



Commission for
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Guidance note:

Service delegations
to parish and town
councils

EXTRACT

Wootton Bridge Parish Council

Case Study

This guidance note was written for the Commission for Rural Communities and National Association of Local Councils by Brian Wilson Associates, with David Atkinson Consulting and Ellie Stoneley.

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Introduction

Services often work best when they are designed, managed and delivered at the most local level possible, where they can more readily be attuned to local circumstances and local people's priorities. There is, therefore, considerable interest in principal authorities (unitary, county and district councils) delegating functions and services to parish and town councils within their area. This short guide aims to help those considering such delegations, by looking at the options, considerations and practical steps required.

Service delegations (which some call 'devolution') are not new. However, no substantive written guidance appears to exist on the topic. But as recent research by the authors found, there seems to be a growing interest in taking on service delegations and various national policy initiatives can be said to support that trend.

This guide has been produced as part of a project to help parish and town councils realise the opportunities that arise in areas which undergo local government reorganisation (as has happened in places such as Bedfordshire, Durham, Shropshire, and Wiltshire). It will, though, also be useful to those considering delegations in areas with two tiers of principal authority – district and county.

The guide has been written primarily for Parish and Town Councils (P&TCs) and their County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs). Principal authorities who are planning delegation schemes for some of their services should also find it of interest.

The next section of this guide gives some policy background, after which there is a section on the benefits and challenges of service delegation. Subsequent sections set out:

- the sorts of services that may be delegated;
- different types of delegation scheme;
- considerations for setting up a scheme;
- what is typically involved in taking on a service delegation; and
- some points for managing a delegation.

In the appendix, you will find three examples of delegation good practice.

It should be stressed that whilst every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, this document must not be seen as legal guidance about what can or cannot be done.

Wootton Bridge Parish Council: The Isle of Wight

Context

Wootton Bridge is a village on the north coast of the Isle of Wight, midway between Ryde and Newport. It is about 3 ½ miles from each and within a short distance from the main ferry terminals of Fishbourne and East Cowes. With a population of 3,618 (2001 Census) and an electorate of 2,899 (2006), Wootton Bridge is a large village and has been host to the famous Isle of Wight Festival. The history of the village stretches back to Roman times, the creek having been used as a waterway and port for thousands of years.

Wootton Bridge was one of the first 12 parish councils in the country to achieve Quality Parish Status in 2003 and it is now the first parish council on the Island to have been re-accredited its Quality Status (January 2009).

The village attracts a great many tourists, with its mixture of modern and Victorian buildings, including the 11th century Parish Church of St. Edmunds and The Sloop Inn in Mill Square. Also of interest is the Isle of Wight Steam Railway, with connections to Havenstreet.

For the last two years Wootton Bridge has been working with the Isle of Wight Council in support of an Empowerment Framework Document for P&TCs on devolution. The Isle of Wight Council, having fully involved the parish council in the planning and design process, then started work on replacing the toilets in Brannon Way. This was carried out with a view to developing this as a devolved/delegated service from the Isle of Wight Council to Wootton Bridge Parish Council.

The Clerk to Wootton Bridge Parish Council, Lynda Smith, works 25 hours a week supported by two part time members of staff (four hours each) and is based in a Help and Information Centre at the heart of the community (which currently shares premises with the Isle of Wight Council who do outreach work there).

The Isle of Wight Council is a unitary authority (since 1995), and the Island is fully parished with 33 P&TCs serving an electorate of 111,149. The Isle of Wight Council has, since 2005, had a commitment to support and develop P&TCs. This initially took the form of surveying them and subsequently improving channels of communication to build relationships and trust across the tiers of local government. This was the start of the plan to empower parishes to take on (should they wish) devolved services. The principal authority, working with the Isle of Wight Association of Local Councils, set up a Parish Devolution Pilot and one of the two Quality Parish Councils involved in this was Wootton Bridge.

Implementation

Where it began

Following the survey of P&TCs across the Island, it became clear that there were major issues of understanding, trust and communication with the principal authority. The Isle of Wight Council set out to develop a better and more meaningful working relationship with them, and to involve P&TCs as much as possible in local issues and in the decisions affecting their communities.

A pilot was set up to support the development of a Parish Devolution Empowerment Framework. This involved two proactive Quality Status parish councils – Brading and Wootton Bridge.

The Clerk to Wootton Bridge had also sought to build a positive relationship with the new Chief Executive of the Isle of Wight Council and he had been invited to Wootton to gain an insight into the issues faced there. Partly as a result of this fact finding visit, Wootton Bridge was involved in the devolution pilot based around the provision of new eco-toilets. This was the start of a move towards closer and more empowering partnership working.

How it developed

The pilot took 6 months and had a project board consisting of the clerks to Brading and Wootton Bridge, the Director for Environment and Neighbourhoods, Heads of Service for Contract Management and Democratic Services, the highways engineer and other key players. The process led to a deeper understanding of the capabilities and the capacity of all those represented.

“The Isle of Wight Council does have a lot of technical expertise and resources that a parish council with only a clerk does not have.”

Chris Matthews, Environment and Neighbourhoods, Isle of Wight Council

There was initially a suspicion from the parishes that the council wanted to drop their powers onto the parish but this was soon overcome.

The pilot focused on eco toilets which have been re-built in partnership with the parishes. The initial thought was that having been built by the principal authority, the management and running of the toilets would be devolved to the parish councils. What has emerged, however, was an initially unexpected outcome: both Brading and Wootton Bridge Parish Councils have resolved to take on a monitoring role for the cleaning contracts for the toilets.

The lack of capacity within Wootton Bridge Parish Council was felt by councillors to be a major issue and there were also anxieties about dealing with health and safety regulations, contracts and insurance. Both the parish council and the principal authority realised how important it was to address these anxieties and to build the confidence of the parish council, so that in time they may want to take over a fully devolved service. However, the overriding concern was always that the funding must accompany the devolved service, must be cost neutral or better, and maintain or improve the devolved service for local residents.

A wider outcome of this pilot was the development of the parish devolution/ empowerment framework document which sets out to support and guide P&TCs through the process of taking on a devolved service or delegation. The framework offers precise guidance on the types of service to be considered for delegation, the enabling and facilitation of empowerment working, and the eight step process for devolving a service:

- Phase 1 - Proof of Quality Accreditation
- Phase 2 - Evaluate merit of request for devolving a service
- Phase 3 - Evidence of competency
- Phase 4 - Determine the most appropriate devolution option
- Phase 5 - Development of SLA/contract
- Phase 6 - IoW Council approval process
- Phase 7 - Devolvement of service
- Phase 8 - Monitoring and review

It is strongly felt on the Island that such a framework is necessary, in order to fully support P&TCs looking to work in this way and to ensure the whole process is robust and clearly defined.

Recognising the limited capacity of P&TCs in terms of time and resource, a suite of options is presented ranging from parishes being involved in monitoring and reporting, to total ownership and transfer of assets.

Impact

The biggest impact for Wootton Bridge has been the partnership working with the Isle of Wight Council on regeneration projects, such as a Doorstep Green. The parish council has been able to secure the grant funding and the principal authority has been able to provide the contractual help/project management. Lynda Smith says:

It has been a marriage made in heaven and made things happen for the village by pooling our joint attributes.

In 1999 Wootton Bridge generated a Village Design Statement which led to the formation of a regeneration plan, managed by an active Village Partnership under the auspices of the parish council – a great example of local partnership working. In 2005, as the result of undertaking a Countryside Agency funded healthcheck, the Wootton Bridge Plan was formulated.

With these steps and involvement in the parish empowerment framework pilot, the parish council now feels confident about their strengths and weaknesses and have a clear understanding of what the community wants of them. In February 2009 there was a Village Open Day involving a high level of local consultation which will lead into a new plan to tie in with the Central Island Plan. The interim report on this plan is to be presented at the Wootton Bridge Party in July.

The WICI – the Wootton Instrument for Community Information – has been established to support the plans on an ongoing basis.

Acting as the ears on the ground the monitoring service provided by the parish council helps to support the work of the highways and the environmental maintenance staff from the principal authority, in terms of safety and security in and around the Doorstep Green and Village Square areas where the new eco-toilets are situated.

Success factors

The decision by Wootton Bridge Parish Council to take on a monitoring role, rather than the fully devolved management of the service, was not the expected outcome of the pilot. It was, however, a fully supported decision and the resulting scheme has been a success which has impacted the wider community in a positive way.

Both the parish council and the principal authority believe that partnership working is key for the future of sustainable and successful devolved and delegated services across the island.

Other key drivers are:

- Trust;
- A mutual understanding as to roles and responsibilities;
- A clear framework to work within; and
- Support and guidance.

The parish devolution/empowerment framework document lays out clear guidelines and structures for the P&TC to work within and has been developed with and in response to P&TC needs.

The Isle of Wight Council and the IOW ALC are aiming high with their plan for “*emparishment – empowerment – excellence*” but they have worked alongside the P&TCs themselves to ensure this becomes a reality.

Sustainability

The confidence engendered by the pilot and its outcomes has encouraged Wootton Bridge to take on other projects: the Doorstep Green and Village Square were created as a result of grant funding secured by the parish council and then the associated contractual processes/project management provided by the principal authority. The parish council's Village Square work took place during the same timeframe as the development of the eco toilets and under the same contract.

The Doorstep Green (venue for the now annual Party in the Park in July) has also been taken over by the Isle of Wight Council who manage the day to day running of the service, which works well and is supported by the monitoring scheme undertaken by Wootton Bridge Parish Council.

The work that has been put into the parish devolution/empowerment framework document will ensure that, in the long run, when a P&TC applies for and takes on delegated or devolved services, they will be fully prepared and able to go ahead with a clear understanding of their expectations and responsibilities.

There is now also a parish task group which meets quarterly, an independent body made up of representatives from the Parish Liaison Team, the IOW ALC and local SLCC.

P&TCs now also receive training in topics such as health and safety, first aid, town and country planning, the code of conduct – courses which are well attended and support the longer term vision for the island. The IOW ALC play an active role in the process and work closely with their members and the principal authority.

For Wootton Bridge the monitoring role they have taken on feeds back local intelligence to the principal authority which enables it to be more responsive to local needs. There is a belief that funding should follow the function and although there are still anxieties around capacity, resource and money, there is a confidence to work towards taking on new powers and responsibilities.

Is empowerment reinventing the wheel, Lynda Smith was asked recently. The answer a resounding no - it is a way of getting “stuff done” locally by local people in a way that offers maximum benefit to the local community, the parish council and the local authority – in a council tax neutral way.

Who we are

The **Commission for Rural Communities** provides well-informed, independent advice to Government to ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. In doing this, it acts as

- Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

The **National Association of Local Councils** is the only body in the country specialising full-time in the work of local councils. It works to protect and advance the rights and interests of member councils with the Government, the main political opposition parties, Parliament, in the local and national press, and in liaison with other bodies such as the Local Government Association, the Audit Commission and the Standards Board.