



# Pointers to Good Practice

A guide for town and parish councils

## Acknowledgments

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Electronic copies of the guide are available from the following websites:

- *Commission for Rural Communities* ([www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk))
- *Improvement and Development Agency 'best practice toolkits'* ([www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk))
- *National Association of Local Councils* ([www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk))
- *Society of Local Council Clerks* ([www.slcc.co.uk](http://www.slcc.co.uk))

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# Pointers to Good Practice for Town and Parish Councils

This guide shows how successfully town and parish councils across England are working for their communities. It reviews experiences of local projects and suggests practical ideas to bear in mind when planning action. It highlights the value of involving people and working with others to improve the quality of life and the delivery of services to the community.

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# Introducing the guide

Where does the guide come from and what does it do?

Town and parish councils are taking a lead, involving many local people and organisations to improve the quality of life in villages and towns. They show how neighbourhood government works by providing opportunities for people to influence decisions that touch their lives. This guide introduces experiences of local community projects undertaken by town and parish councils and suggests ideas for future action.

There has been a significant increase in local community activity during the early years of the twenty-first century. Between 2000 and 2004 the Countryside Agency provided assistance as part of the Government's policies for improving the community, environment, governance and economy of towns and villages.<sup>1</sup>

This guide identifies good practice for town and parish councils arising from the work of the Countryside Agency, now that different organisations, such as Regional Development Agencies and Rural Community Councils, are moving centre stage. Whilst this guide is intended for the clerks and elected members of town and parish councils, it will also be of value to those who work with them, such as voluntary and

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<sup>1</sup>In 2000, the Government drew up a rural white paper, "Our Countryside: The Future" and established several programmes to help achieve its policies. The Countryside Agency was responsible for distributing related funds. Programmes included: Community Development Worker Programme, Community Service Grants, Local Heritage Initiative (with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Nationwide Building Society), Market Towns Initiative, National Training Strategy for Parish and Town Councils, Parish Plan Grants, Parish Transport Grants and funding for Rural Transport Partnerships and the Rural Housing Enabler Programme. Other activities informing this review include the Quality Parishes Scheme, advice on planning issues, rural proofing for local authorities, design statements and the review of rural services.

community organisations, principal local authorities and their councillors, and Government offices and agencies, including the Regional Development Agencies.

The Government wants to ensure that all communities, whether through town and parish councils or other neighbourhood structures, have a chance to have their say, without imposing a model of one size fits all. The aim is to improve the delivery of local services, and involve people and communities more effectively in the democratic process. With this emphasis on giving neighbourhoods a stronger voice, the Government places great value on:

- Parish and town councils demonstrating real quality and professionalism
- Delegation to parish and town councils to deliver services if local people choose
- Increasing community involvement in local affairs
- Social inclusion and equality of opportunity
- Social, economic and environmental regeneration and sustainability.

Sustainability is the ability to maintain local and global assets or resources, not only for current benefit, but for future generations. Assets can be social (such as good health and equal opportunities), environmental (air quality and green spaces for example) and economic (including jobs and local incomes). Sometimes it is difficult to protect all these resources at the same time. The elements of local action are

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<sup>2</sup>ODPM (2005) "Citizen Engagement and Public Service: Why Neighbourhoods Matter", London, HMSO [www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)

intertwined and often combine environmental, social and economic issues. The challenge is to strike the right balance.

This guide provides practical suggestions. Firstly, if more people become involved, your community will grow stronger. Your projects will stand a greater chance of success if they have local backing and address local needs. Successful projects often encourage co-operation, partnership and networking, and help local people to influence other decision makers. Secondly, the test is to build a foundation for action that lasts after the initial funding and enthusiasm has run its course. These ideas are examined further under five headings:

1. Involving people and strengthening the community
2. Working on practical projects with local support
3. Co-operating with others
4. Influencing decisions that affect the community
5. Building change that lasts

Under each of these headings, this guide explains the case for town and parish councils taking action and presents a selection of case studies to show how effectively these councils are already working for their communities.

The selection is a drop in the ocean of activities happening across every county, so look around your region for more examples. Local action isn't always a good experience however, so each section includes a word of caution. Finally, the guide points you in the direction of organisations and websites providing further information and support.

The next section introduces the message from town and parish councils - involving more people creates stronger communities.



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## Involving people and strengthening the community

How do people, organisations and society benefit?

People who know they belong to a real community often feel more secure and will work to protect what they value as their own. A community develops where people who have something in common work together and share experiences. Problem solving and negotiation, as well as delivering projects, events and services, are all ways in which people can get to know each other.

Involving more people in local action has practical and far-reaching benefits. It strengthens commitment to improving the local quality of life. It expands the community's pool of ideas, talents and energy and breaks down barriers. Greater involvement creates more people who understand the processes of democratic government. Good experiences of getting involved may even stimulate people's interest in representing their local community as councillors. Involving schools and young people in community projects demonstrates how citizenship works. If you listen to young people and show them how they can plan projects, negotiate agreement and celebrate success, everybody wins. Some councils employ experts to work with young people, especially those who seem remote from the community. Sometimes it is worth investing in support from a community development worker, whose job is to involve more people and build their confidence.

A community develops where people who have something in common, work together and share experiences.

Many people are unaware that they can express an opinion; they think they lack the skills for taking part or feel excluded from traditional channels of communication.

The town or parish council can take the lead in involving more people from a wider range of backgrounds. When people are engaged in practical projects that are important to them, they find a voice and begin to discover what they can do. People learn new tactics and new skills as they participate in projects where resources and skills are shared. The experience may even help them to get paid work.

Everyone benefits when training is built into a project. Training for councillors, clerks and other staff produces ideas for action, tips for overcoming obstacles and sources of additional funding. Networking and sharing experiences can save your council the trouble of reinventing the wheel. As people overcome the hazards of organising community events they enjoy the buzz of success.

### **A word of caution**

- *Involving more people means that it can take longer to reach a decision, but it is usually possible to work out ways of preventing delay.*
- *A decision not to invest in training may be cheaper, but it will cost in other ways if legal or financial errors occur and opportunities for increasing funds are missed.*
- *Do some groups or individuals in the community dominate the usual channels of communication? If so, the council needs to act and give more people a voice.*
- *When others grow in confidence and more people want to be councillors, existing councillors may lose out! Be willing to hand over to someone else.*

### **Hibaldstow Playing Field and Skate Park, Lincolnshire**

Hibaldstow Parish Council was approached by a group of young people who were keen to see a skate park in the village.

*“Encouraged by the parish council, they visited other projects to see what could be done and what they would like”*

Encouraged by the parish council, they visited other projects to see what could be done and what they would like in Hibaldstow. The parish council then applied for and received a community services grant of £13,766 to provide a recreational facility for young people, including a skate park and a youth shelter. The children were involved in designing the facilities. The skate park is run by the village hall management committee. It took a year to obtain funding but the project was then completed in eight months.

### **Kington St Michael Post Office, Wiltshire**

The village of Kington St. Michael has a population of about 900. It lost its last remaining shop and post office in February 2003. In response, the parish council set up a sub-committee, co-opting representatives of groups from the village, including the retired and parents of young children. This sub-committee



opened a post office and shop in the village hall. They obtained several grants including a community services grant of £5,600 to make alterations to the building. A sub-postmaster was appointed and the shop and post office has been running since March 2004.

### ➡ Ditton Priors Parish Council, Shropshire

Oak Farm in Ditton Priors provides work for people with learning difficulties. The parish council has worked with Oak Farm to help its employees become an integral part of the local community. They have cleaned road signs, mown verges, trimmed hedges, cleared the footways of nettles and briars and generally kept the parish tidy. As a result of the scheme, the Oak Farm employees have become more confident and have a greater sense of belonging to the community.

### ➡ Middleton Children's Play Area, Warwickshire

Middleton Parish Council owned a piece of land that was once a children's playground but had become vandalised, overgrown and filled with rubbish. At the request of local parents, the council cleared the site and put in new play equipment, obtaining a community services grant for £6,737.



Two councillors led the local group, who researched play equipment and organised volunteer labour to build the playground. The scheme took one year to complete and the playground is now maintained by the parish council groundsman. There are plans to enlarge the site and provide more facilities. The scheme won a 'Village Ventures' award from Warwickshire Rural Community Council as an excellent example of community effort.

### ➡ Cam People and Ecology Project, Gloucestershire

Cam People and Ecology Project has developed local skills and increased awareness of environmental issues within the parish since 1997. The parish council was concerned that housing development would destroy wildlife and councillors wanted to be better informed. The council financed some early activities and entered into a partnership with an environmental charity from nearby Stroud. The experts at the Stroud Valleys Project co-ordinated and guided the project as a pilot that could be transferred to other parishes.

The project includes an adult education course and training in 'The Wildlife of Cam', hedgerow and pond surveys, a biodiversity map of the parish and the restoration of a neglected pond. Local volunteers, including both councillors and people new to community action, have been given guidance on carrying out wildlife surveys. Stroud Valleys Project is now running similar activities elsewhere, with two project officers working in twelve parishes.

*"Stroud Valleys Project is now running similar activities elsewhere, with two project officers working in twelve parishes."*

(See [www.stroudvalleysproject.org](http://www.stroudvalleysproject.org) or [www.camparishcouncil.co.uk](http://www.camparishcouncil.co.uk))

### ➡ Oswestry Town Council, Shropshire

Oswestry Town Council invested in the training of its clerk who studied for a degree in Local Policy as a part time student over five years. For the council "it was money well spent". The mayor of Oswestry said: "I am convinced that our investment in training has been paid back many times to the benefit of our local residents and the visitors to the town."

As a direct result of his study, two successful lottery applications resulted in nearly one million pounds of external funding, which was used to help build a stronger community. The refurbishment of the historic Guildhall and extensive improvements at Cae Glas Park encourage more people to take part in community events.

### ➡ **Minchinhampton Parish Council, Gloucestershire**

When the clerk to Minchinhampton Parish Council was appointed, she had little knowledge of local councils and their procedures. She began 'Working with Your Council' in October 2003 and in September 2004 was the first clerk in Gloucestershire to complete the course. She obtained the Certificate



in Local Council Administration early in 2005. Doing the course and the qualification enabled her to tighten council procedures and suggest alterations to the committee structure. It also helped her to put into practice the council's ambition to buy its own property and set up a Parish Centre.

The council had been putting £12,000 a year from the precept<sup>3</sup> towards buying its own property. £60,000 borrowed from the Public Works Loans Board was added to the fund of £84,000, enabling them to buy a property in the centre of the parish for £129,000. The building was converted into the Parish Centre which is open to the public every morning, making the council more accessible to the public and improving relations between the council and parishioners.

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<sup>3</sup> The precept is the income from the council tax raised by the parish or town council and collected by the district or unitary council.

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## Working on practical projects with local support

What can you do to address local issues?



By asking people, you discover ideas for action, get help in deciding priorities, and gain a greater understanding of different communities using your services.



A project often begins as a glint in someone's eye when a problem or crisis needs solving, an opportunity pops up or a groundswell of opinion is expressed. People expect to live and work in a pleasant and safe local environment and receive good quality local services. The parish or town council plays a part in achieving these ambitions.

If the project is going to work, the council should have clear evidence of need and the backing of local people. Assistance from other organisations almost always depends on proof of support from the wider community.

There are many ways of finding out what local people think so that the community benefits from the diversity of groups and cultures. The council can provide opportunities for creating a shared vision for the future and a sense of common purpose. The aim is to encourage the council, and its partners in the community, to work out how social, environmental and economic factors interact without sacrificing the benefits of one in favour of gains in other areas.

By asking people, you discover ideas for action, get help in deciding priorities, and obtain a greater understanding of the different communities using your services.

Parish plans and market town healthchecks (step-by-step examinations of local strengths and weaknesses) help you to discover the needs, thoughts and attitudes of the community. These can be major undertakings, based on comprehensive surveys and a range of consultation tools. If you need a quicker response you could try a short survey, a community conference, a day of communication, Planning for Real<sup>®4</sup>, or focus groups, for example. These processes can be fun and create stronger community spirit.

If community support is to be retained, discussion must lead to a clear plan of action which sets out how each objective will be achieved. *(An example of clear objectives and action is given by Heighington Parish Council (below)):*

### Heighington Parish Council, Darlington

An Extract from an Action Plan:

Action	Method	Priority
Improve the sports field facilities	Establish funding to implement sports questionnaire preferences	High
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Parish Council	Borough Council, Lottery funding, sports teams	Mar 06

<sup>4</sup> Planning for Real<sup>®</sup> starts with a three dimensional model of a place. People gather round it and moves pieces of the model around or attach labels on the model to express their views.

Action	Method	Priority
Local Plan initiative	Liase with Borough Council	High
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Parish Council	Parish and Borough Councils	May 04

Action	Method	Priority
Increased employment in parish	Discuss with Borough Council, residents, employment agencies	Low
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Parish Council	Borough Council, employment Agencies	April 07

Action	Method	Priority
Post Office reinstatement	Liase with Post Office, Village Hall Association and postmaster	High
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Councillor Smith	Post Office, Village Hall Association and postmaster	June 04

Action	Method	Priority
Prescription service	Liase with doctors' surgery	Medium
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Steering Group	Practice Manager	May 05

Action	Method	Priority
Warden supervised provision	Identify need, acceptance design	Low
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Parish Council	Borough Council, Housing Partnership	April 08

Action	Method	Priority
Good Neighbourhood Scheme	Define 'good neighbourliness', consult with interested group	Medium
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Steering Group	Age Concern, Scouts, Shell, village groups	May 06

Action	Method	Priority
Recycling	Consult with Borough Council and interested parties	Low
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Steering Group	Borough Council	May 05

Action	Method	Priority
Removing litter from the countryside	Consultation, identification and organise with parish organisations	High
Responsibility	Partners	Timescale
Steering Group	Borough Council, village groups	April 07



## There are many imaginative ideas for getting good value out of your village or town hall, and new users provide new funds.

If the council doesn't plan ahead in detail, it can get caught out; you miss opportunities and good ideas don't turn into real projects. Some town and parish councils with status as Quality Councils were well-prepared when the Government suddenly offered them an investment fund at the end of 2004, because they had plans and priorities in place.

If you know that the post office or the last shop or pub in the village is vulnerable, the parish council should act before it is too late. There are many imaginative ideas for getting good value out of your village or town hall, and new users provide new funds. Town and parish councils are making it possible for community buildings, including pubs, to be used for a variety of purposes such as a post office, an IT centre or a drop-in advice service.

Projects need careful preparation to avoid the risk to public money. You should have a business plan, especially if you are seeking funds from grant-making bodies. You need to arrange how to cover future expenses, because grants are rarely permanent and usually don't pay running costs. Depending on the size of the project, you could invest in people with specialist skills. For example, expertise in project management, fund-raising or community development can pay dividends.

The Rural Community Council can help, while some experts may already live locally and be prepared to make a contribution.

If you are concerned that your council doesn't have the resources for managing projects, then you will need to work with partners. It is sometimes better for the council to help with activities managed by other organisations rather than delivering services themselves.

For example, many communities know that they lack affordable housing, but the parish or town council doesn't have the power to provide it. Instead the council can work with an experienced housing association to find a solution. First, find out what people think through a parish plan, housing needs survey or healthcheck. Affordable housing can be controversial and reinforce prejudices, so make sure you have evidence to support your case. You will need to talk to housing advisers such as the Rural Housing Enabler at the Rural Community Council and set realistic targets.

Perhaps the community needs a transport service, so the council should look for partners (especially in neighbouring areas) and sources of funding. Most important, you must have support from local people. Public transport schemes designed for people dedicated to cars are still unlikely to succeed, but bus or taxi services for young residents, elderly and infirm people and others who don't drive, can work well.

If your healthcheck identifies gaps in service provision for your community, then think creatively about how they can be addressed. The more you see things coming and get armed with information, the more successful you will be in working for your community.

## ! A word of caution

- Parish and town plans should lead to specific and realistic proposals rather than vague hopes. Always work out how your targets are going to be achieved.
- If you have little local support a project can be a flop, so don't be tempted by funding "bearing gifts" unless you know you have local backing for a realistic venture.
- If you ask people what they want, you may have to disappoint them. They could even suggest something very different from what you had in mind, so be willing to change your views.
- Funding is an attractive quick fix but don't waste it. Where possible, use it to invest in long term, rather than short term, gains.

## ➔ Branxton Parish Plan, Northumberland

Branxton is a small isolated village with an electoral roll of 102. Branxton Parish Council was about to be wound up, when a small group of residents revived it. With support from the Rural Community Council, they applied for and received a parish plan grant. The plan highlighted problems concerning the village hall, playing fields and public footpaths.

It was used as evidence to obtain a grant of £80,000 from Defra to improve the hall. Meanwhile, with finance from the Local Heritage Initiative, the parish council are promoting the

*"A total of £140,000 has been raised for local projects as a result of the parish plan led by the revitalised parish council."*

battle site of Flodden Field in the parish. They have provided a footpath round the site with seats and information boards. In addition, the Playing Field Committee aims to improve the recreation area. A total of £140,000 has been raised for local projects as a result of the parish plan led by the revitalised parish council.

## ➔ Bodmin Market and Coastal Towns Initiative, Cornwall

Bodmin's community regeneration officer worked with Bodmin Town Council and six surrounding parish councils to obtain a grant for market and coastal towns from the South West Regional Development Agency. A working group was set up in 2001 consisting of the clerks of the seven councils and the regeneration officer.



Public meetings and events were held and a wider forum established. The regeneration officer became the coordinator working from the town council offices. A limited company, Bodmin Futures, was set up to produce an operational plan (completed 2004), raise funding and deliver the targets identified in the plan. The parishes involved have become more active and some have also produced their own parish plans.

*"The parishes involved have become more active and some have also produced their own parish plans."*

(See [www.southwesttowns.net/communities/bodmin.asp](http://www.southwesttowns.net/communities/bodmin.asp))

## ➔ Aberford Parish Plan, Yorkshire

Aberford and two neighbouring parish councils were the first parish councils in Yorkshire to use a Planning for Real® exercise in the parish planning process.

A 1:500 scale model of the village was made by the primary school children and 355 villagers attended a Planning for Real® event, organised by Yorkshire Planning Aid on behalf of the councils, and between them made 2010 suggestions.



*“As a result of the good experience of working together on the parish plan, the three parish councils merged to form Aberford and District Parish Council.”*

The parish plan that followed in January 2003, included 36 projects, of which nine had been completed by the end of 2004. These included a community newsletter, new litterbins and benches, and an after school club. As a result of the good experience of working together on the parish plan, the three parish councils merged to form Aberford and District Parish Council. In total, grants of £7,815 were raised, £6,155 of which came from the Countryside Agency.

(See [www.aberford.net/parish.htm](http://www.aberford.net/parish.htm))

## ➔ Brading, Isle of Wight, and Marchwood, Hampshire

When the Government made an investment fund available for Quality Parishes at the end of 2004, Brading Town Council were able to submit a bid for £9,400 quickly because it had action plans in place. People already came to the town council

office to use the computers (including children doing homework), but the council received more funding so that it could take information technology out into the community. (See [www.brading.gov.uk](http://www.brading.gov.uk)).

Marchwood's Village Hall was already used as an information point. The parish council's bid was for an IT suite to develop education and training in IT skills. The council received 50% of their bid. An extra computer would be available for a newly appointed youth worker for the parish and a 'Connexions' officer working on employment opportunities, both giving advice to young people in the locality.



## ➔ Anderton War Memorial Hall, Cheshire

Improvements to Anderton War Memorial Hall were driven by the parish council working with the Memorial Hall Committee.

The parish council successfully applied for a community services grant of £2,000 to provide disabled toilets, baby-changing facilities and storage space, so that the council and its partners could provide a better service to the community. The hall is now used by a pre-school group and a social luncheon club for the elderly, both providing more income for the hall.

*“The hall is now used by a pre-school group and a social luncheon club for the elderly, both providing more income for the hall.”*

# 4

## Co-operating with others

Who benefits and how can partnership be achieved?

One way in which parish and town councils can take action involving more people is to work with other local organisations. The community can benefit from co-operation with other community groups, with neighbouring parishes and with other external bodies such as principal authorities<sup>5</sup>. Partnerships can be formal (with a legal identity), or informal, based on opportunities for networking.

Successful collaboration makes it easier for many players to pool resources and share ideas, responsibilities, problems and solutions. A partnership provides a forum in which the needs of different participants are identified and common goals for the benefit of the wider community are negotiated. Formal partnerships are usually created to achieve distinct projects or policies; this makes it easier to identify and pursue a shared purpose over time. For example, if local people are concerned for safety in their locality, the town or parish council can work with the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership or Community Safety Partnership to achieve benefits and solutions to issues such as drug-related crime, anti-social behaviour and health and well-being.

Co-operation with other community groups helps people to see the local community from different angles. This is particularly valuable for achieving sustainability and the balance of social, environmental and economic needs. As more people with different perspectives get involved, the community becomes more creative in finding lively and imaginative solutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Local authorities usually known as county, district, borough, city, metropolitan or unitary councils, are referred to collectively as principal councils or principal authorities.

Co-operation with neighbouring parishes or unparished neighbourhoods can help small parishes find strength in numbers or an increase in resources. Clustering is also useful where issues, such as transport or retail policy, cross boundaries, while a town council gains from working closely with the surrounding parishes from which its economy benefits.

Successful partnerships search for circumstances in which everyone wins. This can help overcome the tension that sometimes exists between different tiers of government (for example when community interests appear to conflict with the perceived needs of the district or county council). By working in partnership, tensions can be identified and addressed in the search for win-win results. Close liaison between the parish or town council, and the principal authority councillors who serve the same community, is essential.

Parish and town councils have specific local knowledge, a precious commodity that organisations working across the district, county or region will value. For example, local knowledge helps highways or transport authorities to meet the needs of their locality. Some provide rapid response highway teams to resolve maintenance problems pointed out by parish councils. Others consult with parish councils on proposals for traffic calming, 20 mph zones, and bus stops, for example. Parish and town councils can also initiate traffic calming schemes, speed limit changes and other improvements, by bringing the need to the attention of the authority.

Partnership works best when responsibilities are clearly agreed and players are respected as equals. Trust and reliability help you to share the load.



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#### **A word of caution**

- *Partnerships can easily stumble and fail if tensions are not addressed. If you don't have your partners' trust then co-operation will collapse.*
- *Entrenched views and conflicts of interest make negotiation difficult. Partners may see things differently from you. How do you react? Experience shows that a partnership can flounder when players struggle for control rather than consensus, compromise or agreement.*
- *Confusion about responsibilities can be awkward. Make sure that a common purpose, roles and responsibilities are clear from the outset. Representatives on the partnership must be able to speak with authority from their organisation and with knowledge of the project in hand.*
- *Partners may come and go, making the project change tack. Are you flexible enough to cope?*
- *Partnership working can take time; sometimes it's more straightforward to do it alone.*

## ➡ Lavenham Area Minibus Scheme (LAMBS), Suffolk

Lavenham Parish Council was one of a group of nine parish councils working in partnership to obtain a parish transport grant of £80,050 to provide a minibus service linking the villages with Sudbury and Bury St Edmonds. £10,000 was available for each parish. Following a suggestion from the area's county councillor and co-ordinated by the rural transport partnership manager, a steering group was set up and a survey (80% response) showed the need for the service. The partnership used the money to buy a minibus and paid a co-ordinator and driver (both part-time), supplemented by volunteer drivers. LAMBS is run by a management committee with a representative from each parish. It operates weekly services from the villages to two market towns, and a dial a ride scheme. The minibus (with driver) is available for private hire by groups of local people. The service took about twenty months to organise following the initial meeting. (See [www.lambs.fsworld.co.uk](http://www.lambs.fsworld.co.uk))



## ➡ Wheatley Web Link, Nottinghamshire

➡ The villages of North and South Wheatley have a combined population of 615. Wheatley Web Link is based at Wheatley Post Office and The Manor Stores. It provides internet access and IT facilities for local people, and a website with local information. It was developed by a partnership of organisations including North and South Wheatley Parish Council, Wheatley Post Office and The Manor Stores, Bassetlaw District Council and Nottinghamshire Rural Community Council. A grant of £13,864 from the Countryside Agency contributed to a total fund of £24,540.

## ➡ Burgess Hill, Sussex

Burgess Hill Town Council's flagship Help Point is situated on the High Street in the centre of Burgess Hill (population 28,000). The town council drove the plan forward over three years in partnership with Mid-Sussex District Council and Sussex County Council. The building cost over half a million pounds, funded from the council's reserves and a grant of £121,000 from the district council. It became the focal point of the community, with facilities for exhibitions, public consultation, festivals and links to Mid-Sussex District Council and West Sussex County Council. The service developed further with fourteen new partners using the building including Sussex Police, West Sussex Careers Ltd, Adult Education, the Central Sussex Enterprise Centre, housing groups, pension advice and a project supporting people at risk from domestic abuse. (See [www.burgesshill.gov.uk](http://www.burgesshill.gov.uk))



## ➡ Lymm Heritage Trail, Cheshire

The parish council is a leading member of Lymm Environment and Heritage Group, which suggested a heritage trail to celebrate the Lymm Dam and its 17th century mill which made nails and barrel hoops. Lymm Parish Council was the driving force; it applied for and received a grant for £8,665 from the Local Heritage Initiative. They worked with Warrington Borough Council and local park rangers to set up the popular trail in the Lymm Dam catchment area. The scheme took two years to put into place.





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## Influencing decisions that affect the community

Can you have an impact on other organisations?

Local groups represent the interests only of those people who choose to join. However, the council's responsibility is to represent all parts of the community. Organisations making decisions that affect your community will often consult the council on the understanding that it represents the whole town or parish.

It's not always easy to assess what the entire community thinks, especially when there are conflicts of opinion. Plans, healthchecks, surveys, workshops can all give you access to information that helps you to decide. Fully informed, you can work towards consensus or compromise, or you can identify priorities and majority views.

Once you have a clear sense of what the community thinks, you can argue its case. The town or parish council's job, when necessary, is to lobby on behalf of the community. It is particularly difficult if you are putting pressure on external organisations that don't agree with your community's view. If you make your case in a professional and well-informed way, then other bodies are more likely to listen. Successful action raises the profile of the council, boosts local confidence and commands respect. Local people begin to recognise that they can influence decisions that have an impact on the community.

Principal authorities don't have the resources to find out what everyone in their area thinks about services and planning. They need your local knowledge to help them make decisions. For example, in 2000 the Government created local strategic partnerships (LSPs) to be set up at the level of the county or district. The LSP, representing organisations from public, voluntary and business sectors, was required to draw up a community strategy or plan for improving the quality of life and well-being in their area based on local consultation. Parish and town plans can inform the priorities and decisions of the LSP as the strategy develops.

Your community can also influence the spatial planning policies of principal authorities. In 2004, the Government introduced local development frameworks to provide the context for planning decisions. Your community can contribute policies to this framework provided they are adopted as supplementary planning documents negotiated with the planning authority. Once approved in this way, parish or town plans and design statements (detailing design features in a locality) can carry considerable weight when a planning application is being discussed.

Councillors who represent your community on principal authorities are important allies. There is strength in numbers; clusters or groups of towns and parishes have more clout if they work together and speak to the principal authorities with one voice.

### **A word of caution**

- *Other organisations listen, but sometimes they hear only what they want to hear. You may be unable to negotiate agreement and, in the end, you might have to give way to more powerful outside interests.*
- *Tensions and power struggles within the community will weaken its influence on decision makers elsewhere. Power is about what's best for the community, not about defending personal or entrenched positions.*
- *It may be normal practice to support the opinion of the majority, but smaller groups have a right to be heard. Sometimes there will be good reasons for supporting the minority view. For example, most people do not use wheelchairs but attention to the needs of wheelchair users is required by law; what's more it should benefit others in the community.*

### **Totton and Eling Town Council, Hampshire**

Totton and Eling Town Council joined other local councils and groups in successfully opposing the Dibden Bay port development. The town council employed a town planner to prepare a joint case and represent it at the year-long Dibden Terminal Inquiry. The application was eventually turned down by the Government. The council also contributed to a steering group that prepared an urban design framework, later accepted as supplementary planning guidance. (See [www.totton-and-eling.demon.co.uk](http://www.totton-and-eling.demon.co.uk))

*“The council also contributed to a steering group that prepared an urban design framework.”*

### **Wrockwardine Parish Council, Shropshire**

When the chairman of Wrockwardine Parish Council suggested reopening a railway station at nearby Admaston, the council used its newsletter to consult local people. It received a Community Services Grant to start a quarterly publication, and when the grant ran out they continued the newsletter with funding from the precept. The response to consultation on reopening the station was positive, but Telford and Wrekin Borough Council, although supportive of the idea, had no funding for a feasibility study. So the parish council successfully applied for a Parish Transport Grant. Approximately £1,500 from the precept was added to the £8,000 from the Countryside Agency and the feasibility study was commissioned from Railway Consultancy Limited. Although initially negative on grounds of cost, the consultants later came back with a cheaper option. The parish council is pursuing the idea with the railway companies.

*“The council used its newsletter to consult local people.”*

## The Upper Yare Partnership, Norfolk

The parish councils of Yaxham, Whinburgh and Westfield, Garvestone, Thuxton and Reymerston, and Hardingham established the Upper Yare Partnership Trust in 2002 to give them more influence at local government level and

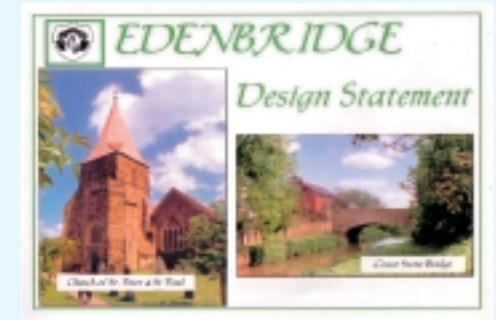
facilitate the funding of community projects. Each parish council makes a small contribution to the running costs of the partnership and additional money is raised from other sources, including the district and county councils and the European Union. The Upper Yare Partnership has lobbied successfully, backed up by thorough research and evidence of community support. Its achievements include road and footpath improvements, saving and developing a struggling community newsletter and preventing a pub from being converted to a private house. The partnership is working on a map of local footpaths with a view to filling in gaps, and a directory of local services and organisations.

*“Its achievements include road and footpath improvements, saving and developing a struggling community newsletter and preventing a pub from being converted to a private house.”*

## Edenbridge Design Statement, Kent

Edenbridge Town Council encouraged the Town Forum to do a Village Design Statement and supported the process from start to finish. The scheme was launched by giving disposable cameras (donated by the local photographic shop) to local people of all ages and asking them to photograph a nominated area. The pictures covered the whole parish from different viewpoints. They were displayed and used to draw out comments from a wider audience.

The completed design statement, produced in 1998, was adopted as supplementary planning guidance. This was made easier by the involvement from the start of the Conservation Officer at Sevenoaks District Council.



The statement has influenced many planning applications, including housing frontages in a new development and the design of the inner relief road. It has also prevented British Telecom from putting up more telegraph poles in a Conservation Area.

## Faringdon Market Town Initiative, Oxfordshire

Faringdon's Action Plan influenced the local development plan and provided the impetus for getting broadband to rural areas around Faringdon. The Action Plan has also initiated projects such as a rural business 'incubator', which provides start-up units at reduced rents, support and practical assistance to local entrepreneurs starting small businesses.

Faringdon is a Beacon Town for the Market Town Initiative. An Action Group did a health check of the town, identifying 54 potential projects. Faringdon Action Plan was then put together, involving 32 of the projects and 23,000 hours of volunteer time. The process took nine months from January to October 2002. The role of the town council was to take an overview and guard against the process being hijacked by particular interests.

Further details can be found at <http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/Economy/Projects/DetailPage-1772.asp>

6

## Building change that lasts


How do you use short-term grants for long-term benefits?

Town and parish councils have an important role to play in creating tools and resources, so that local community action is sustained and long term change is achieved. Grants are often essential to help community projects get off the ground, but they don't keep coming in. Plans for the delivery of services, events and facilities need to include ways in which income to pay the bills can be created in years to come.

The town or parish council has an advantage over other community groups because it can collect funds from all households through its precept. The council can raise loans on behalf of the community and use the precept to pay back over time. This helps to spread the load. The council is accountable to its electorate however, and needs local support for ways in which it manages its income.

Using the precept to help kick-start local action is important; it demonstrates the commitment of both the council and the community, and can encourage outside bodies to provide match funding. Other agencies are reluctant to support communities that are unwilling to help themselves. While the council offers hard cash, the community contributes the time and energy of volunteers.

Town and parish councils have an important role to play in creating tools and resources, so that local community action is sustained and long term change is achieved.



## The council can bring together business interests who may have ideas or resources to contribute to community activity.

Many grant schemes allow you to give a financial value to voluntary action, so you can get money in exchange for volunteer contributions to a project. Grants can pay for dedicated project officers, youth workers or community development workers who are worth their weight in gold, but consider what happens when the funding stops.

The council and the community have choices when considering the long term future of a project. You can start by using grant funding as an investment to develop assets of value in the future such as staff expertise, skills for volunteers or improved facilities.

A service or facility could be self-sustaining by charging realistic fees and holding fund-raising events, while volunteer effort can help keep running costs to a minimum. The town or parish council could give help in kind including venues, staff time or administrative facilities or, as an employer, it can put project officers on the payroll with financial support from other sources.

Council experts can help other groups to draw up grant applications. Funding schemes are almost always short-lived so, as one source of grant funding ends, it is worth looking for other funding schemes that may be available.

The council can bring together business interests who may have ideas or resources to contribute to community activity. The trend is to encourage companies of all sizes to recognise their social responsibility and work with their local communities.

Councils often argue that they are most successful where they set the ball rolling and then hand over to a separate organisation such as a community group, partnership or development trust, for the long term management of a service or facility.

Finally the council may need to decide whether to subsidise an activity through the precept for services that don't generate an income. This choice might raise the precept, so it is wise to ensure that the project is important to local well-being and has support from local people.

Taking the lead in a community can present many difficulties to be overcome. If the quality of life and local well-being is to be improved, choices have to be made. The trick is to get the balance right and maintain the local backing as you juggle different views and the variety of environmental, social and economic needs. In its leadership role the town or parish council helps more people to take part, strengthening the community and creating a deeper sense of belonging. It builds bridges between different interests, encouraging partnership and recognising what is genuinely best for the whole community.

## ⚠️ A word of caution

- *Volunteers come and go; they have the freedom to choose. Sometimes paid employees are more reliable. If volunteers are involved you might employ someone to manage their activity. Sometimes volunteers fade away the longer a project goes on!*
- *Funding sources cease and Government policies change. It is risky to rely on external funding for the long term, so work on a business plan showing how to pay the bills when grant funding stops.*

## ➡️ Ampthill Park, Bedfordshire

Ampthill has a population of just under 7,000. Ampthill Town Council owns a 200 acre park that costs money to run and needs improvement. Where does the money come from? The running costs of £150,000 a year are financed from the precept but the council is using grants to invest in improvements costing a million pounds over five years.

Benefits include the restoration of the Capability Brown landscaping and the replacement of an old football pavilion with a new building designed to increase income from charges, incorporating an interpretation centre, educational facilities and a café.

Sources of grants include the landfill tax, the Local Heritage Initiative and Mid Beds District Council.

*“Replacement of an old football pavilion with a new building.”*

The town council is also working with the Greensands Trust, the Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature and Bedfordshire County Council.

(See [www.amphilltowncouncil.org.uk](http://www.amphilltowncouncil.org.uk))

## ➡️ Waters Upton Co-Location Project, Shropshire

This scheme was initiated by Waters Upton Parish Council when the post office was threatened with closure. The parish council made a major investment to maintain local services. It consulted the community, and identified the need for additional local services.



It negotiated with a landowner and the planning authority, and in return for planning permission on part of his land the landowner gave a plot to the parish council.

Other funders were identified to contribute to the total cost of £327,000 and a steering group was set up, headed by the parish council.

With £250,000 from Government, and a grant of £25,000 from the Countryside Agency matched by a loan taken out by the parish council and repaid from the precept, a two-storey building was constructed containing a shop and post office, two offices and a flat to let above.

The offices are used by a variety of service providers each paying rent that helps to sustain the project. The centre was opened in 2003 and is run by the parish council, with the parish clerk as manager.

## Landkey Mazzard Orchard, Devon

Landkey Mazzard Orchard started with a big investment but in the long term it is maintained by volunteers and managed by a millennium trust. The orchard is part of a millennium green and is accessible to the public, who are free to pick the fruit.

Mazzards are cherry trees native to a particular area of north Devon. Their numbers were declining and some varieties were approaching extinction.

Led by its then chairman, Landkey Parish Council in North Devon worked with the rest of the community to plant a two-acre mazzard orchard to strengthen local character.

The Parish Council obtained a £35,000 Millennium Green grant, for which the village raised matching funding. The trees were planted in December 1999 and are thriving.

## Dalston Cast Iron Road Signs, Cumbria

The parish of Dalston contains a significant number of cast iron road signs which had fallen into disrepair, and so the parish

*“Many volunteers stressed how much they enjoyed their involvement.”*

council initiated a project to restore the signs. As specialist expertise was needed, the council obtained grants from Cumbria County Council, the Friends of the Lake District and the Local Heritage Initiative, raising a total of £31,309.


This investment was supported by volunteer help from the community creating a strong sense of local ownership.

The signs were cleaned and repainted and new castings were made for damaged or missing fingers, roundels and finials. Some signs were moved to places where they were less likely to be damaged again. Many volunteers stressed how much

they enjoyed their involvement, which is continuing, as the history of the signs and the place names on them are being researched. From start to finish the project took three years. (See [www.dalston.org.uk](http://www.dalston.org.uk))

## Askam and Irleth Dreamscheme, Cumbria

As a result of a parish plan, Askam and Irleth Parish Council identified the need for youth provision in the village. They

 worked with Young Cumbria, a local youth organisation, to plan and set up a

‘Dreamscheme’, by which young people undertake work in their community in exchange for points which they can then spend on organised trips.

*“The Dreamscheme has completed over 30 projects and involved more than 300 young people.”*

The parish council successfully applied for a community services grant of £14,500 to help provide a project leader/youth worker. The investment proved very valuable. The Dreamscheme has completed over 30 projects and involved more than 300 young people. It has now secured more funding for two more part-time workers and will offer four sessions a week.

## Chequer Mead Community Arts Centre, East Grinstead, Sussex

East Grinstead Town Council built the Chequer Mead Community Arts Centre in 1995/1996 which cost £2.41 million. As well as an auditorium, there is a gallery, rehearsal space and facilities for hire.



Over half of the bill was paid for by the town council, with further funding from the Arts Council National Lottery Fund (£680,000) and Mid Sussex District Council (£500,000).

*“Since opening in November 1996, the theatre and centre has developed a significant regional reputation.”*


Since opening in November 1996, the theatre and centre has developed a significant regional reputation. The charitable company initially established to manage the centre got into financial difficulties, so the council took it on in March 2004, creating a sole custodian charity trust. There are over 150 Friends of Chequer Mead helping to sustain the venture. (See [www.chequermead.org.uk](http://www.chequermead.org.uk))

## 7

# Searching for information

Where can you go for support and information?





This section points you in the direction of important sources of further knowledge and experience.

There is plenty of information to help you identify local needs and organise action in the community but too much information can be confusing. This section points you in the direction of important sources of further knowledge and experience.

In your county the Association of Town and Parish Councils and your Rural Community Council (RCC) offer support. The county association concentrates on helping your council to operate on a sound footing, while the RCC provides advice for solving the social, economic and environmental needs of towns and villages. For example, make contact with your RCC for help with youth projects and support for community buildings such as community centres, village shops and post offices. The RCC may also have a specialist adviser to help with affordable housing or transport solutions.

Your Regional Development Agency (RDA) and the Government Office for your region are becoming increasingly important. The RDA is developing work with market towns and it can help with local economic issues including shops and small businesses.

It is important to work with principal authorities to establish charters which set out the ground rules for further joint working. This helps to resolve financial issues such as double taxation<sup>6</sup>. It is particularly valuable to negotiate with planning and highways departments, but principal authorities can also assist with environmental schemes, youth projects and transport issues, for example. Help with projects supporting young people can also be gained through Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and the Youth Council movement.

Websites relevant to topics explored in this guide are listed below. This is followed by signposts to a wide range of organisations offering help, support and co-operation that benefits town and parish councils. You need to note that sources of information are always evolving, so keep an eye open for the current state of play.

Topic	Organisation	Web address
Citizenship in the National Curriculum	Department for Education and Skills	<a href="http://www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship">www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship</a>
Crime and Disorder	Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships	<a href="http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk">www.crimereduction.gov.uk</a>

<sup>6</sup> Double taxation occurs when the principal authority withdraws a service from a parish but continues to provide it in its unparished areas. People in the parish are reluctant to use the precept to foot the bill for the withdrawn service because they are still paying for it to be delivered elsewhere through other elements of their council tax.

Community development	Community Development Foundation	<a href="http://www.cdf.org.uk">www.cdf.org.uk</a>
Trusts for community projects	Development Trusts Association	<a href="http://www.dta.org.uk">www.dta.org.uk</a>
Heritage	Local Heritage Initiative Heritage Lottery Fund	<a href="http://www.lhi.org.uk">www.lhi.org.uk</a> <a href="http://www.hlf.org.uk">www.hlf.org.uk</a>
Landfill tax	Landfill Tax Credit Scheme	<a href="http://www.ltcs.org.uk">www.ltcs.org.uk</a>
Local distinctiveness	Common Ground	<a href="http://www.commonground.org.uk">www.commonground.org.uk</a>
Market towns	Action for Market Towns	<a href="http://www.towns.org.uk">www.towns.org.uk</a>
Market town healthchecks and parish plans	Countryside Agency/ Commission for Rural Communities	<a href="http://www.countryside.gov.uk">www.countryside.gov.uk</a>
Parish plans database	Countryside Agency/ Commission for Rural Communities	<a href="http://www.countryside.gov.uk/vitalvillages">www.countryside.gov.uk/vitalvillages</a>

Planning Aid	Royal Town Planning Institute	<a href="http://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice/">www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice/</a>
Planning for Real® or Rural Planning for Real®	Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation Countryside Agency/ Commission for Rural Communities	<a href="http://www.nifonline.org.uk">www.nifonline.org.uk</a> <a href="http://www.countryside.gov.uk">www.countryside.gov.uk</a> <a href="http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk">www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk</a>
Social enterprise	New Economics Foundation Small Business Service (Department of Trade and Industry) The Plunkett Foundation	<a href="http://www.neweconomics.org">www.neweconomics.org</a> <a href="http://www.sbs.gov.uk">www.sbs.gov.uk</a> <a href="http://www.plunkett.co.uk">www.plunkett.co.uk</a>
Training for people who work with town and parish councils	National Association of Local Councils Society of Local Council Clerks University of Gloucestershire	<a href="http://www.nalc.gov.uk">www.nalc.gov.uk</a> <a href="http://www.slcc.co.uk">www.slcc.co.uk</a> <a href="http://www.glos.ac.uk/environment">www.glos.ac.uk/environment</a> (Local Policy and Community Development)
Youth councils	British Youth Council	<a href="http://www.byc.org.uk">www.byc.org.uk</a>

Agency	Assistance
Action for Market Towns <a href="http://www.towns.org.uk">www.towns.org.uk</a>	Support for market towns, promotion of good practice, representation and lobbying
Audit Commission <a href="http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk">www.audit-commission.gov.uk</a>	Guidance on financial rules and integrity of parish and town councils
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs <a href="http://www.defra.gov.uk">www.defra.gov.uk</a>	Strategic commitment to town and parish councils (eg Rural Strategy 2004), rural proofing and coordination of regional policy implementation  Investment funding to help communities to adapt and develop and initiatives to test innovative approaches to local empowerment  Quality Parish Council initiative and incentive fund (with ODPM)
Commission for Rural Communities <a href="http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk">www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk</a> <a href="http://www.countryside.gov.uk">www.countryside.gov.uk</a>	Rural advocate, expert adviser and independent watchdog with a particular focus on disadvantage in rural areas
Government Offices (for the regions)	Implementing Government policy in the region, brokering regional action and co-coordinating government funding Crime Reduction Team

Improvement and Development Agency <a href="http://www.idea.gov.uk">www.idea.gov.uk</a>	Promotion of good practice in local government including practical toolkits
Information technology Ruralnet <a href="http://www.ruralnet.org.uk/why.htm">www.ruralnet.org.uk/why.htm</a> UKVillages online <a href="http://www.ukvillages.co.uk">www.ukvillages.co.uk</a>	Networking and sharing good practice through information and communications technology
Local Government Association <a href="http://www.lga.gov.uk">www.lga.gov.uk</a>	Support for principal authorities and for good practice including cross-tier local government partnerships
Lottery <a href="http://www.awardsforall.org.uk">www.awardsforall.org.uk</a> <a href="http://www.hlf.org.uk">www.hlf.org.uk</a>	Grant funding especially for sports and heritage projects
National Association of Local Councils <a href="http://www.nalc.gov.uk">www.nalc.gov.uk</a>	National support for county associations and county training partnerships, offering advice to town and parish councils including conferences and an information service  Lobbying on behalf of town and parish councils and guiding policy, developments and training

<p>Office of the Deputy Prime Minister www.odpm.gov.uk</p>	<p>Creation of new parish councils and quality councils Guidance on public participation in planning (see Planning Policy Statements) Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Best Value</p>
<p>Principal authorities</p>	<p>Strategy and policy expressed through local strategic partnerships, community strategies and the local development framework Charters for joint working between town and parish councils and principal authorities and delegation of activities to accredited quality parish councils. Funding opportunities including grants for improvements to community buildings Employment of parish liaison staff Co-ordination through councillors representing local communities Monitoring of standards and codes of conduct</p>
<p>Prohelp www.bitc.org.uk</p>	<p>A network of businesses giving free professional advice to community and voluntary organisations (linked to Business in the Community)</p>

<p>Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)</p>	<p>Funding and dissemination of good practice Support for market towns and the Beacon Towns scheme Community Leadership training</p>
<p>Regional Rural Affairs Forums</p>	<p>Consultation and sounding board involving government departments and regional stakeholders</p>
<p>Rural Community Councils See also the umbrella body ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) www.acre.org.uk</p>	<p>Encouraging parish plans and greater community involvement Information on appropriate grant schemes (eg Funderfinder) and co-ordinated dissemination of funding programmes</p>
<p>Society of Local Council Clerks www.slcc.co.uk</p>	<p>Support for professional parish and town council clerks including training and advice</p>
<p>Standards Board for England www.standardsboard.co.uk</p>	<p>Guidance on the framework for ethical behaviour in local government and assessment of cases where codes of conduct have been breached</p>