

Town and Parish Councils

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

This report provides a brief overview of the Board's recent work in relation to Town and Parish Councils to support a discussion with Councillor Sue Baxter, Chairman of the National Association of Local Councils.

Is this report confidential? Yes No

Recommendation/s

Board members are asked to consider the recently published report into better joint working between principal and parish councils and reflect on their own experiences ahead of the meeting.

Action/s

Officers will use the meeting to shape our future engagement with NALC within the context of the levelling up white paper.

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Background

1. There are over 10,200 parish and town councils across England, most of which are in rural areas. Eighty-five per cent set a local precept in 2020-21 raising £596 million, an increase of £42 million on 2019-20.
2. There is a large variation in both the size and capacity of town and parish councils across England. Some town councils cover a population equivalent in size to a small district and undertake a range of services and local functions. Conversely, some parishes cover less than 50 residents and meet only twice a year, as is the legal requirement.
3. The density of town and parish councils within county areas is also hugely varied. As an example, within the borders of North Yorkshire County Council there are 510 precepting parish councils which raised over £8 million in local precepts this tax year. In comparison, Surrey has only 85, although they raised a similar level of precept - £7 million. This significant variation across local areas means conversations about double or downward devolution are often complex, especially when considering how the local governance, accountability and management of devolved funding and services would work.
4. Figures within and around Government have continued to express interest in the role of town and parish councils as part of their vision for levelling up communities across the UK. Danny Kruger's report '[Levelling up our communities](#)' recommended that Government should legislate to increase community power through a 'Right to Serve' and Community Improvement Districts or "pop-up parishes". The influential thinktank Onward published a report [Policies Of Belonging](#) earlier in the year, proposing that every local area be given the "right to self-government" through a parish or town council.
5. For its part the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has highlighted the vital role parish and town councils played during the Covid-19 emergency, organising local volunteering efforts and supporting local people and called for the sector to be empowered to play a greater role driving national recovery, supporting communities and reenergising local high streets, but also outlined the "urgent need to invest in increasing [the sector's] capacity and capability."¹
6. Within this context the People and Places Board commissioned Shared Intelligence in the last political cycle to explore opportunities for better engagement between principal and parish councils.

¹ <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/news-stories/3338-letter-to-rishi-sunak-240920/file>

7. The resulting report [Local service delivery and place-shaping: A framework to support parish and town councils](#) sets out a framework to guide principal councils who are interested in supporting parish and town councils to play an increased role in local service delivery and place-shaping.
8. It focuses on three areas:
 - 8.1. **Building trust** - the underlying principles, shared commitments and ongoing dialogue. The key components of which are:
 - 8.1.1. a clear statement of intent, ideally co-produced with the town and parish councils in the area, about the purpose, scope and mechanisms for delegation or devolution to the ultra-local level
 - 8.1.2. scoping and listening, to build an understanding of the town and parish councils in the area
 - 8.1.3. providing clear information and technical detail about current services or assets as part of a negotiation
 - 8.1.4. provision of material support, or funding, to ensure sustainability.
 - 8.2. **An implementation toolkit** – practical approaches and material for how devolution/responsibility shifts will be achieved. This includes:
 - 8.2.1. a clear process to manage expectations and set a road-map
 - 8.2.2. clarity about legal or contractual mechanisms for delegation or devolution arrangements
 - 8.2.3. forms and criteria to ensure transparency
 - 8.2.4. capacity building – a set of considerations to help local councils build their capacity for success.
 - 8.3. **Other enabling factors for supporting a context of partnership.** These cover:
 - 8.3.1. collaboration between counties, districts and town and parish councils in “three tier” areas
 - 8.3.2. the concept of parish clusters.

9. Following the well-received publication of this research there has been renewed interest in how the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils might work together to take forward the themes and recommendations of this work.
10. To this end, the Chairman of the National Association of Local Councils, Cllr Sue Baxter, has been invited to attend this meeting of the People and Places Board for an initial discussion on where the common areas of interest might be within the forthcoming Levelling Up White Paper.

Implications for Wales

11. Local government structures in Wales are a devolved responsibility.

Financial Implications

12. The Board's activities are supported by budgets for policy development and improvement. Any work arising from this report will be met from within the Board's existing resources.

Equalities Implications

13. Where they exist Town and Parish Councils can provide an opportunity for local communities to take greater responsibility. During the pandemic the LGA provided both staff and financial support to NALC's 'make a change' campaign, which aligns with our 'be a councillor' programme to attract new individuals to local politics.