

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 27 OCTOBER 2009

REPORT BY COMMUNITY PLANNING AND PARTNERSHIPS  
MANAGER

7. BETTER WAYS OF WORKING WITH PARISH COUNCILS

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

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**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- The report details the development of an action plan to improve working relations with parish and town councils.

**RECOMMENDATION FOR : COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

(A)	Comment on the report and action plan; and
(B)	Identify any further actions that could be taken to strengthen the Council's working relations with parish and town councils.

1.0 Background

1.1 The Rural Parish Conference in May 2009 included a topic on how the district could improve working relationships with parish councils. Workshops were held at which Parish Clerks and Parish Councillors made a number of suggestions on how to improve liaison with the district council.

The suggestions have been incorporated into a better ways of working with parish councils action plan. (Essential Reference Paper 'B', pages 7.9 - 7.15)

2.0 Report

2.1 Discussions held with senior staff from the District following the Parish Conference highlighted two key considerations. The first was which of the proposals emerging from the Parish Conference were realistic and feasible in terms of staff resources available at East Herts. The second agreed that officers could not breach

protocol, or provide a service that was not available to the Council's elected Members in seeking to meet the needs of Parish Councillors and Parish Clerks.

2.2 The Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils note that Parish Councils are statutory, elected, accountable bodies, which represent local communities. In light of this, HAPTC feel that Parish Councils should receive an enhanced service, and suggest that a pilot protocol could be established to acknowledge the important role of parishes, and how enquiries from Parish Councils should be handled.

2.3 The agreed approach was that Parish Clerks and Councillors should be treated the same as any other resident or customer, and should not be offered any service that is not currently offered to East Herts ward members.

2.4 The main concerns of the parish councils are summarised around the themes of: communication, engagement, planning/development control and training. (Essential Reference Paper 'B', pages 7.9 - 7.15)

### 3.0 Communication

3.1 Parish Clerks and Councillors at each of the workshops expressed their main concern was a feeling of isolation and not knowing where to go for information and advice.

3.2 Some of the proposals made at the conference were not feasible because of a lack of resources and conflicts with local authority protocols:

- Parish council liaison officer
- Parish hotline
- Online forum
- Contact list of nominated officers

3.3 East Herts Council (EHC) has made a considerable investment into improving the interface between residents and customer services with a special focus on front-end services. Wherever possible, Parish Clerks and Parish Councillors should be encouraged to make use of the improved customer service by telephone or through the Council website.

3.4 Parish Councillors will be invited to an annual customer services briefing which is currently offered to ward members, from spring

2010. The briefing is an “open door” to come and have a look at what services are on offer and how to access them. Staff will be on hand to offer tips on how to get the best out of the service. The briefing could be combined with an additional special “mini” rural parish conference.

- 3.5 Parish Councillors and Clerks could exchange information through a parish council extranet. This could be managed and hosted by EHC for free and parish councils would own the site and be responsible for all content.
- 3.6 Four extranets or sub-sites to update the public, Members, the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and staff are planned for the future. Democratic services will be consulting with members on the proposed Members’ extranet. It would be a relatively simple procedure to include the Parish Council extranet as part of the Members’ extranet.
- 3.7 The web-team would have the responsibility for loading pages submitted by Parish Councils and a member of the Community Projects team would regulate the content. If an extranet is agreed, the next step would be to invite parish representatives to meet the web manager who would explain what was involved in setting up an extranet.
- 4.0 Engagement
- 4.1 Community Voice (CV) provides a regular opportunity for the Council to reach out to local communities, to listen and respond to their views through better-informed decision making. In addition, the Rural Parish Conference is held twice a year so that issues identified can be progressed in partnership with Parish Councils.
- 4.2 Community Voice enables the Council to engage with residents of the five main towns in the district. However, feedback from the workshops suggested that Parish Clerks should attend community voice meetings. Currently, five attend Buntingford CV, two attend Ware CV and one clerk attends Sawbridgeworth CV. Invites and attendance are however, ad-hoc.
- 4.3 It is proposed that a regular invitation is sent to all Parish Clerks inviting them to attend their respective Community Voice. Once it was established which of the five towns each of the various parishes viewed as their nearest town, Democratic Services would be able to invite clerks to all future meetings.

- 4.4 Town Clerks meet quarterly with East Herts Council's Chief Executive and it has been suggested that it may be beneficial for a Parish Clerk to attend these meetings. If this decision was undertaken, it would be necessary to agree a method to choose a parish representative, which at present is not in place.
- 4.5 Three Parish Council representatives were recently elected to the Standards Committee – which is an example of Parish Councils working in their role as statutory consultees. This was arranged by Democratic Services, who wrote to all parish councils asking for nominees and then arranged an election.
- 4.6 The Local Strategic Partnership plays a key role in the decisions affecting the whole district. Although Town Clerks are already invited to the LSP forum, Parish Clerks are not, at present. The Director of Customer and Community Services agrees that it would be appropriate for Parish Clerks to attend the LSP forum.
- 4.7 The District Councillor link to parish councils was seen as very important and should be strengthened wherever possible. Several clerks and parish councillors said that ward councillors would be welcome to attend parish council meetings. At the very least, ward councillors should be made aware of the dates and times of parish council meetings.
- 4.8 Democratic Services do not as a rule contact Parish Clerks for information on the dates of parish council meetings. However, if Parish Clerks inform Democratic Services, this information could be included in the Members Information Bulletin and the council website.
- 4.9 Surgeries are a means by which District Councillors can engage with Parish Councils and local residents. One example is at Stanstead Abbots, where residents can air their views on village issues to both district and parish councillors at local surgeries. The local police community support officer also takes advantage of these opportunities to meet with local residents and their elected representatives.
- 5.0 Planning and Development Control
- 5.1 Both Parish Councillors and clerks felt there was a need for information and training on planning issues. The Planning Policy Team already provides information on planning news and

consultations. Information on the latest planning policy news including progress on the East Herts Local Development Framework and the latest planning policy consultations can be found on the LDF webpages. Parish Clerks are also sent hard copies of the latest edition of the LDF Bulletin.

- 5.2 As part of the preparation of the LDF, the Planning Policy Team continues to actively engage parishes and rural communities and through events at rural venues including the rural conference.
- 5.3 All Parish and Town Clerks are invited to advocate any issues that they would like to cover at Planning Information Sessions. Planning training can be also be provided by several professional bodies.
- 5.4 Online training on planning issues is available through The Planning Portal at: <http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/> This is the UK Government's online planning and building regulations resource for England and Wales. This site can be used to learn about regulations, apply for planning permission and enquire about nearby developments. It is also possible to appeal against a planning decision and research government policy.
- 5.5 Training will be offered to Members once Planning Online is available externally in approximately six months time. The Online Planning tool provides basic details of planning applications including the nature and description of the application.
- 5.6 Parish Councils felt that the value of parish plans should be recognised as working examples of what the local community wants. Parish plans already form part of the evidence base for the East Herts LDF, and a library of parish plans could be established by the Council's Community Projects Team available for viewing by the public.
- 5.7 Several Parish Councils have specific concerns regarding a perceived lack of feedback from development control. Some parish councils feel there is a lack of consistency and clarity as to how decisions are reached.
- 5.8 Development control is not obliged to provide feedback to anyone other than the residents adjoining a proposed development. However, it is acknowledged that where Parish Councils objected to an application that has been accepted, feedback as to why the objection was outweighed by other issues would be desirable.

5.9 Training to enable parish councils to make an effective objection to planning proposals couched in planning terms and made on the basis of planning policy is being considered.

5.10 East Herts Planning Enforcement task and finish group has also considered the issue of communication with town and parish councils.

## 6.0 Training

6.1 Utilising Council web pages, a Council Extranet and planning online portals all presume that Parish Councillors and Clerks have a basic ability to access and use the internet. However, some do not have an email address or access to the internet and others are not familiar with the internet.

6.2 The extent of digital exclusion needs to be assessed before considering proposals to tackle the problem. Parish councils could be offered equipment the district council no longer requires. IT training, financial subsidy and special deals for purchase of new equipment have also been suggested as ways of assisting parish councils.

## 7.0 Next Steps

7.1 Limited resources mean the district can meet some of the requests from parishes primarily thorough the better use of technology and training.

7.2 The importance of the role of Parish and Town Councils as conduits enabling the district to communicate and engage with residents is recognised. However, the general approach to improving working relations with Parish and Town Councils has been to acknowledge that parishes are to be treated the same as any other customer.

7.3 Parishes will be advised how to access and make best use of the council's improved "front end" customer service provision. If accepted, several of the proposals to improve engagement with Parish Councils may require the election of representatives. i.e. town council meetings with the Chief Executive and LSP involvement.

7.4 Training, particularly in the use of the internet, emerged as a key element in several of the proposals to improve links with Parish

Councils. The Council's adoption of electronic government and modernisation targets strengthens the case for Parish Councillors and Parish Clerks to be proficient in the use of the internet. Incentives for Parish Councils to use their precept to invest in PCs and an internet (broadband) connection may also need to be considered.

7.5 It is intended that a progress report will be put before the Community Scrutiny Committee at a later date. There will be an opportunity for more detailed discussions with Parish Councils at the Customer Services briefing in 2010.

#### 8.0 Implications/Consultations

8.1 The insight guide produced by Improvement & Development Agency (I&DeA) and the Local Government Association (LGA) subtitled "understanding your citizens, customers and communities," acknowledges that for some, customer insight does not reflect the importance of the council's role as community leader, partnership working, or the role that active citizens play in engaged and empowered communities.

8.2 The guide suggests that citizen and customer insight are linked; without understanding their wider community councils may miss the needs of potential users of services or potential deliverers of services. Working more closely with first tier authorities could help the district council achieve complex outcomes.

9.0 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within Essential Reference Paper 'A' (Page 7.8).

#### Background Papers

Insight: Understanding your citizens, customers and communities.  
Improvement and Development Agency and LGA.

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## ESSENTIAL REFERENCE PAPER 'A'

<p>Contribution to the Council's Corporate Priorities/ Objectives</p>	<p><b>Fit for purpose, services fit for you</b>  <i>Deliver customer focused services by maintaining and developing a well managed and publicly accountable organisation.</i></p> <p><b>Pride in East Herts</b>  <i>Improve standards of the neighbourhood and environmental management in our towns and villages.</i></p> <p><b>Shaping now, shaping the future</b>  <i>Safeguard and enhance our unique mix of rural and urban communities, ensuring sustainable, economic and social opportunities including the continuation of effective development control and other measures.</i></p> <p><b>Leading the way, working together</b>  <i>Deliver responsible community leadership that engages with our partners and the public.</i></p>
<p>Consultation:</p>	<p>Consultation took place at the East Herts Rural Parish Conference 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009</p>
<p>Legal:</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>Financial:</p>	<p>Provision of equipment and training to tackle digital exclusion to be decided.</p>
<p>Human Resource:</p>	<p>None.</p>
<p>Risk Management:</p>	<p>None.</p>



**Action Plan - Better Ways of Working with Parish Councils**

<b>Theme: COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Department/Section Responsible</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Parish councillors/clerks are not sure where to go or who to contact to obtain information or resolve problems	Direct parish councillors/clerks towards contact with Customer Services.	Customer Services/Community Projects	None. Enquiries dealt with in the same manner as any other query from an East Herts resident.	Immediate
	Direct parish councillors/clerks to the use of East Herts website.	Customer Services/Community Projects	Digital exclusion – can be defined as not having access to the internet in the home.  Assessment of extent of exclusion.  Training in navigation and use of the East Herts website may be required.	Medium Term
	Invite parish councils to annual Customer Services Annual Briefing where information and advice will be given on how to get the best out of the council's enhanced customer services.	Customer Services/Community Projects Team	Community Projects team to work with Customers Services to arrange the event.  Resources and cost.  To be run in conjunction with a special rural conference?  Digital exclusion.	Spring 2010

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Parish councillors/clerks not sure where to go or who to contact to obtain information or resolve problems	Rural extranet to be established	EHC Web Management Team	Resources – at least three major projects in the pipeline.	Six months to one year
	Invite Parish Clerks to a meeting with web manager		Digital Exclusion.	
	Parish councillors/clerks to be reminded of the availability of funding and support from district council.	Community Projects team CP/Planning Policy CS	None	Immediate

**Action Plan - Better Ways of Working with Parish Councils**

<b>Theme: ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Department/Section Responsible</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Engagement of parish councillors/clerks in district council strategies.	Parish clerk representative invited to quarterly district meeting with Town Clerks and the Chief Executive.	Democratic Services	Representativeness. How to ensure that the delegated parish clerk represents all parishes in the district.	Immediate once issue of representativeness is resolved.
	Parish councillors/clerks invited to community voice meetings.	Community Projects/Democratic services to extend invitations to Community Voice meetings parish councillors/clerks	Update current attendance lists.	Immediate once agreement secured and parish "clusters" around five towns are identified.
	Parish councillors/clerks invited to attend LSP (Local Strategic Partnership) forum.	Community Projects/Democratic Services to arrange	Explanation of role of the LSP required to generate interest.  Twice yearly event – dates required.	Immediate.

**Action Plan - Better Ways of Working with Parish Councils**

<b>Theme: ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Department/Section Responsible</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Strengthen district councillor links with parish councils.	Ward councillors to be encouraged to attend parish council meetings whenever appropriate.	Democratic services to include dates of parish council meetings in MIB (Members Information bulletin) following notification from parish clerks.  Web team to post dates of parish meetings on council website.	Resources	Immediate
	Ward councillors to be invited to consider the value of holding joint surgeries with parish councillors and other public service agencies. e.g. PCSOs	Community Projects Team/Democratic Services.	Individual district members may already have considered this proposal.	Further consultation may be required. Medium term.

**Action Plan - Better Ways of Working with Parish Councils**

<b>Theme: PLANNING</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Department/Section Responsible</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Parish Plans	Library of parish plans to be available to parish councillors/clerks	Community Projects Team	Library of parish plans need to be made accessible to parish clerks and parish councillors.	Immediate
Lack of knowledge of Planning Policy	LDF Local Development Framework bulletins already distributed to parish councillors/clerks  Planning Policy consultations with parish councils  Planning Information sessions  Annual update at rural conference.	Community Projects team to increase awareness of LDF bulletins, planning policy consultations and planning information sessions.	Further promotion of the significant work already undertaken by the district council.	Ongoing  Planning Information sessions took place in September/October 2009. Further sessions anticipated.

**Action Plan - Better Ways of Working with Parish Councils**

<b>Theme: DEVELOPMENT CONTROL</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Department/Section Responsible</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Perception of lack of consistency on planning decisions.  Improved feedback on decisions affecting parishes.	Development Control to try to ensure parish councils registering an objection receive feedback on how the council arrived at a particular decision.	Development Control	Resources	Ongoing
Parish councillors/clerks to be encouraged to use current online resources to find out about planning Issues and procedures.	Increased awareness of availability of online planning resources i.e IDeA and PAS (Planning Advisory Service)	Community Projects/Planning Policy	Digital exclusion	Ongoing

**Action Plan - Better Ways of Working with Parish Councils**

<b>Theme: TRAINING (AND RESOURCES)</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Department/Section Responsible</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Essential to enable those parish clerks /councillors who are digitally excluded to make best use of district council's enhanced customer services.	Training and resources to overcome digital exclusion.  EHC Corporate Management Team to agree.	To be decided.	Resources, staffing and financial.	Medium to long term