



East
Northamptonshire
Council

Scrutiny Committee – 24 September 2012

Community Engagement – Town and Parish Councils

Purpose of report

Scrutiny Committee has agreed to review and make suggestions for improvement of relations with Town and Parish Councils as part of their work programme for Q3 this year. This paper provides the background for this review.

Attachment(s)

None

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Corporate Plan includes the following objectives which will necessitate good working relationships with Town and Parish Councils:

- Work with Town and Parish Councils to identify the regeneration needs of their areas and to put plans in place for meeting those needs
- Seek to engage Town and Parish councils and local communities in plans and developments that affect their areas
- Develop Neighbourhood Plans for those villages and rural areas that want them and work with Town and Parish Councils and local communities across the District to implement them
- Engage with local communities to understand their needs

1.2 The Localism Act and other recent legislation has also created new areas where high levels of interaction between ENC and Town and Parish Councils will reduce avoidable contact or enable advance planning of workloads, including Community Right to Challenge (for services) and Community Right to Bid (for community assets).

2.0 Background

2.1 East Northamptonshire is a 'fully parished' area, with 51 precepting bodies including 41 Town and Parish Councils. The size of councils varies considerably with only 7 with a precept raising over £50,000 and 15 representing populations of over 500. All the Town and Parish Councils are supported by a Clerk but this support may vary from a few hours a week to several part-time staff covering at least half of the week for the Town Councils.

2.2 Over the past few years, several methods of engagement by ENC with Town and Parish Councils have been tried, with varying degrees of perceptions of success. These have included:

2.2.1 Between 2004 and 2010, annual meetings attended by Leader, Committee Chairs and appropriate ward councillors, together with senior officers, were held with five geographical groupings of parish councils. (Town Councils were initially included in these meetings but it was then decided that separate meetings were required). These ran from 2005 to 2006. Although feedback indicates that face to face contact was appreciated by those who did attend, attendance was often patchy, with ENC representatives sometimes outnumbering attendees. Discussions tended to focus on planning issues whilst the gap between meetings meant that there was very little continuity in representation or discussion themes between meetings.

- 2.2.2 Single issue meetings with five slightly different geographical grouping of town and parish councils were piloted in 2010 with County Highways as the focus but again attendance and feedback was variable with some pilots working well and others not.
- 2.2.3 Quarterly meetings with Town Clerks attended by CEX and Executive Director(s) plus heads of service as required. In the last 2 years, 8 meetings have been held. None of these meetings has been attended by all Clerks, with average attendance being 3-4 clerks at any one time. This means that consistent communication between ENC and the Councils with the largest populations are not being achieved.
- 2.2.4 Single issue meetings/ training sessions. These have often proved to be the most successful sessions in terms of attendance. Recent examples include:
- Localism Act Standards Framework Changes – a workshop seeking Town and Parish Councils’ input in February was followed by 2 training sessions. The workshop was attended by 41 people (Councillors and Clerks) representing 20 councils.
 - Problems with Planning – an awareness raising session in Jan 2012 was attended by people representing 11 councils.
- 2.2.5 The Monitoring Officer has recently started a series of Parish Briefings which are e-mailed directly to Parish Clerks. Although largely created in response to the need for communications in relation to Standards issues, other relevant material has been included, such as the launch of the Community Plan Toolkit by the Community Partnerships Team. Other previous proposals have included the creation of a dedicated part of the Council website for Town and Parish Councils, which could include a self-help forum, as well as FAQ and reference documents on common or emerging topics.
- 2.3 The mixed uptake of the above initiatives possibly results from a number of factors, including:
- Capacity of the Town and Parish Councils themselves. They are being asked to undertake an increasing large role although Clerk capacity may be limited and other calls on councillors’ time from community and other activities may already be high.
 - Variable relationships between District Cllrs and their Town and Parish Councillor counter-parts. In the rural areas, some District Cllrs have several councils to liaise with, which can create capacity issues. Even when there are dual-hatted members, the District perspective is not always communicated at the Town or Parish level.

3.0 Outcomes for the Review

- 3.1 To deliver the objectives of the Corporate Plan by;
- Agreeing with Town and Parish Councils how relationships between them and ENC can be improved and sustained
 - Clarification of role and responsibilities for ENC Cllrs in relation to Town and Parish Councils.
 - Identification of the key areas for communication and what the best future means of communication for these will be. The key areas are likely to include Planning (applications, policy and infrastructure needs), Standards, Environmental Services and Elections. Options for future communication could include some or all of the following methods: training, dedicated web-pages/forum, regular briefing notes, meetings, named officer links, plus any others identified by Town and Parish Councils
 - A wider understanding of what ENC can offer to support Town and Parish Councils in their work e.g. printing, external funding advice.

As a result of the above there should also be a clear understanding of the way in which infrastructure projects from T&PCs will be identified to ENC for consideration for inclusion in Priority Corporate Projects list and CIL list.

- 3.2 The key constraints for the delivery of the outcomes of the review will be:
- Failure to participate in the review by either relevant ENC Cllrs or Town and Parish Councillors/Clerks resulting in an incomplete or inaccurate picture
 - Unrealistic expectations of resources available to implement recommendations

4.0 Proposed approach

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Committee Work Plan indicates that this work should happen in the 3rd quarter of 2012. This would be a good time to engage as the various aspects of the Localism Act have been or will be enacted over this period. It would also build on the extensive recent contact over the Standards Framework changes and community/neighbourhood plans. It is also likely that ENC will need to undertake a review of parish arrangements in the district from Spring 2013 in order to ensure that any new arrangements are in place for the next parish elections in 2015. Finally, responses are required to identify infrastructure projects to create a prioritised portfolio of district projects to ensure these are included for all possible funding streams to enable delivery of the Corporate Plan objectives
- 4.2 It is proposed to create a joint officer/member project team to co-ordinate this review. This will include the Executive Director, Cllrs P Stearn and P Wathen from Scrutiny Committee, plus officer representatives from key areas such as Planning and Environmental Services. An initial meeting will establish a baseline for the review, and, in particular, consider what further information is required.
- 4.3 It is then suggested that two ENC Cllrs (the local Councillor and one other from Scrutiny) should visit each Town and Parish Council in October/November to ascertain any issues with the current relationship and discuss possible solutions as well as highlight why ENC wants to improve the relationship and what services ENC can offer to support Town and Parish Councils. The responses would then be reported back to a further meeting of the project team, after which recommendations will be made for a corporate approach which could be included in the future community engagement strategy.

5.0 Equality and Diversity Implications

- 5.1 There are no known equality and diversity implications arising from the proposed approach to the review of engagement with town and parish councils. However, an impact assessment will be required to ensure that the proposed final methods of engagement recommended from this review do not adversely affect people with protected characteristics

6.0 Legal Implications

- 6.1 There are no known legal implications arising from the proposals in this report.

7.0 Risk Management

- 7.1 There are no significant risks arising from the information provided in this report other than the constraints identified in 3.2

8.0 Financial Implications

- 8.1 There will be a small additional cost to the Councillors' travel budget to cover the cost of attending Town and Parish meetings if the proposed approach in this report is agreed. It is not anticipated that any significant new costs will be incurred as a result of

the recommendations to be made by the review.

9.0 Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that the Committee consider this report and agree the approach to be taken in the Review of Engagement with Town and Parish Councils.

Legal	Power: Local Government Act 1972, Localism Act 2011				
	Other considerations: None				
Background Papers: None					
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