



NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Review of Partnership working with Parishes & Town Councils

Report of the
Partnership working with Parishes & Town Councils
Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

March 2007

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Membership

The membership of the group consisted of six District Councillors who represent the following diverse wards; Weston & Sandon, Letchworth Grange, Kimpton, Ermine, Knebworth and Codicote.

The group also invited Parishes and Town Council representatives to join the Task & Finish Group and as a result, six representatives volunteered. These representatives are listed below.

- ◆ Cllr Steve Jarvis (Chair)
- ◆ Cllr David Kearns
- ◆ Cllr John Bishop
- ◆ Cllr Howard Marshall
- ◆ Cllr Alan Bardett
- ◆ Cllr Tom Brindley
- ◆ Cllr Colin Thurstance, Ickleford Parish Council
- ◆ Cllr Philip Crowe, Chairman of Ickleford Parish Council
- ◆ Cllr Anthony Titmarsh, Vice Chairman, Knebworth Parish Council
- ◆ Richard Bowran, Town Clerk, Letchworth Garden City Council
- ◆ Carina Helmn, County Officer & Clerk to Kimpton Parish Council
- ◆ Wendy Kitchener, Clerk to Hinxworth Parish Council

Foreword



Partnership working with parishes and town councils is an area that we have recognised as increasing in importance. But it can also be a complex area to get right and work effectively, purely because of the great diversity in the needs and working methods of the parishes and town councils within North Hertfordshire.

The Partnership Working with Parishes and Town Councils Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, was set up to reveal some of the issues that prevent us working better as partners so that we can all learn from the results that the group find, and put an action plan in place to resolve these issues.

I would like to thank this Scrutiny Task and Finish Group for this important piece of work, especially at a time when the local and national focus is on partnership working and community engagement.

This should help us all as Councillors to be more effective in communicating with our partners so that our residents will benefit from our improved working methods.

**Cllr Martin Stears,
Chair of the Scrutiny Committee**



North Hertfordshire has 25 Parish Councils, five Parish Meetings and two Town Councils, together representing two thirds of the population of the district. They range in size from less than 200 to more than 30,000 residents. Inevitably these Town and Parish Councils have a better understanding of the issues affecting their communities than the district council which must seek to represent all of them. However many recognise that they lack the resources to provide everything that their communities would wish.

Improvements in the ways in which North Hertfordshire District Council and the Town and Parish Councils of the district work together can address this, offering the prospect of improved services to local people which are more responsive to the needs of the different communities and delivered more cost effectively.

The task and finish group, which included District Councillors, Parish Councillors and Parish and Town Council Clerks, all assisted by District Council officers, is itself a demonstration of the potential offered by closer co-operation and a better understanding of one another's roles. The group's work has uncovered many examples of good work, but often this depends on the efforts of particular individuals so is not replicated across the district and is at risk if those concerned move on. The group has produced a range of recommendations that should allow this best practice to be replicated and to ensure that North Hertfordshire District Council and the Town and Parish Councils work more effectively for the people that we all represent.

I would like to thank all the members of the group for their effort and their very constructive input in the process, which I hope they would agree has been both productive and enjoyable.

**Cllr Steve Jarvis,
Chair of the Partnership Working with
Parishes and Town Councils Scrutiny Task & Finish Group**

Acknowledgements

The task and finish group would like to thank, from North Hertfordshire District Council; Councillor Tricia Gibbs (Portfolio Holder - Community Engagement & Rural Affairs), Garry Gover (Community Development Officer – Southern Rural), Mary Caldwell (Planning Control & Conservation Manager), Andy Godman (Head of Housing & Environmental Health), Vaughan Watson (Head of Leisure & Environmental Services), Patrick Candler (Head of Community Development & Cultural Services), Lynn Saville (Head of Strategy & Support Services), Chris Nolan (Head of IT & Transformation), Roger Harrison (Head of Communications & PR), Liz Green (Head of Policy, Partnerships & Performance), Barrie Jones (Head of Financial Services), Howard Crompton (Head of Revenues & Benefits), David Scholes (Head of Planning & Building Control) and Norma Atlay (Strategic Director of Financial and Regulatory Services). All of whom gave up their time to meet with the group and provide the group with information, advice and ideas that helped the group to achieve their aims and objectives.

The task and finish group are also grateful to the following partners, who also gave up their time and provided a valuable contribution during the group's consultation exercises: Cllr Tricia Turner, (Leader, Mid Bedfordshire District Council), Cllr John Lewis (Mid Bedfordshire District Council), Cllr John Gurney (Mid Bedfordshire District Council), Cllr Fiona Chapman (Mid Bedfordshire District Council), Stephen Sleight (Transport Officer, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity), Saveria Moss (Beacon Co-ordinator, South Somerset District Council), Charlotte Jones (Head of Area Development – North, South Somerset District Council), Ashwell Parish Council, Ickleford Parish Council, Kimpton Parish Council, Offley Parish Council, St. Paul's Walden Parish Council, Wymondley Parish Council and Hinxworth Parish Council.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The Partnership working with Parishes & Town Councils Task & Finish group was established in September 2006. The primary purpose of this task and finish group was to review the communication and partnership work between North Hertfordshire District Council and Parishes and Town Councils, to look at the diverse needs of each area, identify improvements for efficient ways of working to meet these needs and to explore opportunities for resource sharing and enhanced communication procedures.

1.2 Scope

1.2.1 The initial scope allowed the group to investigate the following areas:

- identify and establish good practice in communication with and between our parishes and other local authorities;
- look at the potential for parishes to gain more knowledge of planning law to inform their objections or recommendations more effectively;
- look at the potential development of shared services;
- establish a clear picture of what services parishes offer, how they prioritise spending and identify their current concerns.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Gathering the relevant information involved a meeting with a neighbouring authority, the involvement and contribution of parish and town council representatives, discussions with council officers, a workshop facilitated by South Somerset District Council (Beacon Council for Improving Rural Services, Empowering Communities 2006-2007 and Getting Closer to Communities, 2005-2006) and a programme of desk research.

1.3.2 The group agreed very early on that they would invite parish and town council representatives to join the group. Their participation was a focal part of the group's research, as this gave members the opportunity to hear directly from the communities that they are aiming to serve better.

1.3.3 The recommendations on page 18 have been developed to allow an action plan to be put in place to provide solutions to the challenges and issues that arose throughout this review.

1.4 Structure of the report

1.4.1 The Partnership Working with Parishes Task and Finish group, will be referred to as "the group" throughout this report.

1.4.2 The main findings of the report are structured around discussions and evidence taken from each meeting.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The driving forces fuelling this review arose from information produced by the following bodies and documents:
- 2.2 **The National Association of Local Councils (NALC)** are the representative body for the many thousands of parish and town councils in England and Wales. The main function of NALC is to make the primary level of local government more effective, more democratic and better able to take a leadership role in local communities.
- 2.3 **The Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils (HAPTC)** is a membership organisation which provides legal, financial and procedural advice to parish and town councils and parish meetings, within Hertfordshire. North Hertfordshire has 25 Parishes, 2 Town Councils and 6 Parish meetings. 21 of these are members of HAPTC.
- 2.4 The Government launched ***Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper*** in October 2006. The White Paper has a strong focus on partnership working as a key vehicle to set priorities and where appropriate shape, design and deliver services in local areas.
- 2.5 **The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)** is currently the main vehicle in North Herts for bringing together public, private and voluntary organisations. However, the White Paper makes proposals to strengthen the accountability of partnerships through the overview and scrutiny functions of local authorities.
- 2.6 **The Rural Strategy 2005-2010** was produced by North Hertfordshire District Council in collaboration with 14 other partner agencies in May 2005. The strategy identifies ways to enhance partnership working, to deliver the vision for the district. Amongst many proposals within the strategy, included are; a review of the Parish Charter, holding an annual parish conference and improving communication between all agencies working in and with rural communities. A number of actions within the strategy have already been established and these are outlined in the Findings section of this report.
- 2.7 It is hoped that the recommendations in this report expand on these proposals and that they are applicable to all rural areas, all parishes and all town councils.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Current Engagement

It was important for the group to understand the methods of communication that currently exist locally, and to establish an appreciation of the different relationships that parishes have with North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC). Their first meeting received a presentation from the Head of Policy, Partnerships and Performance, where most of the responsibility for this area of work rests.

- 3.1.1 Every year NHDC hosts a rural conference and rural community safety conference. The Chief Executive and the Head of Policy, Partnerships & Performance also meet with four Parish and Town Council representatives every 6 months. These representatives are also members of the LSP.
- 3.1.2 Written communication is sent to all parishes and town councils, including the "Members Information Service" and 'What the Media Says'.
- 3.1.3 The group discussed the Parish Charter, and a comment was made that the Charter has not delivered any real working arrangements. An observation was also raised about the lack of consultation with Herts Police in the formation of the Charter. The group agreed that the Police should be consulted when the Charter is reviewed.

3.2 Community Development Officers

NHDC currently has 5 Community Development Officers (CDOs) with a Community Facilities Manager. Amongst other things, they work very closely with parishes, residents, statutory and voluntary organisations to identify and respond to needs and issues that concern the development and enhancement of the community. They provide advice and assistance for parishes with community grants for rural projects and give support to parishes in developing Parish Plans.

- 3.2.1 Throughout this review, the role of NHDC's Community Development Officers was acknowledged as very positive tool in terms of accessing assistance to grant applications and other areas of assistance.

3.3 Training

Planning officers are willing and have offered training sessions to all parishes. Some parishes have taken this offer up and some have not. Officers have also met with a cluster of 4 parishes to discuss their requirements and gave a presentation to them on processing planning applications. A planning training event took place in 2006 as part of the induction of new district councillors, and it was agreed that this was very useful and should be continued.

- 3.3.1 The group discussed the need for a nominated representative from parishes and town councils (who would be responsible for planning), to attend periodic planning training sessions. This representative would be the channel for feeding information to their planning committees. As part of the consultation process with parishes, the overall response was positive when asked for their views about this, however it was emphasised that any training sessions for parishes councillors/clerks should be separate to the training given to district councillors. The purpose of this suggestion is that the training would reflect the separate roles that each type of councillor has. It is also important for parish councillors to understand how and why the district councillors make their decisions.

3.3.2 The group would also like training for parish councillors on the Code of Conduct.

3.4 **Planning**

Planning is an area of concern that the group came across on several occasions throughout this review. The group received a presentation from NHDC's Planning Control & Conservation Manager, in order to gain a wider understanding of NHDC's current policies and procedures.

3.4.1 When the district council receives a planning application, there is a statutory period of 8 weeks in which the Council need to determine the application. A copy of the application is sent to the relevant parish clerk on the validation day. Parishes have 21 calendar days to present their comments to the district council (via the relevant planning officer). Contact details of the planning officer are always on the report. The comments received from the parish are included in the report that is submitted to the Planning Committee at Area Committee meetings. If a parish member wishes to speak at an Area Committee meeting, they can do so by contacting the Council's Democratic Services Department.

3.4.2 If consultation periods fall within holiday months or bank holidays, planning officers are usually able to allow some flexibility, if requested.

3.4.3 The group were informed about a Customer Panel that meet to look at general planning matters. There are a couple of parish reps that sit on this panel, and other members include contractors, architects and members of the public. The Planning Control & Conservation Manager suggested that a similar group could be set up solely for parish councillors, who could act as an information and feedback channel to their parishes.

3.4.4 The group felt very strongly, that it was important for parishes to receive feedback on the responses or comments they give to planning officers, particularly when they make objections, so that members can use the feedback to learn and gain a better understanding.

3.4.5 Clarification on the responsibilities of the Compliance team and the Enforcement team was also given to the group. It was explained to the group that the Compliance team in Planning Control and Conservation was responsible for violations, planning concerns/complaints and monitoring. Whereas, the Enforcement team were responsible for dealing with any matters that do not relate to planning.

3.4.6 The group discovered that Standard Conditions are not brought to the attention of parish members, although they are published on the Council's website. It was suggested that parish members should be notified so that monitoring of these can be done at a more local level.

3.4.7 The group discussed the new Supplementary Planning Document and it was agreed amongst the group that the document is not clear enough about how funds will be allocated, as each parish and town council works differently, and has different requirements. It was therefore requested that further guidance be sought on how the funds will be spent and what the process will be for doing this.

3.5 **Parish Plans**

The group agreed that all parishes would benefit from having a Parish Plan. This would give parishes the opportunity to have greater involvement in the

Local Development Framework. An idea was suggested that some parishes could work together to produce joint Parish Plans.

3.6 **Consultation with Parishes**

In addition to the 6 parish and town council representatives who were members of this group, the group also visited 7 parish council meetings to hear directly from parish members, what their needs are and to give them an opportunity to suggest how NHDC can work in partnership in a better way.

3.6.1 Below is a summary of the feedback received from the 7 parishes. These have been grouped under separate headings:

Current Relationship:

- excellent, has improved in recent years;
- CDOs are an excellent current mechanism that works to inform, assist and bridge gaps in communication;
- the CDO has significantly improved things;
- good relationship with their CDO who has assisted them with funding applications. Overall, the process of funding has become much easier over the years.
- relationships with individual officers good;
- sometimes NHDC appears not to listen;
- good, compared with the inflexibility of Herts County Council;
- need for increased understanding of individual parishes circumstances;
- more awareness over the last 3-4 years of parish needs;
- Chief Executive has listened to rural issues;
- high turn over of staff makes it difficult to know who to contact;
- NHDC do not seem to factor in the differences in urban and rural environments;
- parishes are sometimes treated in exactly the same way as members of the public and are not seen as trusted partners;
- the Council were approached for expert technical support for a football club, and were told no;
- refuse collection and recycling by NHDC were considered to be very good;
- the district councillor is very involved and attends the parish meetings;
- the Council have been extremely good. The Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Fund (PACIF) allowed us to refurbish our village hall;

3.6.2 **Formal Communications:**

- rural representatives group, who meet with the Chief Executive and Head of Policy, Partnerships & Performance, is very useful. But who represents the rural area?, there is only one councillor in the group;
- there is no northern rural committee, Ashwell lumped in with Baldock, therefore don't have the same voice as the southern rural committee;
- perhaps rural parishes should form a cluster group;
- the Local Strategic Partnership only includes one clerk and one councillor;
- not much networking going on;
- written communications are getting better - but the 7-day consultation period to consider the parish charter is still remembered;
- calendar conflicts are inhibiting good communications with district councillors;
- where do the minutes of parish meetings sent to the NHDC go? Do they get to relevant officers?

3.6.3 **Information sent to parishes and town councils from NHDC:**

- on the whole this is good;
- not sure what influence our responses have;

- it would be much better if planning decisions were made by the Area Committees with their fund of local knowledge;
- responses from conservation and enforcement officers are very poor, in particular the parish council cited NHDC impotence as a local developer systematically and blatantly demolished a valued local listed building under the pretext it was falling apart;
- documents/consultations sent from the council are not always clear or easy to understand by parish members who may not be familiar with names/terms used by Government. Would be good if the relevance to parishes are highlighted and the context made more clear;
- Outlook magazine does not reach some parishes;
- we were not informed about the pub licensing laws, sometimes the council will inform parishes about things they need to know about after it has happened;
- it is difficult to understand the planning laws and other planning documents that are sent from the Council.

3.6.4 **Do you get feedback?:**

- decisions are heard, but no feedback on why decisions are made;
- we receive officers' reports;
- not sure if parish advice is taken;
- good relationships with officers;
- help given, especially with village plan.

3.6.5 **What could be improved?:**

- district councillors should be encouraged to attend parish meetings by sending them agendas, meeting dates etc;
- need to promote the principle of subsidiarity;
- enhance the annual conference;
- create a meeting of rural parish councillors;
- provide more information on how district council officers can help parishes;
- have dedicated phone lines for help;
- there needs to be service level agreements for areas of joint activity;
- there is scope to reduce the bureaucracy between NHDC and Parish Councils;
- joint training on planning;
- a central register of services that each parish provides;
- need for more cluster meetings of neighbouring parishes;
- parish clerks to meet on a quarterly basis in addition to the annual conference;
- quarterly meetings between a Herts Highways officer, NHDC Councillor, Parish Councillors to highlight current issues, assign priorities, and monitor agreed actions;
- strict adherence by all parties to principles and spirit of the Parish Charter. This may require a re-launch;
- parish council to be informed by NHDC of agreed service levels. These standards to be met by NHDC;
- NHDC structure and direct telephone directory to be made available to the Parish Clerk;
- rurally focussed distribution of Outlook magazine;
- parish council feedback on possible operational improvements of the new NHDC customer service centre;
- new NHDC CCTV fly tipping technology to be made available to parishes;
- NHDC to review planning enforcement operations with a view to improvements;

- the process of applying for grant should be simpler. It is not always clear about what additional work parishes need to do once an application has been made;

3.6.6 **What functions could better be done by Parishes?:**

- planning decisions;
- lighting – all types, footpaths , pavements, street lighting;
- street cleaning – currently poorly done;
- grass cutting – currently poorly co-ordinated;
- need for more flexibility in approach;

3.6.7 It was also discovered that some parishes did not have an up to date organisational structure of NHDC which meant that they did not have the correct contact details of relevant officer they should speak to about specific issues.

3.6.8 Communication between parishes themselves was raised throughout this review many times on different occasions. As each parish works differently and has different arrangements with NHDC, there isn't a mechanism in place to make it easy for them to share common information with each other.

3.7 **Consultation with North Hertfordshire District Council**

In addition to hearing from parishes, the group also wanted to hear from officers of NHDC about how they felt about the current engagement processes and what their suggestions were for improvement.

3.7.1 Below is a summary of the feedback received from 10 heads of service, which has been grouped under separate headings:

Can you tell me about your current engagement with Parishes?

- we consult on an ad hoc basis on issues that affect their area;
- we involved parishes in our street scene Fundamental Service Review. We have attended some parish meetings to discuss the changes to the waste service. We will also be consulting with parishes about recycling bank sites. We provide technical/professional advice. We work with the Parish Challenge panel through the CDO's;
- CDOs were set up in 2001 and work directly with parishes. We have also had 3 parish conferences. Overall, we work well with parishes, but it could be better. We consulted parishes when we developed the Rural Strategy and are now in the process of a consultation about the Arts, Cultural and Heritage strategy;
- we have good links to communities in parishes, especially through our Meals on Wheels service, Careline and Management Support Unit (which includes; waste, recycling, halls etc.);
- we currently send parishes a copy of the "Members Information" and we are due to start sending parishes the Outlook Magazine;
- we have 4 parish reps on the LSP. The 4 reps come from a town council, a large parish, a small parish and one from the north/south. We also organise environmental action days (community safety). We have a rural strategy group. We have an annual rural (community safety) conference. Myself and the Strategic Director of Customer Services meet twice a year with the parish LSP reps to discuss any issues;
- we collect precepts and deal with any ad hoc queries about business rates.;

- we contact parishes to find out their yearly precepts, and issue the precepts twice a year. We deal with land ownership queries and also help with any ad hoc queries and some aspects of housing development;
- we send planning applications, we organise yearly parish briefings/training on planning issues, we organise consultations on our Local Framework Document and on conservation areas. Parishes are also consulted on regional planning work if there are critical or major implications for that area;
- we have had requests from some parishes for us to audit their accounts and manage the closure of their accounts. Although we do not have the resources and time to carry this function out for all parishes, it can be explored, and would need to be planned for well in advance in our work programme.

3.7.2 **Is there anything you think that works particularly well?**

- CDOs help parishes to understand what their roles are and provide assistance with applications for grants, parish plans etc., the Parish Challenge Panel also works well in fulfilling their role. The relationship between district councillors and parish councillors works well. Parish Plans work well and sets out what is important and encourages good community working. The PACIF (Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Fund) programme has been a success;
- our volunteers work very well with parish clerks who have always been a helpful resource to our services;
- we haven't had much feedback from parishes about the information we send them, apart from change of contact details, so we assume they are happy with this service;
- overall, we are pleased that we have never had to chase parishes for late payments of invoices;
- we have been approached by a parish about reducing council tax bills to properties that have insulation. We progressed with this and this has worked well;
- our engagement in general works well. We have good links and a good relationship with the HAPTC County officer.

3.7.3 **Is there anything you would like to see improved?**

- it would be useful to have a contact list of all parishes and links to parishes on our website;
- training for officers on the role of parishes (similar to the one done a couple of years ago);
- would be good to establish what the line of communication should be;
- more engagement with the parishes that tend not to participate or respond to letters. Some parishes have not taken up the Council's offer of working jointly on particular projects, eg. inspections (which reduce costs). We could probably work with CDO's to encourage those parishes to improve this;
- some parishes need to be less insular and work better with neighbouring parishes. Some parishes need to be more pro-active. Parishes have good links with the voluntary sector, so should explore more funding

opportunities within that sector. The grants system works well, but could be made a lot simpler;

- more communication both ways and a better understanding of the services;
- we would like to use e-govt more for sending out information to parishes, however they will be consulted about this beforehand;
- would be good to have contact details of all parish clerks/chairs perhaps via a database;
- would also be good to have a schedule of parish meetings so that we can schedule in key dates for consultations;
- training for officers on how parishes work and to establish who's who and the services that each parish provides;
- every year, there are some parishes that need to be chased for their precepts & budgets. This is very time consuming for officers. Therefore, response times need to be improved;
- we would like to be able to send planning applications out electronically;
- we would like the quality of responses from parishes on planning applications to be more specific.

3.8 Best practise exercise with Mid Bedfordshire District Council

3.8.1 Members of the group met members of Mid Beds District Council on 24th October 2006. The group wanted to hear from a neighbouring authority about their partnership working arrangements with parishes and town councils.

3.8.2 Existing engagement with Parishes & Town Councils

The importance of District Councillors being present at parish meetings was highlighted and the group were informed that there is usually a time during the meetings for parish members or members of the public to question or discuss matters with district councillors.

3.8.3 Some parishes and towns are part of Community Liaison Forums (CLFs). These were initiated by Bedfordshire County Council and are made up of representatives from the three tiers of local government (although it was originally intended for the County and Towns). Meetings are held quarterly and partnering agencies, such as the Police as well as members of the public are invited to attend.

3.8.4 Parish and town council representatives also sit on the LSP, however there was some concern expressed about the way in which the communication channel works between the LSP and parishes. It was felt that this needed improving at Mid Beds and North Herts.

3.8.5 In the Spring of 2006 Mid Beds District Council held a joint meeting with the County Council, together with representatives from town and parish councils, to discuss issues of concern that affect parishes and towns, such as highways and waste. Another similar event has been organised for November 2006.

3.8.6 Planning / Training

There was a question about planning and the arrangements that were in place at Mid Beds for parish involvement. The group was informed that parish and town councils are alerted via email about planning proposals. They have 21

days to respond on the application. If they have any major concerns, they can bring this to the attention of the relevant district councillor, who can request that it appear on the appropriate Planning Committee agenda. Parish and town council members have received training, which has provided an opportunity to gain clarity on specific aspects of some planning applications. It was agreed that parish and town member training needs to be tailored towards the specific role of parishes, rather than the role of district councillors when considering and commenting on planning applications.

- 3.8.7 There were some concerns expressed about the ability of obtaining guidance on policies that members need to consider, when looking at planning applications and the availability of expert advice and assistance generally. Officers from Mid Beds have provided assistance in providing play equipment, for example. There is also a funding officer who advises community groups on potential funding opportunities.
- 3.8.8 **Shared Services / Parish Charter**
The group wanted to know if shared services exist within neighbouring parishes, and whether there were any formal processes for developing shared services through a Charter. It was explained that shared services do exist within some CLFs, which are managed by clerks and usually involve a cluster of similar parishes. There was an example given of some parishes coming together to successfully secure external funding to run a local bus service. However not all areas have CLFs and there is often a lack of clarity on the purpose and aims. The production of a Parish Charter is currently being worked on.
- 3.8.9 It was also noted that Mid Beds have provided some towns with some initial funding to enable them to take over the responsibility for running services such as car parks, recreation and grass cutting. For example, the town of Sandy has taken over the running of their tourist information centre. Funding was also given to another town so that they could take on the running of public conveniences.
- 3.8.10 Mid Beds are now working with South Beds to deliver T Govt (Transformation Government) following the cessation of a wider partnership, which originally included Luton, Beds Borough and the County. Joint working provides a more cost effective service delivery for both authorities.
- 3.8.11 **Parish Plans**
The group was informed that 20 of the 53 parishes have Parish Plans. Support was provided by Mid Beds and the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) and as a result, the Parish Plans have been very effective. It was agreed that in order for Parish Plans to be effective and to maintain a focus and enthusiasm amongst members, parishes members and their communities need to know what the benefits are, right from the start.
- 3.8.12 Overall, Mid Beds members' felt that their parishes worked well with the district and that the voice of their parish communities was heard. The CLFs allow parishes to work with the district as well as partnering agencies, however there were some aspects of CLFs that needs improving.
- 3.8.13 E-Govt was also highlighted as an achievement and it was noted that about 75%-80% of parishes were online (supported by the BRCC) and worked efficiently this way, whereas in North Herts approximately 64% of parishes are online.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The group found that there are many examples of good practice, but these often depend on the efforts of one or two individuals. The results of these efforts are not always replicated across the district and are unlikely to be sustained if the individuals concerned move on.
- 4.2 It is important to find ways of sharing information face to face between NHDC and parishes. This not only develops more personal relationships between representatives from the different areas, which leads to better working relationships, but also ensures that all relevant expertise is harnessed on any particular issue.
- 4.3 Formal partnerships, such as the LSP are a good way for NHDC and parishes to gain experience of each other's working practices, and to achieve objectives that neither could achieve in isolation, however, there is clearly a need for more inclusive formal working arrangements.
- 4.4 It was agreed that the effectiveness of good communication and partnership working between the district council and parish and town councils was good. But there were a number of areas identified where improvements could be made to raise this effectiveness to a higher level.
- 4.5 The most common communication problems that arose throughout this review were; issues (to varying degrees) in mailing information to and from parishes, NHDC staff and parishes not having an up to date contact list for one another, information being passed to town and parish councils which is sometimes perceived as irrelevant, a lack of understanding of documents and consultations, a lack of feedback on responses from parish members, a lack of training for officers on the role of parishes and increased training for parishes on planning applications.
- 4.6 The group are keen to see more opportunities for shared services explored and implemented, where appropriate.
- 4.7 The following recommendations have been developed to suggest some solutions to the problems that the group found. These have been grouped under 4 main headings:

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Resource

The group recommends that:

- 5.1.1 NHDC officers assist parishes to manage allotments, parks and open spaces. This could be through service level agreements or another formal arrangement.
- 5.1.2 NHDC officers provide a service of expert advice to parishes on issues such as play areas, legal matters, human resources, finance and auditing of accounts. This may have implications on current resource and time, so parishes must accept that a charge may apply for the provision of some of these.
- 5.1.3 Parish and town councils agree to share the provision of expertise from officers for common projects, as outlined above.
- 5.1.4 Villages consider sharing Police Community Support Officers.
- 5.1.5 Parishes consider clustering and sharing a fully trained professional clerk, in appropriate areas.
- 5.1.6 NHDC builds on the current Community Development Officers impetus.
- 5.1.7 NHDC be responsible for collecting and maintaining a database showing all the services that are provided by individual parishes, with a view to exploring which of these services can be devolved or shared.

5.2 Policy / Procedures

The group recommends that:

- 5.2.1 The deadline for submitting parish precepts is extended.
- 5.2.2 An up to date structure chart is regularly maintained and sent to parishes.
- 5.2.3 NHDC implement and monitor service delivery plans with parishes and town councils.
- 5.2.4 NHDC review the Rural Strategy to assess whether the action plan has been delivered.
- 5.2.5 NHDC promotes the benefits of Parish Plans by incorporating elements into the Local Development Framework and Area Committees providing financial support to those parishes who may need it.
- 5.2.6 NHDC investigates ways to make the process of applying for grant simpler.
- 5.2.7 NHDC and parishes and town councils agree and adhere to a standard response time to telephone calls, letters and emails from parishes to council officers.
- 5.2.8 NHDC's Enforcement Review considers the implications for parishes.
- 5.2.9 The new fly tipping mobile CCTV is made available for parishes to utilise, and that parishes are made aware of who to contact for this.

5.3 **Communication**

The group recommends that:

- 5.3.1 NHDC facilitates regular meetings between Parish Chairs and Clerks (perhaps in clusters of areas of similarity).
- 5.3.2 NHDC create a parish page on the Council's website informing readers about parishes, where and when they meet and include links to individual parish/town council webpages. This is in addition to the current contact database.
- 5.3.3 Parishes send their meetings schedules to NHDC to be published on the website.
- 5.3.4 Parishes to invite their County Councillor to their meetings and send them meeting agendas.
- 5.3.5 NHDC arrange a formal communication procedure for letting parishes know about any new funding or IT initiatives are being discussed or explored.
- 5.3.6 NHDC offer a direct number for parish and town council clerks and councillors to call the district council.
- 5.3.7 Parish clerks set up an informal network group.
- 5.3.8 Written communication sent to parishes is as jargon free as possible and wherever possible a summary is provided that draws parish members to the most relevant part(s) of the document.
- 5.3.9 Consulting with parishes becomes an official part of the working methods of NHDC officers.
- 5.3.10 The email addresses of parish and town councils is included on the Council's global address list.
- 5.3.11 The "Outlook Magazine" is distributed to homes or public places in all parishes.
- 5.3.12 Feedback is provided to parish members on planning applications that they have responded to or made comments on.
- 5.3.13 Members of Hertfordshire County Council are informed about this review and that they consider carrying out a similar exercise with parishes.
- 5.3.14 Information on the LSP meetings is sent to all parish and town councils.

5.4 **Training**

The group recommends that:

- 5.4.1 NHDC includes a session on the work and role of parish and town councils, as part of the Council's induction of Members and Officers. It is also suggested that the delivery of this session is presented by an experienced parish councillor or clerk.
- 5.4.2 HAPTC and NHDC provide support to produce job descriptions for parish clerks and parish councillors.

- 5.4.3 An official training schedule is compiled and targeted at planning representatives of each parish.
- 5.4.4. Parish and town councils are included in the training opportunities that are offered to NHDC councillors.
- 5.5 **The group also recommends that:**
 - 5.5.1 An action plan is drawn up and a review of the recommendations is conducted by a group of district members and parish and town representatives, in 12 months time, to monitor the action plan.
 - 5.5.2 All parishes and town councils join HAPTC.