

**SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 28<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2004**

**WORKING WITH PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS**

**REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**Purpose of Report**

1. This report provides a brief overview of the current arrangements in place for working with Parish and Town Councils.
2. This report has been prepared at the request of the Chairman of the Commission.

**Strategy for Working with Town and Parish Councils**

3. In 1994 Leicestershire County Council produced “In Partnership – A Strategy for working with Parish and Town Councils” which sets out the basis for developing the County Council’s relationship with Parish and Town Councils. This Code of Practice is based on a dual commitment:
  - to improve the arrangements for consulting with local councils on issues which impact directly on local communities; and
  - to delegate responsibilities to the most local level which is capable and willing to undertake the task effectively.
4. The Code of Practice establishes, as the first principle, that local councils will be given the fullest opportunity to influence decisions that have an effect on their local area. An appendix to the Code forms the basis of the matters to be consulted upon which is reviewed annually in conjunction with representatives of the Leicestershire Association of Parish and Local Councils.
5. In addition to the adoption of the Code there are a number of other developments that involve the County Council working with Parish and Town Councils. These are summarised below.

**Annual Meeting with Parish Councils**

6. The County Council and the Leicestershire Association of Parish and Local Councils arrange an annual meeting to which all Parish Councils in membership of the Association are invited. Parish Councils are also given an opportunity to raise issues or table questions on issues of concern in their area.

7. In May, a presentation will be made to the Association of Parish and Local Councils on the work of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership with the aim of developing a closer working relationship. The LRAPLC is represented on many key partnerships including Leicestershire Together, the local strategic partnership for Leicestershire.

### **Leicestershire Rural Partnership**

8. The Leicestershire Rural Partnership (LRP) comprises a range of organisations that deliver most of the services to rural Leicestershire. LRP is led by Leicestershire County Council. The Partnership seeks to improve the quality of life of those living and working in rural Leicestershire.
9. The work of the LRP is co-ordinated by a Board that is guided by the Leicestershire Rural Strategy which is required to be approved by the County Council. The Strategy sets out the LRP's vision and key issues relating to rural Leicestershire. Numerous projects have been developed in response to these key issues that bring numerous benefits to many people living and working in rural Leicestershire. In particular, LRP has played a key role in promoting and developing village appraisals and parish plans.

### **Village Appraisals and Parish Plans**

10. A village appraisal is a community-led initiative that aims to find out what people want for the place where they live by gathering facts and opinions on a wide range of issues. It is carried out by a group of interested people elected at a public meeting. It usually takes the form of a questionnaire distributed to every household in the village or parish. To date 46 village appraisals and parish plans have been completed and 43 village appraisals are in progress.
11. Following the survey work, a report is produced which identifies issues such as potential threats and opportunities in the village, what should be conserved and protected and how the residents want the village to develop in the future. A village appraisal can provide a policy statement to help the parish council to make informed decisions. It can also be used as evidence to influence statutory authorities and other decision makers on issues affecting the village.
12. A parish plan is a holistic, comprehensive plan, which addresses all issues of concern to the community, together in one document. It is prepared by the community working together, based on information provided through research, survey and consultation. It is focused on action and contains a clear statement for the future, including an action plan addressing the needs identified.
13. The County Council and other service providers are involved in all plans/appraisals through the local consultation protocol. This makes provision for questions to be suggested at the survey stage and for responses to proposals and priorities back to the village. This process is co-ordinated within the County Council by staff in the Policy Team of the

Chief Executive's Department. Many issues raised in parish plans are operational, such as library opening hours, how to report faulty streetlights or where to get advice on grants. Other issues are more fundamental, for example a request for traffic calming on a particular road. Here, the village may have to wait its turn on a priority list, or await investigation, if that village has not previously been considered. Where this occurs the process is clearly explained and the request for help is not simply dismissed without any explanation or justification.

14. The results of appraisals and parish plans will be shared across the whole Council by including the questionnaires and outcomes on the CIS through the consultation database. This database is a guide designed for holding the details of historic, current and planned consultation. The database will soon be made available to partner organisations. This will enable them to both learn from the results of the Council's consultation when preparing their activity and to enter the details of their own consultation activities so that the County Council can learn from their consultation. Therefore the village appraisal and parish plan results, whilst led by the RCC, could be entered directly on the database and thus influence service plans.
15. A service level agreement with the Rural Community Council is currently being prepared to ensure that the County Council achieves maximum benefit from its funding of the parish plan/village appraisal process. Leicestershire County Council will provide almost £80,000 of support through the Leicestershire Rural Partnership for community consultation in 2004/05, including Appraisals, Parish Plans and Rural Centre health-checks. This will include references to County Council member involvement in the process.

### **Working with Parish and Town Councils**

16. Departments of the County Council have at various times worked closely with Parish Councils not only in planning and developing services but sharing resources to provide a better level of service in the locality. Examples of these include:
  - Maintaining a regular dialogue with Parish Councils over a range of highway matters which can include joint initiatives in relation to:
    - grass cutting;
    - snow clearance;
    - street lighting;
    - tree wardens;
    - enhancement of highway improvement schemes;
  - providing support staff to work with Parish Youth Councils and supporting young people in taking part in village appraisals;
  - shared use of village hall facilities to provide library services;

- working with parish to protect wildlife, environmental and archaeological heritage of the County.

### **Quality Parish and Town Councils**

17. The Rural White Paper, 'Our Countryside: The Future. A Fair Deal for Rural England', published in November 2000, set out a number of measures to give local people the opportunity to become more involved in the development of their communities. The Government believes that parish and town councils, as the tier of government that is closest to local communities, have a central role to play in improving local quality of life.
18. The White Paper proposed a number of initiatives designed to enhance the role of parish and town councils; to develop a framework for partnership working; and to equip parish and town councils to take on a stronger role for the benefit of the local community. A central proposal was the introduction of the new concept of a Quality Parish Council.
19. Through this scheme the Government wants to encourage all parish councils to reach the standards of the best and, in doing so, to demonstrate their status as the local representatives of their communities. The Government's view is that Quality Parish Councils could play an enhanced role in the community:
  - as an integral part of all consultation and co-ordination arrangements set up by principal local authorities and other service providers on how services are delivered in its area;
  - in the discussion, management and delivery of services which parish councils may carry out and deliver, on behalf of the principal local authority, or by using their own existing powers; and
  - in the provision of access points to information on services of principal local authorities and other service providers.

### **Delegating Functions to Parish and Town Councils**

20. The County Council works closely with Town and Parish Councils in planning and developing services. As stated earlier the Code of Conduct also recognises that where a Town or Parish Council so wishes, it should have the opportunity to take decisions that are essentially of local significance. An Appendix to the Code sets out a range of delegation/partnership arrangements for local councils to consider. Local Councils were advised that the County Council would be concerned to ensure the competence of the local council to deliver the service and also ensure that the level of finance required to deliver the service locally did not disadvantage local councils and was providing best value. Thus far there has been limited interest by local councils in delivering services but more concern about increasing their representational role.

**Recommendations**

21. The Commission is asked to note the contents of this report and indicate what, if any, action it proposes to take about reviewing the current arrangements in place for working with Parish Councils.

**Circulation under the sensitive Issues Procedure**

None

**Background Papers**

In Partnership – A strategy for working with Town and Parish Councils

'Quality Town and Parish Council Scheme – Publication issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in June 2003

Leicestershire Rural Strategy 1998 to 2003 and the draft Strategy 2004 to 2009

**Officer to contact**

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