

Democracy Commission Cross Party Working Party – 9 March 2020

Improved working arrangements with Parish Councils

Purpose

To explore the benefits and opportunities of re-establishing a more formal relationship with the 5 Parish & Town Councils in Kirklees and discuss the opportunities and implications of working more closely together (NB reference to Parishes in the rest of the report includes town and parish councils).

Background

There is a long history and tradition of formal and informal working between Kirklees Council and the 5 parish areas covering a wide range of topics (planning matters, highway issues, community grants, allotment provision, managing local assets etc.). Parish Councils have an enormous potential for helping to create vibrant communities, where individuals can share information and get involved in shaping the places they live in. They are the most accessible point of democratic engagement and therefore are vital for reinvigorating our representative democracy, as well as providing much-needed community intelligence.

Going back to the mid-2000s, there have been various informal and formal attempts at managing relationships and co-ordinating corporate governance with our parishes. A Parish Charter between the 5 Parish & Town Councils and Kirklees Council published in 2005 set out the aim to work together for the benefit of local people. This Charter was the result of discussions locally to establish a new way of working and to confirm existing good practice. It is still available on our website and frequently referenced by the parishes and some Ward Members.

In terms of a strategic relationship, the last attempt at a more formal approach was back in 2015 when an informal Cabinet Sub-Committee was created for the municipal year. The Cabinet at the time decided there was a need for the leadership to understand where the parish councils could work better with Kirklees Council and what role they might play, particularly in the context of the vision for the New Council. Equally, it was also important that the parish councils understood their role and the opportunities afforded to them in existing legislation (particularly the Localism Act 2011). Evidence from other parts of the country highlighted parish councils were successfully taking on street-scene services and using their strong local knowledge to inform how future services should be delivered.

The Sub-Committee was comprised of the Leader at the time (D.Sheard) and the relevant portfolio holder (G.Turner) plus the chairs of the five parish councils. The main aims set out at the time were:

- Work towards a more pro-active relationship and better communications with the parish councils;
- Explore how we can work in a more pro-active and effective way.

The Group met twice (July and October of that year) with both meetings being successful in terms of getting the right people round the table enabling a dialogue, voicing concerns from each area and starting to highlight potential work areas.

At this point it is worth reflecting on some of the key issues and potential work areas raised in those meetings as some are still relevant and may well need further consideration as part of this discussion.

- Provision of farmers markets
- Review and re-drafting of the Parish Charter
- Housing provision, particularly in desirable rural locations.
- Asset transfer and parish accommodation (at the time a process was being developed and has been pursued with some success in Denby Dale and Meltham).
- Development and provision of local transport schemes
- Consultations and better information sharing between parishes and the Council

Key issues

Recent conversations and correspondence with a couple of parishes have highlighted there is a gap in how we formally communicate, particularly in terms of a 'first point of contact'. It has also been flagged up that the Charter is out of date as most of the structures and processes it references are no longer in place and the mechanism for engagement have changed.

The lack of a process or procedure in place causes not only confusion with the parish councils but also with our ward councillors, often leading to frustration and a duplication of effort from officers or councillors trying to answer a query or solve a problem.

In the context of our developing approach to citizen engagement using the Place Standard proactive work takes place to involve Parish and Town Councils in areas where such engagement is within their boundaries. The most recent example relates to the work that has taken pace in Meltham.

There are numerous work areas that would certainly benefit from a more joined approach between the Council and the Parishes. Across England, activities of local councils vary enormously. A report from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) 'Power to the People' back in 2013 gives an indication of the diversity of local council activities which include community transport schemes, development of community centres, car parks, promoting cycle ways and footpaths, re-development of redundant buildings for community use, allotments and much more. As stated above, a lot depends on the ambition of the council itself. If the objective is solely to keep the precept as low as possible, there is little point in having a council.

In general terms, the list below sets out a number of potential areas which could benefit from a more 'joined-up' approach:

- Improved service place-based delivery
- Shared ambitions and priorities
- Supporting and delivering community activity e.g. Place Standard and supporting the delivery of our developing approach to place-based working
- Safeguarding and enhancing local services and community centres
- Increased intelligence on sensitive planning issues affecting their community
- Development of community transport schemes
- Safeguarding and improving local rights of way
- Environmental improvements (links to tackling the Climate Emergency and the activity that is starting to be developed)
- Managing the Council's assets in parish areas

In terms of our formal relationship with parishes, a report was presented to the Standards Committee on the 25th November proposing arrangements for the review of the Standards process. One of the recommendations about the content of the consultation was that we consult on the involvement of the parishes in Standards complaints involving parish councillors and also whether they be involved more in discussions at Standards Committee about behaviours, training etc. The consultation will start shortly.

A report on improved working with parish councils was discussed with the Executive Team (ET) on the 21st January, the outcomes being;

- Draw up a Charter for relationships with Parish Councils in line with place based working - each Parish council should have own bespoke Charter;
- Future paper to be considered by ET which proposes how to take this matter forward to LMT and Leading Members.

Implications for improved working with Parish Councils

Working with People

Parish Councils have always been a key partner in terms of providing much-needed intelligence from their communities and helping find shared solutions to localised problems. Re-establishing more formal relationships and exploring further opportunities to work together will further put people from those parishes at the heart of the decisions affecting them and help develop solutions together.

Working with Partners

As stated in the background section, there is a long history and tradition of partnership working between the Council and the Parish & Town Councils. Further collaboration and working together with Parish Council could be one of the keys to ensuring we get the best outcomes for citizens, communities and Kirklees as a whole. Whether it be working partners such as the police or health, with local businesses or the voluntary and community sector, the development of proposals on a collaborative and shared basis in a way that is consistent with the Corporate Plan.

Place Based Working

As already shown with the example of the Place Standards work in Meltham, Parish & Town Councils are a key partner in investigating, developing and delivering place-based working.

Recommendation

The Working Group is asked to consider the information and proposals set out in this paper with a view to informing the next steps.

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