that principal and local councils can liaise with each other

- create shared agreements about working relationships between tiers

- join forces with other local partners so as to do more.

Each provides a checklist or step-by-step guide, and an example of partnership in action. By clicking on the links above you can go to any chapters that is especially relevant to your council.

How to build community capacity and citizen power through partnership

One of the biggest advantages of principal and local councils working together is that it allows policy interventions to set down real roots in the neighbourhoods, and to be carried out in partnership with local people.

Local councils are immersed in their communities. They are run by people who live and breathe what is going on in their town, village or neighbourhood. There is a level of depth that principal councils, with their broader geographical remits, can find more challenging to build.

The first step to building local capacity through partnership is to identify shared priorities for a community. These might be demographic, economic, or related to social issues. (In Alcester, featured in our case study, it was the phenomenon of an ageing population). Often, the quantitative data provided by the principal council and the qualitative understanding of the local council can complement each other.

After this, both parties can start to think about what the local council can do with the community. What do they have, by way of local connections and insight, which the higher tiers of local government do not? What do they have by way of people and assets?

And what, conversely, can the principal council provide to support the local council? It might, for example, be able to help by supplying advice on the management of budgets or the formulation of metrics to help a project achieve its potential.

The long-term aim with an idea like this is to embed roots in the community that become self-sustaining through having an immediate grass roots presence. This can help communities to do more, with the local council acting as a source of immediate support and continuity. And it can create more responsive communities.

As the Alcester case study shows, partnership approaches like this can help tackle some of the biggest issues facing the country – adult social care, social prescribing and the ageing population – at the most local of levels.

Case study
Alcester Town Council and Warwickshire County Council

Alcester Town Council is a middle-sized local council with a population of 8,000. One third are over the age of 65. Alcester formed a Health and Wellbeing Board in 2015, mirroring the county structure and including representatives from the NHS Trust and CCG, and charities such as Age UK and Citizens Advice, as well as Warwickshire County Council representatives.

Alcester received funding from Warwickshire to employ two part-time health and wellbeing coordinators, tackling isolation among older people, and focusing on preventative steps. They work with existing clubs and societies, and when gaps are found they set up new groups. They also recruit and train volunteers – meaning several of the groups, including a lunch club with 40 members, are now self-sufficient. The coordinators also work one-to-one with older people who require support with issues relating to, for example, housing, benefits or care.

Recently Warwickshire County Council and local health services have started to use Alcester as a testbed for 'place based' working, prompted by the existing health and wellbeing presence. Working with their Health and Wellbeing Board partners, Alcester plans to extend its work to cover two other strands: young people's mental health, and support for carers.

For more information, email Vanessa Lowe, Clerk, at clerk@alcester-tc.gov.uk

or Jenny Murray, Localities and Partnerships Manager at jennymurray@warwickshire.gov.uk

Checklist

☐ Work between tiers to identify shared community challenges

☐ Consider what capacity the local council has to be able to tackle local challenges

☐ Explore what capacity the principal council can provide to facilitate this

☐ Consider how it can become sustainable for the long term

How to design channels so that principal and local councils can liaise

Part of the challenge with partnering towards a shared goal is that every relationship between councils is different.

Often, the role of individual relationships is essential in coordinating between tiers. Too often a member of staff leaving or a politician retiring results in partnerships withering away. Getting clear 'point people' in place, whose responsibility it is to liaise between the two, is therefore vital. Having individuals with set roles can help bridge the gap between principal and local levels.

In particular, a strong and flexible point person can help to cater to local councils' immensely varied levels of capacity, resource, and ability to navigate issues. It is no use relying on a single system or process; in a situation where one council is on the front foot and another needs to build its basic capacity, it is vital that there is a point of contact, or a single team to liaise with.

There are many different ways of going about this, depending on the structures in place. In some instances, it may be that councillors can play bridging roles – especially if they are a councillor at both the principal and local council have roots in the community.

Including responsibility for local councils within a Cabinet portfolio at the principal council can be another effective way of creating direct channels and responsibilities. And other principal councils deploy a parish liaison officer scheme, whereby each member of senior management has set roles. North Somerset council in particular has pioneered this.

Running alongside this, it is important for principal councils in areas with a number of town and parish councils to have dedicated officers or teams who hold responsibility for partnership. This helps to build capacity and realise potential in a more coordinated way.

However the channels for liaison are structured at a council, the important thing is to develop clear responsibilities and point people, who know the area sufficiently well that they can work with a range of different local partners.

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Case study
Milton Keynes

Milton Keynes is a fully parished borough covering both urban and rural areas. In order to keep communication channels open between the principal council and all 48 parish and town councils, a named officer scheme has been created. A team of three officers (including the director of policy, insight and communications), as well as a named lead cabinet member, make up the group responsible for liaising with local councils.

In addition to acting as a point of contact for parish and town councils, the named officers meet up on a regular basis with the Parish Advisory Group – a set of parish councillors from across Milton Keynes, which includes a ward councillor (who is often dual-hatted) from all main parties. At these meetings, the two groups work to make decisions that affect parish and town councils. For instance, after an initial draft of a framework for local councils and service delivery was produced, discussions between the two groups led to significant amendments being made to the draft framework. The principles enshrined in the amended draft framework have now been approved by the cabinet.

The named officers also meet all parish councillors at quarterly parish forum meetings, which are organised by the Parish Advisory Group. The officers are also on hand to attend individual parish meetings, clerk's meetings, and area meetings. Working in an urban area with significant variations in capacity and revenue, having point people in place lets Milton Keynes get the relationships right in each case.

Email Kay Pettit, Programme Manager, Town and Parish Councils, at kay.pettit@milton-keynes.gov.uk for more information.

Checklist

☐ Identify channels of democratic influence through regular contact with councillors, and senior politicians and managers

☐ Create easy to contact officer teams with clear responsibilities

☐ Look for opportunities for shared training

How to create shared agreements about working relationships between tiers

Establishing a strong working arrangement is essential in creating robust and effective partnerships between principal and local councils. A shared, well-understood sense of what underpins and drives the partnership can really help to turn it into something meaningful – rather than just an occasional or ad hoc relationship.

Charters or sets of 'partnership principles' are the most common ways of establishing and formalising this. However, getting them right is not always easy.

For charters to be effective, rather than just sitting in a drawer, they need several key components to be addressed.

For starters, there needs to be clarity from the outset about which organisations are included. Which principal councils are signed up to it, and which parishes? On some occasions there have been instances of principal or local councils not signing a charter they are included on – which means the partnership is over before it has begun.

Another point is about vision. We have already mentioned the importance of an ambitious, mutually endorsed goal. This particularly applies to working relationships. The best charters set out concrete ambitions, and go beyond platitudes about cooperation. This can energise people around the partnership. And it can also help clarify what people want and expect from the partnership.

Perhaps more importantly than any of this, the most effective charters build relationships and interaction around them. Principal and local councils meet and interact around the newly established charter, using it as a catalyst for further cooperation. Or else the charter is a formalisation of relationships that are strong in the first place, clarifying roles and responsibilities that are already being realised in practice.

There are many ways of doing this. Charter Champion schemes or training programmes are often a good idea. But however the working relationship is codified, the key is that any set of principles is written with the aim of becoming a living, breathing tool for real cooperation.

Case study
Warwickshire County Council

The Warwickshire Local Councils' Charter has been approved by each of the parished principal councils in the county. It provides a partnership framework which covers communication, consultation, support and the measurement of progress.

To embed this, it is being rolled out through a Parish Champion scheme. The scheme ensures that the principles of the charter are communicated throughout the parished areas. Warwickshire Association of Local Councils, which was instrumental in writing the charter, has helped coordinate the Parish Champion scheme. All of the principal councils in the county are signed up to it, and a champion has now been appointed for all except one (which is currently working towards the same goal), as well as for the county council.

The champion is a local councillor who acts as a link between the different tiers, to ensure that the principles of the charter are adopted. They are responsible for raising awareness, facilitating discussions about devolution of services, attending local council liaison meetings, and encouraging joint training.

One benefit that has already been seen is that councils in the county now do two and even three-tier training much more frequently, with councillors from the county, district, borough and local level in attendance. The first three-tier training event was held last year involving Warwickshire County Council, Stratford-on-Avon District Council and the local councils in the district. These training events build better working relationships and create a better understanding of how different roles interact.

Email, John Crossling at johnc@walc.org.uk, Jenny Murray at jennymurray@warwickshire.gov.uk, or Amanda Wilson-Patterson at ,amandawilsonpatterson@warwickshire.gov.uk, for more information.

Checklist

☐ Clarify who is included in the charter and ensure buy-in of all parties

☐ Create ambitious, co-produced shared goals

☐ Include roles and responsibilities – and expectations and hopes

☐ Get people to drive the working relationship – eg Charter Champions

How to join forces with other local partners so as to do more

Sometimes known as 'clustering', the process of establishing cooperation between small councils is a key aspect of effective partnership.

This is especially true among smaller organisations within the local council sector. The majority of town and parish councils – around four fifths, by some estimates – have less than 2,500 residents. Resource capacity is often fairly low, with just a single part-time clerk in some cases.

There is therefore a strong argument for working together to pool resources between adjacent local councils – when those councils are close together and have a sense of shared purpose. This can allow a single member of staff to work across an area, or a single facility to be utilised across town and parish boundaries. It might allow a group of very small organisations to develop a shared voice and be heard collectively, or allow skills and expertise to be shared.

District, county and unitary councils have a vital role to play in facilitating this. The 'bird's eye view' afforded by the principal tier sometimes lets them recognise areas where a common purpose might exist between local councils, and where that common purpose might be shared by the principal council in trying to improve the area.

Relationships are key to this. Strong clusters will often have a lead local council which helps the towns or parishes to combine forces. In the case of groups of very small parishes, some partners may be dormant or play a more minor role. It is important that everyone is happy with clustering arrangements, however, and facilitators often have a role to play in cultivating and formalising the working relationships (ie by helping draw up a charter). So, it is important that there is a single point person at the principal council level, who can help the cluster fulfil its potential.

Case study
Ashford Borough Council, and Wittersham, Stone-in-Oxney, Warehorne and Kenardington Parish Councils

Following the 2011 Localism Act, Kent County Council, Ashford Borough Council and four parishes decided to team up to deliver a new service. Wittersham Parish Council, Stone-in-Oxney Parish Council, Warehorne Parish Council and Kenardington Parish Council represented neighbouring villages. They had a strong shared agenda, which the county and borough councils helped them develop. In particular, the local councils were aware of resident concerns about the condition of the village's public spaces. They wanted to improve upkeep and maintenance in areas such as grass cutting, hedge trimming, weeding and litter disposal.

As individual parishes, none could justify a full-time staff member. But by joining forces they were able to employ a village caretaker. The role was funded by Ashford's allocated budget for services such as grass cutting, together with a contribution from Kent and three of the parishes, alongside a grant from Ashford for the trailer. The lead parish council, Wittersham, ran the programme on a day-to-day basis, having identified a candidate for the role who lived locally. Ashford gave general support and continues to do so.

The scheme is still working well, helping to keep the villages spic and span, and building relationships and interactions between the villages.

Email Michelle Byrne at michelle.byrne@ashford.gov.uk for more information.

Checklist

☐ Seek commonalities between local councils that are geographically close and similar in character

☐ Look to create a vision which might unite the cluster: why do they want to join forces?

☐ Find a point person to drive the project at principal level, and a lead officer at local level

☐ Codify the relationship – including any financial issues – via a charter or working document

Partnership and service delivery

Ultimately, the primary reason for the existence of local government is practical – to deliver services, run public assets and resources, and give residents the support they need. Whether you are a small parish with a few thousand residents, or a combined authority with a population of millions, the aim is the same: high quality, value for money services, which serve the community in the ways they want and need. Working together can help to deliver services at the scale which is needed – be it large or small – in the most effective and responsive ways possible. This is especially true at a time when budgets are smaller and financial pressures greater.

This part of the guide looks at how the interrelation between principal and local councils can do this. The four short chapters explain how to:

- transfer powers and responsibilities between tiers
- use local partnerships to make staffing more responsive
- divide up capital and costs to create new opportunities
- team up to deliver value-for-money.

Each provides a checklist or step-by-step guide, and an example of partnership in action. By clicking on the links above you can go to any chapter that is especially relevant to your council.

How to transfer powers and responsibilities between tiers

Transferring the running of services and assets between councils can be a contentious aspect of partnership working. Handled poorly, this process can undermine the potential for local councils to take genuine control.

This is especially true in the context of very large budget reductions for local government in recent years. In the worst-case scenarios, cuts to core budgets have meant that, in order to save an amenity or service, principal councils are approaching local councils to help continue a provision that might otherwise have to stop.

The temptation for local councils can be to see everything through this prism and reject all efforts to devolve physical assets or delivery duties. In other cases, conversely, they might seek ownership of an asset or service on principal rather than because they have a genuine vision for how to run it better.

The reality is that the transfer of services and assets can work well, but only if it manages to strike the right balance between new powers and new responsibilities.

This relates closely to the ideas of vision for the local area discussed elsewhere in this guide. The transfer of assets and services works best if the local council has a clear idea for how services can be run more effectively or imaginatively at a community level. The local council may have a better way of funding the asset or running the service. Or they may have a different goal for how the service itself functions – be it opening times or the look and feel of a local facility.

On other occasions this is to do with ownership and management. For example, on some occasions a town council has taken on a municipal building they were previously renting and then hired it out to the principal council when they need it. As a result, the local council is able to step up and do more, taking on more responsibility. But it has power alongside this responsibility, through ownership of a service that it previously only rented.

The important issue, ultimately, is that transfers are made in partnership, in the common interests of local residents. To achieve this, principal councils need to support local councils to generate a vision or plan for how they might do things better. And local councils, can help by understanding the pressures principal councils are under, and looking for proactive and constructive solutions.

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Partnership and local participation

Partnership and service delivery

Asset library

Case study
Wyre Forest District Council and Kidderminster Town Council

Wyre Forest District Council set up Kidderminster Town Council in 2015 following a Community Governance Review – with four out of every five voters in favour of the new local council.

Prior to Kidderminster Town Council's creation, there was consultation about what assets the town council would take on as part of the reorganisation – with local civic statues and toilets among those chosen.

The biggest asset transferred, however, was the freehold of the town hall. Wyre Forest leased back the 'events and entertainment' side of the facility and space for its customer services team, ensuring that services would run seamlessly. Under the agreement to run the town hall, Kidderminster contributes around 30 per cent of the costs and Wyre Forest continues to be responsible for the management and maintenance. This is done under a financial formula agreed between the two councils. Subsequently, the town council has negotiated the transfer of responsibility for a paddling pool which would otherwise have been closed.

The town council now have ambitions to run the town hall independently and promote its commercial and community uses. They have directly employed a project officer who is responsible for looking into ways in which the town hall can be developed as a vibrant community asset – for instance through identifying potential grants.

Email Ian Miller, Chief Executive, Wyre Forest District Council at Ian.Miller@wyreforestdc.gov.uk or Tony Beirne, Town Clerk, Kidderminster Town Council at Tony.Beirne@kidderminstertowncouncil.gov.uk for more information.

Checklist

☐ Create clear criteria for the circumstances when an asset can be transferred (eg only if it will be run better)

☐ Identify assets, at a principal level, that local councils could run better

☐ Work in partnership to develop clear plans in each case for how it will work better under local council control

☐ Develop clear contracts to formalise changes of ownership

How to use local partnerships to make staffing more responsive

Principal councils work at a much larger scale than local councils – including when it comes to staffing.

Frequently, a principal council will employ very specialised members of staff across a large area. In an area of reduced budgets, these types of roles can become hard for principal councils to justify. This is especially true if there are parts of the wider area that no longer require a particular service.

Working with local councils provides a way around this. It can create an effective, localised and tailored workforce. And it can save jobs in the process.

It might be, for instance, that a particular council no longer needs a county-wide cemetery manager, but that an individual local council requires someone with a broader remit to run all their open spaces. Contracting the member of staff to the local council like this would allow a less specialised, more 'all round' service, putting employees in place where they are needed. In the process it might bring staff closer to their homes, and give them deeper roots in a specific local area.

A key factor in doing this is, of course, for principal councils to look at whether there are areas where specialised staff are over-resourced. There needs to be a clear dialogue with town and parish councils about places where there are gaps at a local level.

There also needs to be a strong human resource focus, on training staff and identifying whether they are interested in a more geographically precise sphere of activity.

Case study
Southern Parishes group, Hampshire

In the Hampshire area, a group of parish councils formed the Southern Parishes group. The aim was to identify ways of supporting each other with staffing, facilities, and bulk-buying.

The group is made up of local councils of varying sizes, and one of its first steps was to explore staffing needs. As a result, Bishop's Waltham, one of the group's larger councils, contracted out their lengthsman to two smaller local councils, Durley Parish and Upham Parish. The lengthsman now works half a day at each.

Building on this, the Southern Parishes group worked, with the support of district councils in the area – and in particular Eastleigh – to identify issues where the same principles applied. Dog fouling, littering, fly-tipping, and flyposting were picked out as partnership priorities to tackle.

The Southern Parishes decided to appoint an Accredited Community Safety Officer (ACSO) to deal with these problems. Bishop's Waltham Parish Council contracted the ACSO out for a third of the time to Swanmore Parish Council. They are looking to recruit another in the future who could be contracted out to other smaller local councils in the group.

The approach underpinning this shows how, by working together, councils of different sizes can work together to make sure staffing needs are met.

Email Lindsay Edge at parishclerk@bishopswaltham-pc.gov.uk for more information.

Checklist

- [ ] Find places where a localised employee might work better than an area-wide specialist – and vice versa
- [ ] Decide how to fund new roles
- [ ] Work with staff to oversee any changes

How to divide up capital and costs to create new opportunities

The difference between principal and local councils is often to do with capacity versus flexibility.

Local councils run on smaller budgets, based on individual grants and their precept. They tend, as a result, to be more risk averse even if they have ideas for innovating. On the other hand, local councils often have more flexibility than principal councils. They can be nimble in responding to service needs, in ways others cannot.

One way to maximise the potential between the two is to look into ways of juggling capital and running costs. For instance, the principal council can provide upfront costs for a local council idea – which to them involves relatively small risk. And the local council can run services in flexible ways, using local staff and resources, and keeping running costs low as a result.

This lets both principal and local councils play to their strengths – bringing service benefits that might otherwise not exist.

Often, an initial step in doing this is the identification of funds or grants, at a principal council level. These may have a strong emphasis on a certain issue – high street development, or renovation of green spaces, for example – on which the town or parish council might have something to contribute. Match-funded approaches between local and principal councils are another version of roughly the same thing.

This is an issue where partnership is welcome for both sides. Principal councils may want to divert funds and allocate resources to particular areas, but may not have the time to implement them. And local councils may have the enthusiasm and local knowledge to run services well, but not the tools. Often a relatively small outlay can result in both parties working towards a shared goal. The principal council then has a key role to play in evaluating and justifying the effectiveness of approaches.

Case study
Dunstable Town Council and Central Bedfordshire Council

Dunstable Town Council won funding through Central Bedfordshire Council's Market Town Regeneration Fund. In order to be eligible for this funding, Dunstable had to evidence match-funding.

One of the projects that the grant supported was the Dunstable Town Centre Ranger scheme. They already had one town ranger and wanted to employ a second person to carry out similar duties specifically focused on the town centre. The Central Bedfordshire grant was for capital only and allowed them to purchase a ride-on utility vehicle, industrial jet-washer, and mechanical sweeper. The revenue costs of employing and managing a staff member came from Dunstable, who could evidence funding to employ the new ranger for five years.

The Town Centre Ranger Scheme helps to enhance the street cleaning services offered by Central Bedfordshire Council. It builds a sense of social capital and shared pride in the area.

Supporting local projects through offering grants like the Market Town Regeneration Fund helps to break down barriers between principal and local councils. It demonstrates the possibilities when both parties play to their strengths.

Email Nigel Young at: nigel.young@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk for more information.

Checklist

- [ ] Look for national funds and grants directed at specific issues

- [ ] Establish clear communications between principals and locals

- [ ] Identify issues at Town or Parish level where a small outlay could bring long-term results

- [ ] Cooperate between tiers to monitor delivery and assess return on investment

How to team up to deliver value-for-money

Achieving better value for money, through joint procurement or by increasing the opportunity to secure extra funding, is a central benefit of partnership working.

A big part of this comes from the fact that working in partnership allows people to alter, in effect, the size and scale at which their council works.

In some cases, for example, procurement is easier for a bigger organisation, which is effectively buying in bulk. So, a large county council might be able to deliver better value for money for residents than a small parish. Teaming up in ways that acknowledge this – by clustering, partnering and working as one – can help smaller councils to punch above their weight.

But it can sometimes work the other way, too. Small local councils might be able to purchase an individual, bespoke service from a contractor for a more reasonable, non-premium price – avoiding the expense of having it done by the supplier as a 'bolt on' for a larger client. There are occasions where smaller is better.

The other aspect to remember here is funding. For smaller parishes, extra budgets are often provided via structured grant funding. Often the amounts are small – under £500. But central government often provides funding for specific purposes, such as high street regeneration, or development of green spaces. And funds or grants are often more likely to be given out if principal and local councils are working together – offering the possibility for funders of an ultra-local footprint.

Often, a helpful function for staff leading on partnership can be to email town or parish councils on a regular basis with potential funding opportunities.

There is no perfect way of creating efficiency through partnership. But the most important thing is that both local and principal councils get around the table regularly, to think creatively about revenue opportunities.

Case study
Burnley Borough Council and Padiham Town Council

Padiham Town Council sits in the Burnley Borough Council area. The town has a distinct heritage thanks to several historical landmarks – including the Rachel Kay-Shuttleworth and Gawthorpe Textiles Collection.

In 2018, Burnley Borough Council successfully won £1.9 million over five years, as part of a Townscape Heritage Lottery Fund Project. The funding was secured with Padiham Town Council as a partner. £1.4 million came directly from the Heritage Lottery fund, and the rest was generated by the council and private partners.

Known as Crafting the Future, the Padiham scheme is targeted at property and public realm improvement projects, and particularly at improving Victorian buildings in the town centre. It includes community craft activities, a "Homemade on the High Street" initiative, restoration and traffic calming, and other forms of investment in the area's heritage.

The Crafting the Future proposals was given a significant boost by Burnley Borough Council's decision to partner with the town council. Alongside resident groups and local businesses, Padiham Town Council provided authentic grass roots knowledge and a local footprint. Connections with Padiham Archives, for example, provided cultural links into the community.

The town council had also already helped develop and consult on the conservation area management plan – which was a key part of the successful bid.

Ultimately, it is hoped the fund will help the area to grow economically and to attract visitors. And while the resource commitments were small, the joint commitment to the project helped funders to see that the bid had support at all levels of government.

Email Kate Ingram at kingram@burnley.gov.uk for more information.

Checklist

☐ Think big – looking at ways of teaming up for a wholesale approach to procurement

☐ Think small – looking at where smaller and nimbler councils can avoid big contractor costs

☐ Create direct channels of communication to flag grant and fund opportunities

☐ Stay in regular contact

Asset library

LGA and NALC resources

There are a lot of useful resources for partnership working on the NALC and LGA websites, including:

- The LGA's New Conversations guide, a toolkit for community engagement
- Three guides from the LGA on combined authorities, devolution and mayors
- a NALC template letter from local to principal council, to kickstart partnership work
- NALC Devo Plus toolkit provides a practical guide on devolution for local councils
- example onward devolution proposals from Gloucestershire
- a devolution toolkit from central government
- the 2017 LGA Councillor Workbook
- the LGA Councillor workbook on working with town and parish councils.

Further reading

The following publications are also of use in understanding the wider background to partnership working:

- Modelling Devolution, Working together to deliver local services, Local Government Association and National Association of Local Councils, January 2013.
- The Voice of the Councillor, Final report of the De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission, Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University, July 2017.
- People Power, Findings from the Commission on the Future of Localism: Summary Report, Commission on the Future of Localism, Locality, 2017.
- A Prospectus for Ultra-localism: Working with government to help communities help themselves, NALC 2017.
- Locating Localism: Statecraft, citizenship and democracy, Jane Wills, Policy Press, 2016.

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