
PARISH COUNCIL PARTNERSHIP

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 To agree a way forward for partnership arrangements with the Parish Councils. It should be noted that although this report refers to Parish Councils it includes the Town Council.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Parish Council representatives were invited to the Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25 November 2003. This was to ensure that issues relating to Parishes could be included within the budget process. At that meeting Parishes raised the following issues:

- Purchase of manpower/technical support from Rochford District Council
- Parish Liaison Officer to assist with communications between parishes and the District and to provide support for the Parishes
- Issues around consultation with the District
- Transfer of assets and liabilities.

- 2.2 The decision of that Committee was to set up a Parish Liaison Sub-Committee so that detailed discussion could take place around the issues raised.

- 2.3 On 10 February 2004 a Meeting of the Sub-Committee was held without Parish representatives so that the work programme could be identified. It was agreed that the Head of Financial Services meet with Parish Clerks to identify the way forward for the next meeting.

3 MEETING WITH PARISH CLERKS

- 3.1 The Head of Financial Services met with the Parish Clerks on 21st May. At the meeting there was broad agreement that the Parishes and District work around the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister - ODPM). This does not necessarily include seeking quality status but using the document as an indication of best practice. This scheme defines a Quality Parish as follows:

- Is representative of, and actively engages, all parts of its community, providing vision, identity and a sense of belonging.
- Is effectively and properly managed.
- Articulates the needs and wishes of its community.

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- Upholds high standards of conduct.
 - Is committed to work in partnership with principal local authorities and other public service agencies.
 - In proportion to its size and skills, delivers local services on behalf of principal local authorities when this represents the best deal for the local community.
 - Works closely with voluntary groups in its community.
 - Provides leadership to the community through its work on Parish plans and
 - Working with its partners, acts as an information point for local services

3.2 The meeting of Clerks felt that

- There were real opportunities for the Parishes and the District to work together on partnership and consultation. However it needs to be demonstrated that it is a real process and this would require changes within Parishes and the District. The lack of real consultation has shown up in issues around the transfer of assets and liabilities and in particular, open spaces and play spaces. Here Parishes were aware of discussions taking place within the District but Parishes were not part of the process.
- Although there is an existing Consultation Charter and Code of Practice between the District Council and Parishes, at some point in the future this needs to be reviewed to capture the elements of any new partnership.
- Parishes need to empower a representative to attend future liaison committees and if the timing is right, be able to agree with their representatives the response of behalf of the Parish. The establishment of a named representative for the Parish was viewed as the best option.
- The cycle of meetings for Parishes does not always allow for a quick response to consultation papers.
- Simple issues need to be addressed such as keeping up to date contact points within the District and who to talk to if problems are encountered.
- On the issue of IT support, it has to be remembered that some clerks work from home and if Broadband is not available, meaningful electronic transfer of documents is not possible.

- The particular problems of partnership arrangements with the smaller Parishes needs to be considered as they have limited finance and support structures.
- A Liaison Officer was generally thought not worth exploring, as contacts between the Parishes and the District were generally known. It was noted that for any support scheme it is not only for Clerks, but to support the Councillors as well.
- The option to place items on future Parish Liaison Sub-Committee agendas would be welcomed.

4 OTHER PARTNERSHIP ISSUES

4.1 In February 2004 Essex County Council published their final report “County and Parish Working Together”. The District and the majority of the Parishes were not aware that this document was being prepared. By invitation Great Wakering Parish Council had had some involvement in the background to this report. The report states that the most significant areas of concern are:

- Problems with responding to consultation and a lack of feedback on responses.
- Uncoordinated mailings from Essex County Council.
- Not having a contact list for Essex County Council.
- The sheer weight of information received from all sources, much of it irrelevant.
- Parish Councils lack of suitable IT resources.
- A feeling that Essex County Council has little understanding of the role of Parish Councils and how they function.
- Several areas where training was needed by clerks and Councillors.

4.2 As can be seen from the above the key list of concerns are fairly similar to those already under discussion between the District and Parish Councils. Essex County Council have now set up a working party to consider the findings of the report.

4.3 The Rural Community Council has appointed a worker to give help and advice to rural community groups, which include parish councils. Although the rural objective would probably exclude Rayleigh, contact has been made with this appointed person and she will be pleased to be involved in future discussions on parishes where the Rural Community Council can be of assistance.

- 4.4 The main body for parishes is the Essex Association of Local Councils. However the extent of their role in any future development for the Parishes or Parish/District/Essex County Council relationships needs to be determined.

5 THE WAY FORWARD

- 5.1 In order to progress issues the following are proposed for consideration:

- A future timetable of Parish Liaison Sub-Committees needs to be established where named representatives of the Parishes can attend and have the opportunity of placing items on future agendas. This needs to be for a fixed number of meetings to complete the review of partnerships and amend the Consultation charter and code of practice to capture the issues agreed. For this meeting, with the agreement of the Chairman, the draft of this report has been discussed with the Parish clerks who attended the earlier meeting and all Parishes have been requested to send one Member Representative.
- The views of the Parishes are sought on the future involvement of the Essex Association of Local Councils, Essex County Council, the Rural Community Council and any other partnership organisation.
- This meeting identifies a way forward for the development of IT within the Parishes. Financial contributions towards the structure of IT could be made from the principal authorities with benefits accruing through the electronic distribution of information and through the consultation process, particularly in relation to planning. This clearly would include discussions with Essex County Council as they have identified this as a key area.
- The meeting considers whether there are any benefits of establishing a post to assist partnership working and assist with capacity problems within the Parishes. If this were considered a funding formula would need to be established for cost sharing with the partnership organisations and the Parishes.
- The meeting considers the development of Parish websites and identifies the most appropriate way forward working with Essex County Council.

6 PLAYSPACES

- 6.1 The Playspace Sub-Committee have been considering the options for playspaces throughout the district. Visits have been made to all sites with the conclusion that the majority of playspaces are not strategic assets for the District Council and that Parishes should be consulted about their future. Parishes have now been provided with a list of playspaces together with the views of the Playspace Sub-Committee as to the options available.

- 6.2 The District Council also looked at constructing a possible funding formula should the Parish decide to retain a playspace in line with current usage. This would only relate to repairs and maintenance as the District intends to continue with the rolling renovation programme. This would need to be considered at a later meeting.

7 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS** an agreed action plan in relation to the issues raised within this report.

Dave Deeks

Head of Financial Services

Background Papers:-

Working with Local Councils – Consultation charter and code of practice (RDC)
The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme (ODPM)
County and Parish – a report on working together for the future of Essex (ECC)

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