

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS/CMT

1. Meeting:	Cabinet Member for Community Cohesion
2. Date:	24th October 2005
3. Title:	Progress on the Joint Charter between Parish Councils and Town Councils and RMBC.
4. Programme Area:	Neighbourhoods

5. Summary

This report presents the first phase of the development of a joint working charter between Rotherham's Parish and Town Councils and RMBC. The Charter will set out how the two tiers of local government aim to work closer together for the well being of local people and to promote engagement with the democratic process.

6. Recommendations

THAT THE REPORT AND PROGRESS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A JOINT CHARTER BETWEEN RMBC AND PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS BE NOTED.

7. Proposals and Details

The Rural White Paper of 2000 identified the potential for Town and Parish councils to take on a stronger role as part of the Modernising Local Government agenda. The paper introduced the concept of Quality Parish and Town councils and highlighted their potential to give town and rural communities a better deal on services and a stronger voice in decisions affecting their daily lives. The White paper clearly indicated that the Government envisages local councils providing strong local leadership and working in partnership with principal authorities to improve the quality and range of services available.

Parish and Town Councils are the first tier of democratic government in England. Rotherham currently has 29 Parish and Town Councils of which three are classed as Parish Meetings. In August 2004 the Democratic and Resources Scrutiny Panel reviewed the current situation with regard to:-

- The current relationship between the principal Council and Parish and Town Councils in Rotherham
- The possible impact of Quality Parish Council legislation
- Good practice from other authorities

This review was considered by Cabinet in September 2004 and the following recommendations of the report supported:

- Begin the process of negotiating a joint working Charter.
- Improve communications - consultation to be formalised
- Provide a link officer in each programme area to provide liaison when required
- Training and development opportunities to be opened up to parish clerks and councillors
- Other forms of support e.g legal services to be available to parish councils (at an agreed cost)
- Guidance on funding opportunities to be provided

Following this a Seminar was held in January 2005 between RMBC and all Parish and Town Councils to look at how to improve joint working between the two tiers. It was agreed that the Yorkshire Local Councils Association would be asked to arrange a representative working group from the Parish Councils to work with the Council on the detail of the Charter. Following the seminar twenty four local councils confirmed their commitment to developing a joint charter.

During April 2005 an officers working group met with representation from Neighbourhoods, Education Culture and Leisure, Chief Executive, Economic and Development Services, Resources and Rotherham 2010. This task of this group is to ensure that the Charter is viewed as a high profile issue within their service area and that a link is established for Parish Councils when relevant issues arise.

Next Steps

The Yorkshire Local Councils Association arranged a postal ballot for nominations to be made for the working group during July and August 2005. The nominations were discussed at the South Yorkshire Local Councils branch meeting of the 5th of October

2005 and it was decided that the issue would be finalised by candidates being placed in a further postal ballot to be sent to all Rotherham's Parish and Town Councils.

The YLCA will again arrange this process and have provided a timetable to ensure that ballot papers are returned to them by the middle of December 2005. As soon as the ballot has been processed and the results known the first meeting of the working group will be arranged to be joined by Councils officers and the Cabinet member for Community Cohesion to negotiate the detail of the Charter.

The Charter

It is proposed that the Charter will use the good practice framework provided by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as a starting point. The Charter will set out:-

- A basic statement of mutual rights and responsibilities
- Promote and embed joined up working between the two tiers which will underpin public confidence in local democracy.
- Provide a framework for service devolution and financial arrangements
- Support more councils to obtain Quality status
- A performance and review structure which remains flexible for change and amendment as things develop.

The development of the Charter represents an important element of the move by the Council and partner agencies towards a Neighbourhood Management approach to the delivery of services. Members are currently considering the revised governance arrangements for Area Assemblies and a Neighbourhood Management Coordination Group, working through the Local Strategic Partnership, is taking forward a range of activity aimed at improving the local coordination and integration of services.

The Charter will provide a strong framework for future decisions regarding the role of Parish and Town Councils in the delivery of local services and in strengthening the accountability of service providers to local communities.

8. Finance

Some re-alignment may be required in future if Parish and Town Councils request consideration to devolve some services to a neighbourhood level. The government is currently looking at a national neighbourhood framework to address the issue of inequality in the ability to raise resources between different neighbourhoods.

Parish Councillors will need financial support to obtain training and development if they are to develop a wider community leadership role and make the most of new opportunities.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

The Parish Councils are not currently clearly linked to the Area Assembly process. Coordinating structures still need to be developed and these will be addressed in the current review of Area Assemblies. Many Parish councils are small and if they are to make a significant contribution to community engagement and promoting the democratic process clear routes need to be provided for 'grass root' structures to influence strategic decisions.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

The issues set out in this report link to key elements of the Government's vision for neighbourhood development, promoting local democracy and delivering community leadership.

Community Strategy

Developing closer ties with Parish and Town Councils links with the PROUD theme and the key priorities: "Develop local democracy at a neighbourhood level, devolving powers and resources and increasing opportunities for engagement."

Corporate Plan

Support Parish and Town Councils in achieving quality status: Develop a parish councils accord and strengthen joint working.

Year Ahead Statement:

Contributes to action point 36: The Community and voluntary sectors, Parish and Town Councils.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

- Cabinet/CMT Report 29 March 2005
- Charters for Town and Parish Councils and Principal Local Authorities: A Good Practice Guide April 2005
- Rural White Paper 2000
- Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter ODPM 2005
- Scrutiny Review August 2004
- Vibrant Local Leadership ODPM 2005
- Together We Can: Civic Renewal Unit 2005

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