

Submission to the Lyons Review from North Dorset District Council

Empowerment and the Deal for Devolution

North Dorset District Council is a small rural District Council with a profound commitment to a citizen-led approach to community planning, a longstanding enthusiasm for partnerships as a way of delivering local priorities and a vision about a sustainable role for its market towns as hubs for rural service delivery. The Council has experience of:

- Working with parish and town councils which deliver a range of local services; and
- Empowering local community partnerships based on the market towns and the villages which surround them.

The Council welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the debate about neighbourhoods, using its experience of town and parish councils, community planning and regeneration in this sparsely populated rural area. The paper describes the context of our work in North Dorset, the town and parish council arrangements, our approach to community planning and rural regeneration, the development of our local community partnerships, the way we have used Liveability funding to promote community empowerment and our response to the questions in ODPM's paper. The timescale of the consultation has not permitted a formal discussion on the part of members but this paper captures the views of the Council's most senior Members and Managers.

Context

North Dorset covers an area of almost 61,000 hectares and has a population of approximately 64,000 people. Half our residents live in the District's 5 small market towns, with the other half distributed through villages and smaller settlements. North Dorset experiences high house prices, low wages and an ageing population. The 2004 Indices of Deprivation for England show that 30% of residents are deprived of access to services.

Town and parish councils

Within the District there are 5 town councils, 45 parish councils and 11 parish meetings. These local Councils own and manage 36 play areas/skate parks, numerous playing fields and many other areas of public open space. Eight parish and town councils carry out maintenance of District Council owned land in their areas, for a fee, providing a level of local stewardship which we believe would be absent from a conventional contract. Village hall committees, which operate independently of the parish council in some instances and report to their parish councils in other cases, provide indoor facilities for a wide range of local activities, including sports, arts and early years.

The District Council provides technical, professional, training and grant giving support to the parish and town councils in respect of many of their services and developments but most of the direct revenue costs are met by a local precept raised through Council tax. There are 395 parish and town councillors in North Dorset, working alongside 33 district councillors and 7 county councillors. This provides a high level of democratic engagement, with an elected representative for every 150 people in our District.

Community Planning and Rural Regeneration

The Council welcomed the introduction of community planning in the Local Government Act 2000 as a mechanism for working more closely with its communities and liaising more effectively with sub regional partners in a Strategic Partnership.

In developing its approach the Council was mindful of the following issues:

- The increasing significance of regional decision making;
- Government advice that authorities should work together to avoid duplication of partnerships in an area, conflicting priorities and consultation/ partnership fatigue; and that, in two tier areas, there should not always be a local strategic partnership and community strategy for each district;
- Longstanding community development support to consultation and partnership around the key market towns in North Dorset through the Council's Agenda 21 programme, economic development activities and planning policy development;
- The insight and guidance within the Rural White Paper about the significance of the market towns for the future of the countryside and local support for that view;
- The overlapping requirements of rural regeneration initiatives and community planning in that both call for research about local needs, consultation over local opinion, the development of action plans and strengthened partnership working.

In 2001, as the Council began to develop its approach to local community partnerships, the South West Regional partners launched the SW Market & Coastal Towns Initiative (MCTI). This encouraged market/coastal towns to undertake local consultation with a view to producing local community strategic plans aimed at long-term regeneration of their areas.

The council opted for an innovative approach to community planning by:

1. endorsing the Dorset Strategic Partnership, that is the sub regional partnership, as its Local Strategic Partnership;
2. supporting the development of 4 local community partnerships based in the market towns and the villages surrounding them; and
3. making explicit connections between community planning and rural regeneration.

The Development of Local Community Partnerships

In order to support the development of local community partnerships, North Dorset employed resources available through the South West MCTI for two of its towns; moved resources from other areas of its own activities into community development; made council officers available to assist with the work of community partnerships; and changed its approach to economic development towards support for area based regeneration.

Relative to the size of its budgets, the Council has invested significant funds in community development. A partnership approach with other agencies, including the Dorset Strategic Partnership, Signpost Housing Association and town councils has boosted those funds and enabled a team of professional community development workers to be employed. This team has worked to facilitate the development of 4 local community partnerships focused around the principal market towns and their rural hinterlands and has supported the development of local action plans at parish and town levels.

The Council recognises that the voluntary sector has an important role to play in community planning because of its ability to harness voluntary effort, provide independent support to community based organisations and deliver community projects. The Council subscribes to the Dorset Voluntary Sector Compact.

At the beginning there was considerable local scepticism. There was not a strong working relationship between the district and the towns and there was not a history of volunteering. Parishes did not see the benefit of producing village plans. Now, there are vibrant partnerships in existence and an enthusiastic “round table” of parishes and villages who have found true value in producing plans to build the future success of their community.

Through the support of the community workers, employed independently by the local Rural Community Council, the council has been able to target support to more remote areas of the district and engage traditionally hard to reach groups, such as young people and small, isolated groups of asylum seekers. The community workers have been assisting to build the capacity and skills of local people so that they are more confident in articulating their aspirations and in delivering projects. Through this intensive community development support, the workers have been encouraging the setting up of new community organisations able to co-ordinate community action planning and lead on the development and implementation of projects.

Four community partnerships have been set up, with three taking the option to register as not-for-profit community organisations. The council has been able to utilise these partnerships to inform, consult and receive feedback on policy and service delivery. Being registered at Companies House and/or with the Charity Commission provides formal safeguards for any funds received by these local community organisations from public/private/voluntary sector agencies. The council is currently supporting the partnerships with applications to the Big Lottery for additional resource to support the continuation of community capacity building.

Each partnership has carried out extensive community consultation about local needs and used the results of that consultation to produce a plan for their area which deals with economic, social and environmental issues. The District Council is co-ordinating the response of statutory agencies to the actions suggested in the local community plans and local communities have delivered some of the projects which are within their control.

The community partnerships have been used as a focal point for discussion and consultation within the new planning policy framework (the Local Development Framework) specifically with the development of the new Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The SCI refers to the community partnerships as a key consultation mechanism for future planning applications. In addition, the robust evidence of need identified through the local community planning process is being used to help formulate the Core Strategy for the district.

The Council is currently allocating substantial officer time to supporting the Gillingham community in developing new community and leisure facilities for the town and its hinterland. The current leisure facility, which is owned and managed by the District Council, has reached the end of its useful life. With the increasing constraint on financial resources, the Council is unable to retain the facility in the longer term and has therefore allocated over £3m from its capital programme to the local community partnership to help them deliver and then manage a replacement facility for the expanding population of Gillingham. This is a lengthy process, but with advice from officers within the Council and the support of external consultants, the local community is being helped to build its capacity and skills to enable local people to take on ownership and management of the facility.

In a similar development, the Council has been working with the Shaftesbury community partnership, the Shaftesbury District Task Force, to secure funding for a local community group – the Shaftesbury Swimming Pool Trust – in order that they can take over ownership and management responsibility of the local open-air swimming pool, currently owned by the Council. The support of the Town Council has been crucial in securing the necessary match funding to enable the project to proceed. The project secured £50,000 from the People’s Millions late in 2005. The council engaged consultants to help the Trust with developing a robust business plan, from which they learnt new skills in financial management and planning and are better equipped to take on the new responsibilities of asset ownership and management.

In Sturminster Newton, Sturquest has designed and commissioned an award-winning mixed use development in the old market site, together with environmental improvements to the facilities of the town.

Liveability funding

In North Dorset we have used Liveability funding to support community engagement as a means of identifying and delivering enhancements to the local environment. Many environmental projects identified through the local parish/community planning process have been supported and community capacity and skills have been enhanced. Specific assistance has been provided for business planning and bid writing and significant match funding has been attracted to the district.

1. What are the current barriers to sharing more power with local people and how can local government, its partners and central government work together to overcome them?

Some of the barriers which we have identified to sharing services with parish and town councils are as follows:

- Some parishes are simply too small to take responsibility for services. Our smallest parish, for instance, has only 67 electors.
- Even the largest of our town councils has very limited staff support and requires additional professional and technical advice on a regular basis, some of which is provided by the District Council. Town and parish councils need to be able to call on such expertise as they need it.
- The large number of town and parish councils and parish meetings (61) relative to the size of the population in this District is a barrier to effective liaison and negotiation between individual towns and parishes and the District Council. This problem is multiplied at the County Council by a factor of six and relationships between the first tier of local government and local councils are necessarily very remote.
- Market towns provide a range of services which support the parishes surrounding them, including meeting places, sports facilities and advice services. There is a tension about who pays for the services in the market towns and a disparity between the precepts raised in the towns, which are, on average £85.26 (band D) and the villages (£16.99 at Band D).
- Town Councils are pressing the District Council to transfer money-making assets (parking and markets) to the towns so that they can provide local management and use the receipts support other local actions. However, the Council cannot afford to lose income from its budgets without a compensating increase in council tax.

- Devolving services to towns and parish councils acting alone ignores the relationship between the towns and surrounding parishes. The view expressed in the Rural White Paper and supported by this council is that market towns need to act as the hub if rural communities are to be sustainable.
- There is confusion in the general public about which agency is responsible for which type of service, about what is mandated by government nationally and what is subject to local choice. Funding is so complicated that accountability is extremely fuzzy for the majority of issues. The situation is all the more unclear in cases where Council tax capping of low taxing authorities is a clear threat.
- It is evident that Parish Councillors tend to be older than the population in general and there are questions about representativeness.

The approach to local community partnerships outlined in this paper overcomes some of these problems. The community development associated with this approach engages people who would be reluctant to become involved in the formal structure of a town and parish council and targets excluded groups. However, it brings with it its own challenges.

- Local community partnerships lack capacity and need support.
- They are not subject to the probity safeguards built into every tier of local government.
- Accountability is not so well defined.

In general, there are some key issues which present a continual challenge

- Community capacity building requires investment and it can take a long time.
- Community based structures should always engage with the local democratic organisations.
- Decision making power over the use of public funds brings with it a requirement to apply Nolan principles of probity and accountability. The bureaucracy associated with the imposition of such principles inhibits community engagement on the part of some individuals and slows down those people who simply want to make progress with community projects. There must be a place for groups which want to influence local decision making and deliver projects without the burdens which are attached to accountable bodies. The implication of this is that local accountable bodies have a major role in ensuring the proper distribution of public funds to community based groups which have the appetite to use them on community projects.
- Linking the strategic and local tiers of local government and community partnerships requires intervening structures.

Despite these barriers, as outlined in this paper, North Dorset has a good track record in sharing service provision with town and parish councils, supporting community partnerships to deliver defined projects and working on projects to devolve significant service provision to local community partnerships.

2. What are the key factors that will help to make empowerment attractive and accessible to service users and citizens?

The following factors have been helpful in making empowerment attractive and accessible in North Dorset:

- Tailoring activities and events to target audiences;
- Providing a dedicated team of community workers;
- Attracting funds to enable the community to experience quick wins (through Liveability funding specifically);
- Supporting communities in exercising self help e.g. setting up a credit union, clearing a trailway;
- High level and consistent support to community empowerment from senior Councillors and Council officers, supported by a coherent approach to policy development;
- A history of success as a result of local determination and energy.

3. How can we rebalance the current performance framework, so that local authorities can better respond to bottom up pressures to improve the quality of public services?

We believe that the performance indicators against which we are judged should be those which are most relevant to local people. Through negotiation with our relationship manager at the Audit Commission we believe that the number of indicators should be reduced to reflect those which are most relevant to our situation and that additional weighting should be attached to those indicators which address the priorities expressed by local people.

In some instances, national indicators have little meaning in this rural area. For example, the Audit Commission requires us to collect information showing public satisfaction with 'parks and open spaces'. North Dorset contains open spaces of the highest quality and the council has taken a number of appropriate steps to improve public access to them, such as:

- Developing a management plan for the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
- Funding a ranger service;
- Promoting 'Friends of' groups;
- Improving disabled access by changing styles into kissing gates and providing accessible fishing platforms
- Developing local nature reserves; and
- Providing trailways on old railway lines.

North Dorset has no parks. This largely Victorian urban legacy is simply absent. However, the Council is not permitted to amend the satisfaction survey question to ask about public satisfaction with open space. We are obliged to ask local people about their satisfaction with 'parks and open spaces', in an area where there are no parks. We believe that this is a nonsense.

4. What are the implications of more citizen and neighbourhood empowerment for local governance and the role of democratically elected representatives?

Our experience suggests that greater empowerment enhances citizen interest and engagement with the political process, as citizens develop a greater interest in public life and in the reasons for policy decisions. Local authority members can support and encourage this process by developing their community leadership skills, focussing on two way communication and facilitation. Local authority members have an important role in encouraging community self help and explaining the externally imposed constraints on decision making. Improved two-way dialogue with local elected representatives also assists in aligning national initiatives with local relevance as well as focussing attention on the local priorities.

The active engagement of local people in local service delivery clearly enhances democracy and this is enhanced further when local democratically elected representatives work in partnership with local people and then influence decision makers at county/regional levels in line with community views. At a parish level, parish plans are usually facilitated by the parish council but always include local residents in the parish planning group. The involvement of the parish council is critical to ensuring that more local actions are addressed through the increase in parish precepts to pay for local activities/projects. They have also been able to offer support to local projects seeking funding from other sources.

5. How cost effective is empowering users and citizens as a way of driving service improvement?

We would very much welcome an attempt to calculate, in cash terms, the costs and benefits of empowering users and citizens. As already indicated, there are significant costs associated with community capacity building. There are also potentially cashable benefits and these seem to fall within four categories:

- The value of volunteer effort and the costs of replacing that through public funding;
- The value of improved decision making as a result of local engagement in decisions;
- The reduction in maintenance costs associated with facilities where there is local 'ownership' and stewardship;
- The fund raising success of projects placed in the voluntary/community sector.

6. How do we ensure that the interests of disadvantaged people and neighbourhood are addressed and avoid capture by unrepresentative individuals/groups?

Contested elections are the minority in parish and town councils and in these circumstances, there is always the danger of capture by unrepresentative individuals and groups. The best defence against such capture in local councils and in local community partnerships is to generate higher levels of interest in the activities of such groups by providing them with sufficient resourcing. Good community work can help to ensure that disadvantaged people are properly represented in community structures and in consultation events and that under-represented people are targeted.

Our experience is that, despite our extensive efforts to consult and persuade, parish councils sometimes oppose actions which are in the interests of disadvantaged people and the broader community. Affordable housing is a good example. This is the key issue for Dorset and community consultation at every level supports affordable housing having the highest priority. Many parish councils welcome affordable housing but others oppose all affordable housing development in their villages, despite clear evidence of local need and the community based encouragement of the rural housing enabler. Similarly, the provision of a temporary stopping place for Gypsies and travellers

attracted to the Blandford Forum area by the Dorset Steam Fair has attracted fierce opposition from local parish councils. If the interests of poorly housed people and Gypsies and travellers are to be protected then local elected representatives, acting on a broader canvas, need to be prepared to make unpopular decisions, while facilitating discussion about the details of how those decisions are implemented.

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