

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

3 June 2024

TITLE:	Strengthening the Relationships with Town and Parish Councils
PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	Councillor Mike Gledhill - Leader
CONTACT OFFICERS:	Andrew Stokes - Chief Executive Linden Vernon – Head of Democratic Services
WARDS INVOLVED:	Non-Specific

Appendices Attached:

Appendix A – Staffordshire Moorlands Parish Precepts

Appendix B – One community: A guide to effective partnership working between principal and local councils (LGA/NALC)

Appendix C – Local service delivery and place-shaping: A framework to support parish and town councils (LGA)

Appendix D – Staffordshire Moorlands Parish Assembly - terms of reference

Appendix E - Biddulph Works Together

Appendix F – Guide to Revitalising Town Centres (LGA)

Appendix G - High Street Task Force Report – Cheadle

Appendix H – High Peak Towns and Villages Regeneration Fund - Guidance Notes

Appendix I – Bath & North East Somerset Parish Charter

1. Reason for the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is for the Panel to consider the options and process to strengthen the relationships with town and parish councils in line with the priority action agreed in the Corporate Plan

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Panel:

- 2.1 Considers the potential options / actions included in this report to strengthen the relationships with town and parish councils and identifies the preferred way forward
- 2.2 Consults with the Parish Assembly to establish a shared approach

2.3 Establishes a working group of members of this Panel and the Parish Assembly to work up a proposal for the consideration by Cabinet.

3. Executive Summary

3.1 The Council has committed in the new Corporate Plan to strengthen the relationships with town and parish councils. The terms of reference and the process for this review need to be developed.

3.2 There are 42 parishes in the Staffordshire Moorlands. There are 41 parish councils (including the 3 town councils in Leek, Biddulph and Cheadle) and one parish meeting. There are approximately 360 councillors that serve on parish councils in the Staffordshire Moorlands. This includes 39 of the 56 district councillors a few of which are members of more than one parish council.

3.3 The Staffordshire Moorlands parish councils vary in size and function. This is illustrated by the differing precepts which are detailed in Appendix A.

3.4 The benefits of district councils working together with parish councils are well understood and have been highlighted in various national publications including:

- One community: A guide to effective partnership working between principal and local councils (LGA / NALC) (attached at Appendix B)
- Local service delivery and place-shaping: A framework to support parish and town councils (LGA) (attached at Appendix C).

3.5 These documents conclude that strong relationships make democracy more local, help to get communities working together and facilitate identifying creative ways of delivering positive outcomes. Whatever the scale of their activity, town and parish councils they offer a number of benefits to local service delivery and place shaping including:

- A close knowledge of the needs of their communities, with ability to tailor activity accordingly
- An ability to mobilise their communities, coordinating and harnessing individuals and groups to address local priorities
- Action that is backed by an ability to raise money locally through a precept

3.6 The contribution made by town and parish councils has certainly grown in the Staffordshire Moorlands, but there is still a significant amount of 'untapped' potential that could help contribute to the delivery of the district councils priorities. There is already a significant amount of liaison activity between the district council and the town and parish councils. Section 10 of the report highlights some of the work and initiatives that have and are continuing to take place.

- 3.7 In establishing the improvement of the relationships with parish and town councils as a priority, Cabinet set out a number of areas of focus:
- Building pathways to support delivery of district wide strategies
 - Improving support & guidance
 - Facilitating the delivery of projects
 - Facilitate the sharing of best practice e.g. Biddulph Works Together (Appendix E)
 - Training & development
 - Strengthening the parish assembly arrangements (current terms of reference attached at Appendix D) – including appointing a permanent chair which was agreed at the Annual Council Meeting in May
- 3.8 There are also number of additional initiatives could be considered in any new and improved relationship structure. These include:
- Establishing town centre partnerships – as suggested in the High Street Task Force report in respect of Cheadle (attached at Appendix G)
 - Working in rural localities in clusters with links to the Council's Community Leadership Scheme
 - Establishing a small regeneration project grant fund – similar to the Towns and Villages Regeneration Fund established in High Peak (see Appendix H)
 - Considering regular structured communications through a bulletin or newsletter
- 3.9 Before finalising the approach to strengthening the relationships, it is essential that there is a clear understanding of the underlying principles and shared commitments. It is therefore suggested that there is a period of scoping and listening, to build an understanding of the town and parish councils in the area. This would be in the form of structured engagement and research. Once this exercise is complete it is suggested that a clear statement of intent is co-produced with the town and parish councils in the area. This could be in the form of a Parish Charter (see example is attached at Appendix I which relates to Bath & North East Somerset)
- 3.10 It is proposed that Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel considers the potential options / actions included in this report to strengthen the relationships with town and parish councils and identifies the preferred way forward. This should then be shared with the Parish Assembly with the view to establishing a working group of members of this Panel and the Parish Assembly to work up a proposal for the consideration by Cabinet.

4. How this report links to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 The proposals in this report will help deliver the following aims and objectives set out in the Corporate Plan:

Aim 1: Help create a safer and healthier environment for our communities to live and work

- Develop a positive relationship with communities

Aim 2: Use resources effectively and provide value for money

- Strong and effective democratic processes

4.2 Developing enhanced partnerships with town and parish councils is a priority action.

5. Alternative Options

5.1 There are a number of options for consideration set out in the report

6. Implications

6.1	<u>Community safety, including safeguarding and prevention of terrorism</u> None
6.2	<u>Workforce</u> None
6.3	<u>Equality and Diversity/Equality Impact Assessment</u> This report and any agreed recommendations will reflect the Council's Equality and Diversity Policies
6.4	<u>Financial Considerations</u> None at this stage
6.5	<u>Legal</u> None
6.6	<u>Climate Change and Sustainability</u> Town and parish councils have a critical role in the delivery of the Council's Climate Change Action Plans
6.7	<u>Conservation and Enhancement of Biodiversity</u> Effective collaboration between the district and town and parish councils has a positive impact on the management of green spaces
6.8	<u>Consultation</u> It is proposed to consult and engage with town and parish councils before finalising an agreed approach
6.9	<u>Risk Assessment</u> Not required at this stage

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**Web Links and
Background Papers**

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7. Introduction & Background

- 7.1 The Council has committed in the new Corporate Plan to strengthen the relationships with town and parish councils. The terms of reference and the process for this review need to be developed.
- 7.2 As a starting point, this report sets out the current structure of the town and parish councils in the Staffordshire Moorlands and summarises the current engagement activity. The report then goes on to set out some suggested priorities for improvement.
- 7.3 The purpose of this report is to agree a focus that can be used for the development of an implementation plan. The recommended steps that need to be taken are also set out in the paper.

8. Town & Parish Councils in Staffordshire Moorlands

- 8.1 There are 42 parishes in the Staffordshire Moorlands. There are 41 parish councils (including the 3 town councils in Leek, Biddulph and Cheadle). Blore with Swinscoe operates a parish meeting which unlike a Parish Council has no elected councillors. All residents on the electoral roll are welcome to attend meetings and speak and vote on issues of concern to the local community.

Parish Councils in Staffordshire Moorlands

Alstonefield	Checkley	Forsbrook	Leek	Tittesworth
Alton	Cheddleton	Grindon	Leekfrith	Warslow
Bagnall	Consall	Heathylee	Longnor	Waterhouses
Biddulph	Cotton	Heaton	Longsdon	Werrington
Bradnop	Dilhorne	Hollinsclough	Oakamoor	Wetton
Brown Edge	Draycott	Horton	Onecote	
Butterton	Endon	Ilam	Quarnford	Blore (with Swinscoe)
Caverswall	Farley	Ipstones	Rushton	Parish Meeting
Cheadle	Fawfieldhead	Kingsley	Sheen	

- 8.2 All of the parish councils precept on an annual basis. There are 43 precepts as Kingsley Parish issue 2 precepts including a separate precept in respect of their Whiston parish.
- 8.3 There are approximately 360 councillors that serve on parish councils in the Staffordshire Moorlands. This includes 39 of the 56 district councillors a few of which are members of more than one parish council.
- 8.4 In common with the national picture the Staffordshire Moorlands parishes vary in size and function – nationally there are 10,000 local councils across England and Wales ranging from rural parishes with budgets of a few hundred pounds to large town and city councils with budgets in the millions.
- 8.5 In order to give some indication of the variation in scale of the Staffordshire Moorlands town and parish councils, the precepts for 2023/24 are detailed in Appendix A and can be summarised as follows:

- The number of Band D equivalent properties in parishes range from 42 in Ilam to 6,251 in Leek.
- The parish precepts range from £680 for Blore with Swinscoe to £419,195 in Biddulph – it should be noted that the annual budgets are much larger in some cases as many of the town and parish councils generate their own income e.g. Biddulph Town Councils 2024/25 Budget is £680,845.
- The 2024/25 Annual Council Tax for a Band D property ranges from £10.92 in Heathlee to £127.91 in Wetton.

9 Benefits of Closer Working with Town & Parish Councils

- 9.1 In May 2018, the Local Government Association (LGA) and National Association of Local Councils (NALC) produced a guide that sets out how principal and local councils can work more effectively in partnership. *One community: A guide to effective partnership working between principal and local councils* (attached at Appendix B) sets out a series of core principles to working effectively in partnership.
- 9.2 The guide acknowledges that local (town and parish) councils have a depth of insight into the needs of their communities and local areas that might not be possible for principal (district, county and unitary) councils. Meanwhile, principal councils can provide the scale and resources to make local goals a reality. It highlights that effective partnerships between principal and local councils play three important roles in that they:
- Make democracy more local.
 - Help to get communities working together.
 - Help to find creative ways of delivering outcomes.
- 9.3 A step by step guide is then provided to developing partnerships around improving community influence, local participation and service delivery. A number of case studies are also set out to illustrate the benefits that can be achieved.
- 9.4 In August 2021 the LGA produced a further guidance document: *Local service delivery and place-shaping: A framework to support parish and town councils* (which is attached at Appendix C). This document presents a framework for principal councils looking to support parish and town (local) councils to play an increased role in local service delivery and place-shaping.
- 9.5 The document concludes that town and parish councils can be an integral part of vibrant communities, along with voluntary and other community sector organisations. However it is noted that the roles they undertake reflect their local appetite and capacity. Despite this, whatever the scale of their activity, town and parish councils they offer a number of benefits to local service delivery and place shaping:
- A close knowledge of the needs of their communities, with ability to tailor activity accordingly

- An ability to mobilise their communities, coordinating and harnessing individuals and groups to address local priorities
- Action that is backed by an ability to raise money locally through a precept

9.6 It also should be noted that the potential of parish and town councils to contribute to vibrant and successful local and community governance has grown noticeably since the Localism Act 2011. The creation of the power of general competence for parish and town councils that meet set criteria is one important factor that contributes to this potential. The Act also created the concept of neighbourhood planning and rights for communities to bid to take on responsibility for assets and services from principal local authorities.

9.7 The contribution made by town and parish councils has certainly grown in the Staffordshire Moorlands, but there is still a significant amount of 'untapped' potential that could help contribute to the delivery of the district councils priorities.

9.8 The development of many of the district council's strategies e.g. Climate Change; Green Spaces; Tourism; Move More has required the input of town and parish councils. It follows therefore that they are critical in their implementation if the actions are going to reflect the unique issues in the diverse towns and villages in the Staffordshire Moorlands.

9.9 The stronger connection that the town and parish councils have with their local communities provides a significant opportunity for the district council to develop a deeper understanding of specific localities. Building a better relationship with town and parish councils would result in them being advocates and will support the district council with the implementation of necessary change programmes e.g. waste collection.

10 Current Relationships & Activity

10.1 There is already a significant amount of liaison activity between the district council and the town and parish councils. This section of the paper highlights some of the work and initiatives that have and are continuing to take place.

10.2 Regular liaison meetings with parish and town councils have been in place for some time in Staffordshire Moorlands through the **Parish Assembly**. The Parish Assembly was historically chaired by the Chairman of the district council. The terms of reference (attached at Appendix D) for the assembly provide for an Annual Meeting in June/July of each year with three other meetings each year for the conduct of general business. In addition the Chairman may convene a special meeting of the Assembly.

10.3 It is evident that the assembly has not operated in the formal way that is set out in the terms of reference, however there have been regular meetings which have discussed a wide range of subjects. More recent topics that have been included on the agendas include:

- Partner Updates including Staffordshire Fire & Rescue Service, Staffordshire Moorlands Local Policing Team, Staffordshire County Council Highways, West Midlands Ambulance Service, Staffordshire Parish Councils' Association, Leek Moorlands Hospital (Staffordshire Moorlands)
- Events Arrangements
- Planning Enforcement
- Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- Defibrillator use in the district
- Empowering parishes to meet the Climate Emergency
- Development of the Social Economy
- Regeneration and Planning Update
- Leisure and Tourism Update

10.4 The Council has continued to support neighbourhood planning through the development of **Neighbourhood Plans**. These provides a platform for residents to influence planning and place making in the areas in which they live and work.

10.5 In Staffordshire Moorlands, the **Leekfrith** Neighbourhood Plan was the first in the District to be made in June 2021. This has now been followed by the adoption of a plan for **Biddulph** in December 2023 with a further plan for **Checkley** adopted in May 2024. The adoption of these Neighbourhood plans follows independent examinations and referendums.

10.6 **Consultation on planning applications** - Town and Parish Councils are statutory consultees in the planning process and must be informed of all planning applications, and any amendments to those applications, within their parishes. However it should be noted that town and parish councils can only comment on these planning applications in the same way as any other member of the public. All town and parish councils in the Staffordshire Moorlands are notified about planning applications in their localities. These applications are discussed at town and parish meetings (in a number of cases at dedicated planning committee meetings) – consultation responses are then summarised and returned to the district council for consideration.

10.7 The district council regularly works with town and parish councils supporting the **delivery of specific neighbourhood projects**. Recent examples include:

- The district council has supported **Forsbrook Parish Council** on securing the purchase of former Blythe Bridge Police Station from the Staffordshire Commissioner – the site will be used to deliver 12 older persons apartments with other the other parts of the site being retained for an extended public car park that will support the village shops and the development of a community facility by the parish council. The district council is also providing a loan to enable the parish council to finance their elements of the project.
- The district council provided a grant to **Waterhouses Parish Council** towards improvements to the recreation ground including the purchase of a

suite of specialist maintenance to enable them to undertake enhanced maintenance to their sports pitches on an ongoing basis. The Council also supported the Parish Council with their funding application to the Football Foundation and helped implement the project in partnership with the local football club.

- **Kingsley Parish Council** had aspirations to improve their local recreation area and are developing a project to install new football goals, activity frame, disabled friendly swings and other sport/play equipment at the site which benefits children and young people of different ages and abilities. The district council supported this project through the allocation of £5,000 of grant funding.
 - The district council has leased a parcel of land at Mayfair Avenue to **Ipstones Parish Council** to facilitate community use of the site.
 - The district council provided financial and project support to **Cheadle Town Council** resulting in the delivery of significant improvements to Tean Road Recreation Ground. Improvements included the provision of a new skatepark and a new multi-use games area and the refurbishment of the existing tennis courts, and enhancements to the toddler play area. The financial support include the allocation of £186,000 from the district council's capital programme.
 - The district council provided financial support (including a loan of £20,000 to support **Bagnall Parish Council** with the purchase and improvement of a playing field in the village.
- 10.8 The district council completed a **community asset transfer** of a number of buildings to **Biddulph Town Council** – this included the transfer of Biddulph Town Hall on a long lease. The transfer also included ongoing revenue financial support (on a reducing basis) to enable the town council to manage the transition. The transfer of control has facilitated a greater community use of the building through local management. The town council also provides a 'one-stop' reception service which includes signposting residents to district council services.
- 10.9 The town and parish councils support the district with the **delivery of projects that are funded through planning gain** (Section 106 Agreements). These deliver many community benefits including the improvements and playing fields, recreation grounds and open space.
- 10.10 The district council regularly provides **support and advice** to parish and town councils. This has included:
- Support with service delivery – The district council, through AES, provides grounds maintenance services to **Cheadle Town Council**.
 - Mutual support and advice on community projects e.g. discussions with **Brown Edge Parish Council** to support the purchase of the Hollybush and car park in the village.

- Technical guidance and support – the Council’s Corporate Health & Safety officer has provided technical guidance to a number of town and parish councils including **Waterhouses and Biddulph**.

10.11 It is important to note that, in addition to the direct relationships with town and parish councils, the district council regularly supports projects in the towns and villages which are delivered by community groups or committees. An example of this is the long history of support given to improve village halls.

11 Cabinet Priorities for Improvement

11.1 In establishing the improvement of the relationships with parish and town councils, Cabinet set out a number of areas of focus:

- **Building pathways to support delivery of district wide strategies** – recognising the potential and necessity for town and parish councils to be integral in delivering the Council’s strategies including Climate Change; Green Spaces; Tourism; Move More.
- **Improving support & guidance** – supporting town and parish councils with capacity building including signposting, consultancy and supportive ‘handholding’ particularly in supporting them with access to grant funding.
- **Facilitating the delivery of projects** – continuing providing project and financial support to town and parish councils with the delivery of specific neighbourhood projects (as set out in section 10.7). Extending the scope of this support to include other small grant ‘pots’ e.g. green spaces.
- **Facilitate the sharing of best practice** – providing the structure and platforms for town and parish councils to share success initiatives with each other. There are many examples of innovation within individual towns and parishes that have the potential to work in other localities e.g. Biddulph Works Together (see Appendix E)
- **Training & development** – providing training and development opportunities for town and parish clerks potentially considering a town & parish administrators / clerks’ forum
- **Strengthening the parish assembly arrangements** – appointing a permanent chair as opposed to the Chairman of the Council which results in a change annual – this would provide some continuity of focus (***This was agreed at the Annual Council meeting on 15th May 2024***)

12 Other Potential Issues for Consideration

12.1 There are also number of additional initiatives that Cabinet could consider being included any new and improved relationship structure. These include:

- **Town Centre Partnerships**

'Community-led regeneration strategies for the district's towns and rural settlements' are to be a key element of the Deputy Leader's focus for a new Growth Strategy which will include consideration of:

- Mainstream approaches to regeneration are no longer viable and have failed our communities;
- Development of community-led strategies for our towns and rural settlements underpinned by alternative economic models are sought;
- Biddulph, Cheadle, Leek (particular rural settlements where there is an appetite)

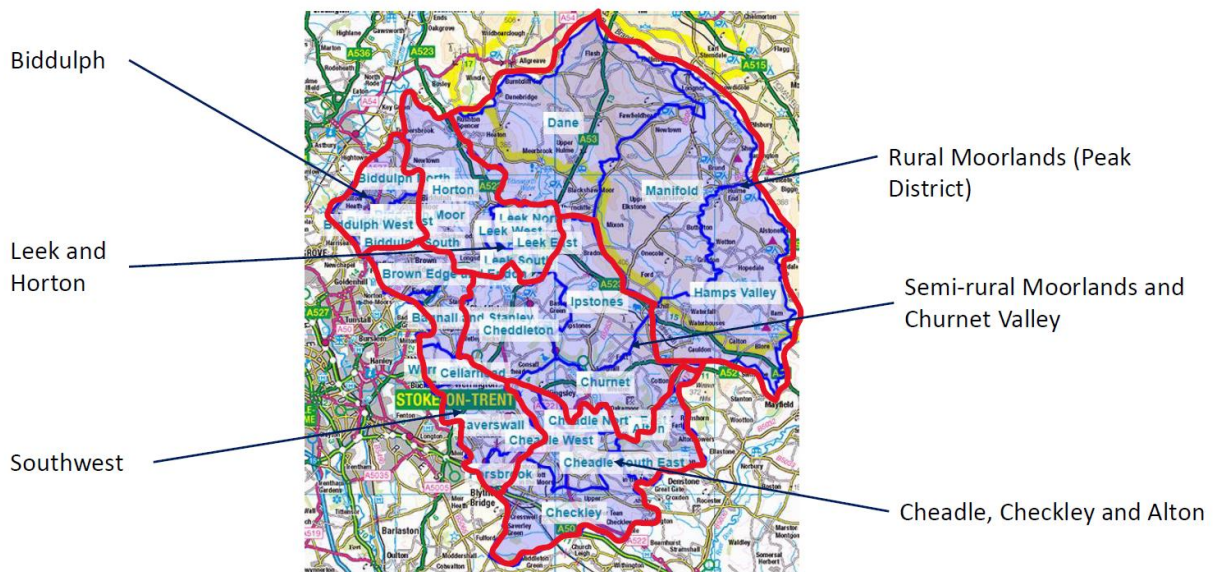
The Council's approach to revitalisation to town centre recovery post COVID19 was built in line with the principles set out in the *LGA Guide Revitalising Town Centres* (attached at Appendix F). This guide stresses the importance of partnership structures in successful town centre development. During the recovery from COVID-19 the district council opened a specific dialogue with the three town councils. In this period the Leader of the Council had a direct dialogue with each of the town mayors and deputy mayors and established a forum to consider the issues and responses moving forward. This approach had many positives and worked well.

Members may be aware that following an unsuccessful Future High Streets Fund bid the Council received some bespoke Expert Support from the High Street Task Force to help the Council to look at repurposing Cheadle to tackle the decline in footfall and the underused assets such as the Market and vacant units. The outcome was a report (attached at Appendix G) with a number of recommendations including the development of a robust town centre partnership to build wider ownership, help the transformation of Cheadle Town Centre, and create capacity for delivery.

If the Council was to consider a town centre partnership approach, the three town councils could be included forefront of these arrangements alongside the district council.

- **Rural Localities and Clusters**

SMDC's plans and strategies and specific investments are focussed on the district as a whole. In order to fully understand the relevance of the key issues to different localities, a locality analysis exercise was completed to support the development of the Staffordshire Moorlands Corporate Plan 2023-27. In this exercise area wards were grouped into larger localities that share certain characteristics



The aim of this analysis was to provide an initial starting point for discussions about the needs of different places in the Staffordshire Moorlands district and how SMDC services can best be levered to shape the places Staffordshire Moorlands residents live in in an equitable way. This may, in the first instance, help identify additional research needs.

The locality analysis will support the approach to the enhancement of the Council's Community Leadership Scheme which supports Councillors in their wards as effective community leaders by:

- Identifying community issues or concerns; and
- Addressing those concerns through influencing service delivery and/or facilitating community self help

More structured liaison with parish councils needs to underpin this approach and could be focussed on the localities developed in the analysis to form clusters encouraging the constituent parish councils to work closer together on areas of commonality.

- **Small Regeneration Project Grants**

Cabinet is keen to continue to support town and parish councils with the delivery of small projects and wants to extend the arrangements to provide a small funding pot that is made available.

In High Peak, the Council has recently created a Towns and Villages Regeneration Fund which can be used to fund small projects in towns and villages throughout High Peak at the discretion of the Deputy Leader & Executive Councillor for Regeneration, Tourism and Leisure. Recognising that High Peak is not fully parished this fund is available to town and parish councils but also to community groups.

The Towns and Villages Regeneration Fund is aimed at attracting visitors and

residents to improve town and village centres and projects could include part-funding:

- Improving public (not business) display boards and signage (where the owner's permission is obtained)
- Part-funding (50%) shop front grant schemes
- Production of local walking and cycling trail maps and promotion.
- Improvements to the accessibility of high streets and visitor attractions for disabled visitors and residents
- Small scale environmental tidy ups of public green spaces
- Part funding (50%) creative and makers and heritage events accessible to the public
- Other to be outlined by applicants

The pot has a total budget of £15,000 per annum and a copy of the guidance notes is attached at Appendix H.

The Council could consider the adoption of a similar scheme in Staffordshire Moorlands.

- **Communications**

In order to ensure the ongoing dialogue with town and parish councils, the district council could produce a formal parish council 'newsletter'. This could be a structured engagement making town and parish councils aware of relevant information including district council initiatives; funding streams that are available; sharing best practice etc.

13 Further Developing the Relationship with Town & Parish Councils

- 13.1 Whatever strategy is adopted by the district council for enhancing the relationship with town and parish councils, it will be necessary to firstly build trust recognising that it is a two-way process. A clear understanding of the underlying principles, shared commitments and ongoing dialogue is required.
- 13.2 It is therefore suggested that there is a period of scoping and listening, to build an understanding of the town and parish councils in the area. This would be in the form of some structured engagement and research. In this engagement the district council will need to be clear of its intentions.
- 13.3 Once this exercise is complete it is suggested that a clear statement of intent is co-produced with the town and parish councils in the area. This could be in the form of a Parish Charter. There are many examples of these in other council areas (an example is attached at Appendix I which relates to Bath & North East Somerset)

14 Next Steps

- 14.1 It is proposed that Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel consider the potential options / actions included in this paper to strengthen the relationships with town and parish councils and identify the preferred way forward.
- 14.2 It is then suggested that the proposed approach is shared with the Parish Assembly with the view to establishing a working group of members of this Panel and the Parish Assembly to work up a proposal for the consideration by Cabinet.
- 14.3 Once this is determined a detail project / action plan including milestones and timescales will be developed.