
Tools to support frontline councillors in Wiltshire

The Wiltshire Improvement Partnership is seeking to better understand how to support councillors at all tiers to work effectively locally.

Through project work in Malmesbury (North Wiltshire) and Trowbridge (West Wiltshire), this report identifies the key challenges for the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership and a series of tools, processes or structures which could be piloted to address them.

I. Introduction

Transforming Neighbourhoods at the Young Foundation

Transforming Neighbourhoods is a two-year programme of research, innovation and practical action bringing together 15 local authority partners, central government and a range of national umbrella organisations. Wiltshire County Council joined the Transforming Neighbourhoods Consortium in 2005.

Learning from what is happening on the ground in communities is an important element of the programme. Since September 2005 the Young Foundation has been working with its local authority partners on a series of projects exploring the challenges, opportunities and obstacles to effective neighbourhood working in different places. Work in 2006-7 has focused on three main themes: developing a role for frontline councillors; the local authority offer to neighbourhoods; and embedding community engagement.

This piece of work falls into the first work stream – developing a role for frontline councillors.

National context

Nationally there has been growing interest in the community empowerment and place shaping agenda across all political parties and in both rural and urban areas. In October 2006 the Local Government White Paper¹ identified the need for local authorities to address the cultural and organisational barriers to effective neighbourhood and community working.

In particular, the White Paper reaffirmed the importance of councillors' role as democratic and community champions. The paper outlined a number of changes and tools which will enhance the role for elected members operating as frontline councillors at the heart of their community. The future role of all members in engaging the community, in local scrutiny and through the Community Call for Action is particularly relevant to this research.

¹ Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government and Communities White Paper (October 2006)

Context in Wiltshire

Wiltshire County Council, Kennet District Council, North Wiltshire District Council, Salisbury District Council and West District Council have come together as part of the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership to investigate the roles of elected members and community leaders in decision making. Through the partnership they are looking to pilot new ways of supporting elected members at all tiers to place them at the heart of decision-making structures.

The Wiltshire Improvement Partnership builds on the success of the existing community planning structures in Wiltshire which are nationally regarded. Wiltshire's district and county councils are all now considering what can be learnt from other agencies and how to best support elected members in decision making. There is consensus about the need to reduce the number of meetings, increase the transparency of decision making and further involve the community without duplicating interactions.

The Young Foundation completed an earlier piece of work in Malmesbury and Trowbridge in March 2006, considering the opportunities to utilise and engage town and parish councils in community planning. This piece of work builds on those original findings.

The project

This piece of work explored the existing barriers for county, district, town and parish councillors and community representatives in working effectively locally and the tools or structures which could be piloted to address them.

Workshops were held in Trowbridge (West Wiltshire) and Malmesbury (North Wiltshire) community planning areas. In both areas community planning partnerships bring together community representatives, councillors and service providers:

- In Malmesbury, the Malmesbury and Villages Community Area Partnership operates at the same geographical level as North Wiltshire's Area One Committee. Both structures work closely together and through the community plan there have been notable achievements including a taxi bus service for residents and ongoing discussions about provision for young people.
- A larger urban centre, Trowbridge has a strong community infrastructure and a history of engaging partners through theme groups, partly as a legacy of past external funding it has secured for regeneration purposes. Trowbridge Community Area Future has also established a Parish Council Liaison Group to work with the outlying rural villages.

In both areas, members of the respective community planning partnership, district area structure, parish councillors and clerks were invited to contribute to the discussion.

This report explores the following questions:

- What are the challenges for councillors at all tiers, community representatives and parish clerks in working together locally?
- Given the changing role for councillors and parishes outlined in the White Paper, what support, resources and skills are needed at all tiers?
- What could this look like in Wiltshire? Are there packages or products which could be piloted in Wiltshire to meet these needs in the short and long term?

2. Challenges

This section of the report briefly sets out the key challenges identified in the workshops for Wiltshire County Council, West Wiltshire District Council, North Wiltshire District Council and the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership.

In both Malmesbury and Trowbridge there was a notable willingness to engage in discussion, with clear evidence that both councillors and community representatives are working together to achieve change locally. Though played out in different contexts, there is a great deal of overlap between the issues and challenges in each area.

Challenges common to all

- i. The role councillors are being asked to play is changing with an emphasis on partnership working as both democratic and community champions. Given the complex skill set this requires, how can councillors be supported and trained to meet the demands of this role?
- ii. There are clear advantages to community involvement in all areas of civic life, yet engaging local communities can seem like an uphill battle. How can parishes and community planning boards engage with 'hard to reach groups' (including BME communities, young people and commuting professionals)? What can be learnt from other areas of Wiltshire and other structures?
- iii. Volunteers are both difficult to recruit and retain. How can residents and councillors be incentivised to participate in community planning? Once they begin to participate, how can meetings be made more engaging? How can the role of councillors and residents on these boards be made clearer?
- iv. Both Malmesbury and Trowbridge are served well by a number of different democratic structures, partnership boards and community groups. However, this complex structure is hard to navigate and costly to administer. How can responsibilities and decision-making structures be clarified further? Could a clarification of roles avoid duplication of purpose? Or is it possible to rationalise the number of meetings held at a particular geographic level?
- v. The White Paper introduces charters as a new mechanism for communities to clarify local responsibility and take on responsibility themselves; however, in the Wiltshire context, does this threaten to undermine existing structures, and lose hard won ground? Can the sentiment of charters be combined with the successes of community planning and parish plans?

Challenges for county and district councillors

- vi. County and district councillors are stretched by the existing meeting schedule. Are there opportunities to rationalise, consolidate or refine meetings or ensure that district level meetings support, rather than duplicate, the work of the community planning partnership?
- vii. Councillors have to balance a variety of competing local and strategic demands as they make decisions. Can performance information from local authorities and other services be presented alongside local priorities to provide comprehensive intelligence for

councillors? How can local intelligence enhance the opportunities of local scrutiny, as laid out in the White Paper?

- viii. The roles of community and democratic representatives are different but overlapping. Can the role of councillors on community planning partnerships be clarified or defined to make better use of their skills and/or avoid duplication of effort?

Challenges for parish and town councillors and clerks

- ix. How can the time of parish councillors and clerks on community planning boards be recognised and acknowledged?
- x. Activities and resources may not always be focused on a particular parish, given the competing priorities within a community planning area or district. How can both goodwill and momentum be maintained locally?
- xi. Parish clerks, in particular, deal with a great deal of paperwork which is more or less relevant to their parish. Could the information sent out for consultation by parishes be rationalised, or the system for sharing it improved?
- xii. Parishes are increasingly frustrated with the difficulty of navigating structures to raise a concern or make an enquiry. Is there an opportunity to pilot new ways for parishes and frontline councillors to raise or report issues?

3. Recommendations for tools, processes and support

The Wiltshire Improvement Partnership has secured funding to pilot a variety of new tools, processes or mechanisms to support councillors at all tiers to work more effectively together and with the community. This section identifies 10 potential options, of varying resource intensities, for the partnership to consider.

1. Sharing good practice

Whilst most county, district and parish councillors shared information, ideas and grievances through informal networks, all felt there was room for further joint work and particularly learning from others on *what has worked locally*. Participants were also interested in cross-sector learning. Of particular note was Westerly Housing Association's menu of engagement which offers tenants 27 routes to get involved at a variety of different levels, and councillors' personal experiences of engaging Eastern European populations locally.

The Parish Council liaison group in Trowbridge is well regarded locally. Seminar participants were particularly positive about the opportunity to share issues, ideas and solutions with other parishes. A similar model for sharing ideas and instigating joint work in more urbanised areas, such as the estates of Trowbridge, would be welcome.

Though good practice is sometimes shared informally by word of mouth, there would be significant advantage in investing in specific interventions which promote local information sharing. There was interest in a 'good practice guide to engagement' (e.g. menu of engagement options, or how to reach commuters), 'ten tips for getting things done in Wiltshire', and 'good practice from the parishes'. Costs could be minimised by publishing the information online and utilising engaged councillors or residents as contributors.

Recommendations:

- *Produce a good practice guide to engagement in Wiltshire*
- *Share the Trowbridge Parish Council liaison group concept with other areas*

2. Developing systems for logging queries

Community representatives and parish clerks often find it difficult to clarify who has responsibility for particular issues. Navigating decision-making structures is made more complicated where the remit of groups overlap. Though the county and two districts have good systems for answering resident enquiries, seminar participants all commented on the difficulty of finding the correct department with which to lodge a query. Some also complained that on occasion there was no follow up to their request.

Some seminar participants expressed interest in a 'one-stop shop' to register enquiries, complaints or comments with any service or forum. A centrally managed system could then direct the issue to the relevant officer, councillor or committee for follow up. A unique reference number for each query would allow enquiries to be tracked easily.

Recommendations:

- *Clarify and promote the roles and remits of each group, partnership or committee*
- *Assess the feasibility of piloting a single point of contact for parish queries to the county and district*

3. Developing member skills

The role councillors are being asked to play is changing, with an emphasis on partnership working. Political parties across the spectrum are keen to enhance the role of councillors and empower them to work effectively as local representatives. The Local Government White Paper has hastened this debate, describing local members as '*community and democratic champions*'. It places particular focus on the role of members as 'frontline' councillors and their ability to lead on new and established local engagement.

Seminar participants recognised that increasingly this role requires complex skill sets for both ward and parish councillors including action planning, brokering, conflict resolution, multi-formatted communication and nurturing innovative project ideas, etc. In addition it was felt that specific skills were needed to engage the traditionally 'hard to reach', including black and minority ethnic communities, young people, incoming villagers and professional commuters.

Wiltshire County Council has been working with IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency) on a tailored member development programme for ward councillors using a workbook on effective leadership. All county, district, town and parish councillors, as well as parish clerks, are offered training as part of their induction, though participants reported that few attend all the sessions. There may be opportunities to re-engage disillusioned councillors through peer learning and good practice.

Recommendations:

- *Work with member services at County and District level to consider existing training provision and the future competencies which could be included*
- *Evaluate the Parish Councillor training programme and consider what could be done through peer learning*

4. Rationalising meetings or agenda items

The number of meetings in both Trowbridge and Malmesbury held at the same geographical level is noticeable; this was noted frequently by community representatives and both parish, town, district and county councillors. County and district councillors particularly felt the burden of having to attend both community planning and district area structures.

Seminar participants were happy to discuss the overlap between Trowbridge Community Area Future and the West Wiltshire Area Seminars, and between Malmesbury and Villages Community Area Partnership and North Wiltshire's Area One Committee. In both areas it was acknowledged that the community planning and district structures held a subtly different role, remit and decision-making powers. However, opinions differed on the way forward:

- More frequent joint meetings and work were seen as a simple option to avoid duplication of effort whilst maximising the benefit of different perspectives. There was consensus amongst participants of the need to work more closely together in this way.
- Equally, a more radical merger proposal to consolidate of meetings at the same geographical area was seen as beneficial in reducing the number of meetings and clarifying decision-making structures. There was some appetite for this, although others opposed this for political reasons or because of longstanding tradition.

This issue was controversial and would benefit from more exploration and discussion before any decision being taken. This could be achieved by establishing a time-limited review.

Recommendations:

- *A series of joint meetings be held between structures operating at the same geographical level to share expertise and develop understanding*
- *Following this, more detailed consideration is given to rationalising or consolidating structures operating at the same geographical level*

5. Using intelligence locally

The community-planning process in Wiltshire is nationally regarded, and its success in collating local priorities is recognised locally. Together with district-based initiatives, community planning has consolidated partnership work with service providers at the local level. In both Trowbridge and Malmesbury the Primary Care Trust, Police and a variety of other services were involved in developing action plans to meet pressing needs.

Acknowledging the competing demand for resources and investment across the area, councillors reflected that enhanced local intelligence would significantly aid informed decision-making. This would ideally combine community-determined priorities with statistics on key indicators such as crime, health, employment, education and environment at a community-planning area level. Similar models exist in Sheffield and Tower Hamlets amongst others.

The White Paper also outlined an enhanced role for frontline councillors in monitoring service performance against agreed targets locally through ward-based scrutiny. For many members local scrutiny was the most interesting opportunity of the paper. Comprehensive information on local needs and performance could also aid and underpin this.

Within Wiltshire this could perhaps be led by the Wiltshire and Swindon Intelligence Network, a consortium of public sector bodies combining the data of different agencies. This would however need significant investment.

Recommendations:

- *Assess the capacity of the Wiltshire and Swindon Intelligence Network to provide detailed information on needs and performance at a community planning area level*

6. Reporting success locally

The process of community planning in both Trowbridge Community Area Future and Malmesbury and Villages Community Area Partnership has brought consensus around local priorities. However, there is always a danger with such exercises of raising public expectations beyond the remit of resources. Community planning has largely been successful in educating parishes and community groups on the competing demand for resources within each area but, given the inevitably changing nature of local investment, seminar participants acknowledged the need to keep the 'story of success' running locally in both parishes and estates.

A quarterly newsletter or similar mechanism to report milestones, successes and events in the community planning area would be a very simple tool to help maintain both goodwill and momentum. It would also help to clarify the rationale for the distribution of resources across the area over time. Consideration would need to be given to resourcing and supporting such a publication, and to tailoring the information either to residents or specifically to parish clerks and councillors.

Recommendations:

- *Resource a simple community planning publication each quarter to update on progress. Tailor this to a parish or resident audience*

7. Devolving small budgets

There is a clear appetite for increased community and councillor influence over services. Seminar participants frequently talked about involvement in decision making on local schemes or budgets to enhance influence and gain understanding of the rationale for prioritising particular projects or schemes over others. The White Paper too suggests small budgets could be devolved to ward councillors or parish councils.

Clearly it is neither appropriate nor financially viable to devolve all decision making or associated budgets to a local level. For example, social services, governed by statutory duty and the need to provide services for vulnerable individuals, is likely to be an area where neighbourhood influence is minimal. However local authorities often have the discretion to offer communities increased influence over environmental services. Wiltshire County Council has already undertaken extensive cross-directorate work, in partnership with the district councils, to draft a proposed menu for local influence, highlighting the type and frequency of consultation and feedback which could be expected. There is however opportunity to extend this work to consider budget devolution.

By identifying a number of areas over which the authority has the discretion to offer influence, and the opportunity to do so relatively easily, both the County and District Councils could pilot locally-determined budgets such as community planning boards prioritising street scene improvements or a £10,000 budget per councillor for small highways schemes. With appropriate information and advice to encourage creative spend, and officer-led monitoring, the risks of locally-determined spend could be mitigated.

Recommendations:

- *Wiltshire County Council, West Wiltshire District Council and North Wiltshire District Council pilot a locally-devolved budget for both the Malmesbury and the Villages Community Planning Partnership and the Trowbridge Community Area Futures*

8. Distributing information more efficiently

Parish clerks and councillors particularly struggled with the volume of policy proposals and consultation papers they were asked to comment on, which they felt were often of little direct relevance to the village. The cost of administering paperwork, both financially and as a portion of the parish clerk's time, is cumbersome and many parishes felt unsustainable.

Though rationalising the information sent out for consultation could be a solution, parishes were fearful that this may lead to them being ill-informed. One response would be for county and district councils to invest in clerk capacity and training, to enable them to respond on behalf of their parish or filter through only the appropriate information to parish councillors.

Another more radical solution would be to invest in an online system which allowed users to register an interest in particular topics and locations and then flagged new documents, minutes or consultations of relevance. Such a system could only be successful if all service providers were signed up to using it, though the cost benefits could make this an attractive option.

Recommendations:

- *Wiltshire Improvement Partnership to consider the feasibility of an online information tool, allowing parish clerks and councillors to access consultation documents via key words of interest*

9. Incentivising involvement

Both officers, community representatives, parish, district and county councillors were conscious of the difficulty in engaging and involving residents. Recruiting and retaining volunteers to be part of the community planning actions was particularly difficult.

Acknowledging the time and effort given freely by volunteers is a key tool in retention. Volunteers could also be incentivised by reporting success locally and promoting the difference that volunteer involvement has made to a village or estate.

Some resentment at the lack of remuneration for community representatives and parish councillors involved in community planning was evident. Expenses or travel costs to bring parity with the system in place for district and county councillors would be welcomed.

Recommendations:

- *Report success locally, where individual involvement has brought significant value to an area*
- *Account for appropriate expenses for volunteers who are part of the community planning process as part of the project budget*

10. Carefully consider charters

Charters were introduced in the White Paper to set out the service standards and priorities for action which local people expect from the local authority (and sometimes a wider group of partners) as well as any obligations that the community has taken on itself.

In Malmesbury and Trowbridge there was some confusion and cynicism about the benefit of charters. This was partly because existing community plans are seen as valuable documents, reflecting large amounts of input from councillors and community representatives, but also more negatively because of the legacy of a previous iteration of 'Parish Charters' in Wiltshire. Nomenclature is therefore an issue, though participants expressed greater concern that any new charter may duplicate the existing information in a community plan, and certainly that further engagement would lead to consultation fatigue.

Charters should therefore be pursued with caution in Wiltshire. They are likely to be welcomed on the ground only where they build on existing plans and give significant authority to hold district and county services to account.

Recommendations:

- *Community plans, rather than charters, remain the focus of work locally*
- *Where charters are requested by a community or parish, they make clear the local authorities 'offer' to the area as an avenue for scrutiny*

Many thanks to all those who participated in this piece of work.

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The Young Foundation is a unique organisation that undertakes research to identify and understand social needs and then develops practical initiatives and institutions to address them

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