

# The Wiltshire Charter for Local Councils

## A Consultation Paper

## **Wiltshire Charter for Local Councils**

### **Introduction**

Altogether there are 256 Town Councils, Parish Councils and Parish Meetings in Wiltshire. The whole of Wiltshire is parished with the one exception of Salisbury City.

These Councils provide the most local level of Government, and are hence collectively referred to as “local Councils”. They are supported and represented by a Wiltshire Association of Local Councils (WALC), based at Wyndhams in Devizes, and by an Association of Wiltshire Towns.

The largest of these local Councils is Chippenham Town Council which has a total budget of £1.4 M and covers a population of 28,000 people. The smallest parish councils and parish meetings spend less than a thousand pounds and represent populations of less than 100 people.

The first Wiltshire Charter for Local Councils was produced in 1996 and set out the relationship between the County Council and the District Councils, on the one hand, and local Councils, on the other, defining for the first time what each could expect of the other.

The current document seeks to revise this earlier agreement, and to extend the range of partners to the Charter, to include the Police, the Combined Fire Authority, and the three Primary Care Trusts that serve the county.

At present there is a diversity of approaches to local governance across the county. Principal authorities are committed to exploring with local Councils, and others, opportunities to strengthen the connections between local governance arrangements across the three tiers of local government, and to make the system more understandable and accessible for local people.

This Charter encourages all parish and town councils to work towards the principles of Quality Status, but partners will continue to work with all parish councils to develop opportunities for them to take forward their local agendas and plans.

### **The Role of Town and Parish Councils**

Parish and Town Councils are an elected tier of local government with powers and duties laid down in law. As democratically accountable bodies they offer a means of shaping the decisions that affect their communities, with the authority to raise money through local taxation and a range of powers to spend public money to provide facilities and services in their communities.

As the most local tier of local Government, town and parish councils have a special role to play. This role includes the following aspects:-

- (a) Acting as a local voice – gathering local views and identifying local issues, and using these to make representations to appropriate bodies, and to respond to consultations.
- (b) Communicating locally-relevant information – keeping local people informed about initiatives and issues which affect the local area, including those being pursued by the town or parish council itself.
- (c) Providing services to the local community where it is more responsive, efficient and cost-effective than it would be for other providers to do so.
- (d) Monitoring the quality, cost, appropriateness, accessibility and effectiveness of services provided by other bodies to the parish, or town.
- (e) Protecting, promoting and further developing the *local distinctiveness* of the built environment, landscape, archaeology, biodiversity, local traditions and culture of their area.
- (f) Engaging with other local town and parish councils, and other local bodies, to address wider issues of benefit to the area.

The following sections set out further details on these aspects of the local Council role.

#### **Acting as a Local Voice**

- **The local Council will actively seek to maintain an up-to-date and balanced view of the needs and wishes of its residents**, using appropriate means to do this (including informal contacts, question time at parish council meetings, surveys, public meetings, etc.), and will set aside sufficient budget to fund this activity.
- **The local Council will set down its understanding of the priority issues facing its local community in a short written statement of local priorities, and revise it at least annually.** In doing so the local Council is strongly encouraged to use the eight policy themes adopted by the Wiltshire Strategic Board as a way of grouping and presenting their statement of local priorities. The eight themes are:

Social Care and Health, Countryside and Land-based issues, Housing and the Built Environment, The Wiltshire Economy, Transport, Crime and Community Protection, Education, Skills and Learning, Culture.

- **The local Council will set down in, however short and simple a format, a parish or town action list or more developed plan**, which describes what the local Council intends to do concerning each of its priority issues, including encouraging others to take action (for example, the community area partnership), and any local project(s) the Council will set up itself and how these initiatives will be funded and managed.
- **Partners will consult with parish councils before making decisions on issues where it is thought that there will be local interest or concern.** Nevertheless local Councils can request to be consulted on any issue being considered by partners to the Charter. Local Councils have expressed a wish to be consulted at a stage when policy options are still tentative or in a fluid state, rather than be presented with a final document for endorsement.
- **Partners will present information to local Councils in a way that makes it as easy as possible for them to understand the local relevance of the issue under consideration.** This may include the production of an accompanying briefing document highlighting the aspects that are likely to be of most importance to local Councils and the key questions that need answering; as well as the writing of short summaries of longer documents (with the full versions available on request).
- **Partners will provide reasonable consultation periods**, which take account of the frequencies with which local Councils meet and the legislation under which they operate, and will clearly identify a contact for each consultation who will be able to answer queries about the topic on which views are being sought. Partners will strive for a 12 week consultation period, with a minimum of 21 days for Planning Applications and 46 days for other matters.
- **Principal councils, in particular, will take steps to brief, in advance of consultations, those who have contact with local Councils**, including their local Councillors, relevant service officers, community area planning contacts, and local information point workers, so that they can assist in responding to such exercises.
- **Principal and local councils, in particular, will include 'Wiltshire Charter Implications' on all officer reports.**
- **Principal councils will support elected members to disseminate information regarding relevant issues to local councils in their wards as part of their community leadership role.**
- **WALC will explore appropriate system to disseminate information regarding consultations by partners possibly through a web based process.**
- **WALC will, on request, facilitate consultations by calling together relevant groups of parishes at the outset of exercises.**

- **All bodies will share their planned programme of consultations by recording this information on the Wiltshire Intelligence Network consultation database at [www.intelligencenetwork.org](http://www.intelligencenetwork.org).**

Appendix 1 details the Planning Protocol between Planning Authorities and Local Councils

<h3>Communicating Locally Relevant Information</h3>
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- **Local Councils should consider providing information to their community on a regular basis either by producing a regular newsletter or using another local publication** (in the case of Quality Parishes at least four times a year) to keep their residents informed of the activities of the parish council, and the local implications of the activities and plans of other key local organisations. The newsletter should include the names of Councillors and the Clerk and how they can be contacted, and be readily available at public sites across the parish. All partners should provide information in a similar way.
- **Local Councils should also consider producing and making publicly available an annual report** of its activities, achievements, and finances (Quality parishes must produce an annual report).
- **Partners will provide parish councils with appropriate information about their work at the local level** to assist local Councils in engaging with these organisations. This information could include the contact details of key staff with responsibility for the area, local performance standards and targets, financial information on the costs of key local services used by residents, and future plans and proposals with respect to those services (including the intention to carry out Best Value and other kinds of review). The way that this information is provided, and the level of detail made available, will be decided by each partner organisation, in consultation with the Wiltshire Association of Local Councils. ( In the majority of cases it will not be feasible to provide such information on a parish-by-parish basis, but rather for appropriate local groupings of parishes).
- **Partners will provide relevant research results and community statistics about Wiltshire through the Wiltshire Intelligence Network ([www.intelligencenetwork.org](http://www.intelligencenetwork.org)).** Service and other customer information will be provided through local information points, and websites. Partners will ensure that the requirements of parish and town councils are taken into account in the way that these facilities are developed and delivered. Local Councils will consider how they might use these outlets to publicise information they produce.
- **The Wiltshire Association of Local Councils will include information on behalf of partners in its regular newsletter** and will also (for an agreed fee to cover postage and packing) distribute material to local Councils.

- **Partners will distribute to local Councils appropriate publications which they produce**, provided that the cost of doing so is reasonable, and that there is proven interest from local Councils in receiving them.
- **Local principal Councillors, who share the community leadership of their areas with town and parish councils, will keep in regular contact with the local Councils in the area that they represent, and attend their meetings as appropriate.** Local Councils will assist this process by supplying local principal Councillors with appropriate information, (e.g. agendas and minutes, newsletters, copies of correspondence, etc.) to enable them to play a full part in local affairs as they relate to the work of the principal Council. The detail of this to be mutually agreed between individual principal councillors and particular town or parish councils. Local Councils should also consider keeping local community area planning contact officers informed in a similar way, again by mutual agreement.

#### **Devolution of Services from Principal Authorities to the Local Community**

- **Partners will consider any reasonable proposals from local Councils, or groups of local Councils, to take on particular service responsibilities.**
- **Partners will make it clear to local Councils what level of funding (and associated service levels and standards) will be allocated to service provision in their area**, and will welcome offers of funding or contributions in kind (e.g. use of buildings, staff, land, etc.) to enhance these service levels. Such 'partnership' arrangements would be set down in a formal service agreement between the relevant parties. Partners will give written justification for refusal of any requests for devolved services which will be available for scrutiny.
- **Partners will actively explore ways in which they can involve local Councils in decisions about the shape and level of the local services they deliver.**
- **Partners will set in place practices and procedures that avoid so-called "double taxation".**

#### **Monitoring and Reviewing Local Services**

- **Partners will provide appropriate details about the level and standard of service that local Councils can expect in their areas. Local Councils will be encouraged to monitor these standards, and to report problems and concerns to the relevant organisations. Partners will make it clear how such comments should be fed into their organisations.**

- **Partners, where appropriate, will offer interested local Councils the opportunity to get involved in reviews and scrutiny of their local services.**
- **The Wiltshire Association of Local Councils, in consultation with its members, will suggest a subject for review or scrutiny each year.** Partners will assist WALC to focus the specification for the review so that it is practicable, and will then give very serious consideration to incorporating the suggestion into their review or scrutiny programmes.

#### **Protecting Local Distinctiveness -**

- **Local Councils are encouraged to identify the key features of their local area (landscape, heritage, buildings, wildlife, culture, etc.) which make it special and distinctive, and to take steps to protect, promote and further develop this local distinctiveness, in line with local residents' priorities.** There are a number of existing resources for this information including Local Development Plans, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans, archaeological records, Biodiversity Action Plan, listed building registers, etc.). The format for setting down this information will be left to the discretion of individual local Councils. Partners will help to identify the professional processes and methods that could be used to achieve this consideration could be given to one option which is the production of a Village Design Statement.
- **Partners will support local Councils in this process by providing information, and suggesting effective actions that could be taken by local Councils, and sources of funds that could be applied for to support such activities.** Partners will respect the outcomes of community led consultations and act on their recommendations where appropriate.

<h4><b>Engaging with Other Local Town and Parish Councils</b></h4>
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- **Local Councils will explore ways to co-operate with other town and parish councils, Community Area Partnerships, Local Strategic Partnerships and other local bodies in the area, to find effective solutions to common problems or issues.** This could include direct approaches to those councils; participating in any three tier members forum for the area; and support of, and communication with, any community area planning partnership.
- **Local Councils to actively participate in the production of any community area plan, and to assess how they can contribute to the effective implementation of that plan once it has been agreed.**
- **Partners will accept any Community Area Plan agreed by the recognised Community Area Planning Partnership, as the best expression of community wishes, concerns and aspirations for the area. Similarly, it**

**will give similar status to parish plans, or shorter parish statements for smaller parishes, at that more local level.** In both cases partners will assess how they can contribute to implementing these plans, both through the mainstream services, and by setting up initiatives using external funding, etc.

- **Partners will give fair levels of representation to local Councils at community area partnerships, district local strategic partnerships, and at the county-wide local strategic partnership (the Wiltshire Strategic Board).**
- **In framing their priorities and parish-level plans, local Councils and partners will be mindful of their local community area plan, to any parish, town or district community strategy, and to the Strategic Board's Strategy for Wiltshire.**
- **Partners will explore effective ways to meet with town and parish councils on a district-wide basis, at least annually,** to explore issues of mutual interest and concern. These forums or conferences will amongst other things keep under review the effectiveness of the Wiltshire Parish Charter in developing constructive and productive relations between all its signatory organisations. On the basis of this feedback, partners in discussions with the Wiltshire Association of Local Councils will jointly decide when the Charter needs updating, or a fuller review.

**Other Issues:-**

**(i) Training and Development –**

**Partners agree to support the Wiltshire Association of Local Councils in their further development of the Wiltshire County Training Partnership for Local Councils, and its associated activities.** Support could involve financial contributions, provision of speakers, sharing of training opportunities, making buildings available for use, etc.

**(ii) Standards of Conduct**

**The County Council, the four District Councils and the Town and Parish Councils have adopted codes of conduct, based on the national model code of conduct. All councils will work to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.**

**(iii) Monitoring and Review**

**WALC will submit an annual report on the operation of the Parish Charter to the Wiltshire Strategic Board, containing an assessment of the effectiveness of current arrangements, and any recommendations for change.**