

Working Panel – Teignbridge District Council Charter

29th May 2025

Background

This was the first meeting of the Working Panel, including members and officers from parish and town councils, and parish meetings, in Teignbridge District. The panel had been provided with some example charters in advance of the meeting, including:

- The Town and Parish Charter South Gloucestershire 2023
- County Durham Parish Council Charter
- West Lindsey Parish Charter
- North Yorkshire Parish Charter

The panel was facilitated by the Devon Association of Local Councils.

A charter is a way of describing a collaborate working relationship between the district council and the towns and parishes in its area.

The meeting took the form of an open discussion between those present about what they would like to see in a charter.

Notes

There was a question raised about local government reorganization (LGR) and whether this would have an impact on the statutory responsibilities or duties of parishes and towns, and principal authorities. It is not expected that the statutory responsibilities or duties of parishes and towns will be impacted. For principal authorities, it may be that the differing responsibilities or duties of what is currently the county and district councils will become amalgamated into a single principal authority but the duties are likely to remain the same. It was recognised that a charter may want to include space for change in view of LGR.

Reflection across the group was that the South Gloucestershire charter was the most favoured model, being succinct. It was suggested that the 'key principles' section could be brought forward to the top of the charter in the shape of a mission statement.

The South Gloucestershire model would also allow for other documents to potentially be 'bolted on' to give more detail where needed (this may include existing documents).

There was an aspiration that any document created provides the basis for best practice during LGR so it can guide any future unitary with how they engage with parishes and towns. There was a suggestion that there could be a pledge on Teignbridge's end to put this forward to be taken up any new structure.

Communication was a significant topic, and a desire to see a commitment to improved communication. Some of the issues raised around communication were:

- Not knowing who to speak to at the district council, so towns and parishes rely on existing contacts who may not be in a position to provide assistance.

- It was commented that towns and parishes wanted their voice to be heard, and that communication is currently quite slow with issues raised seemingly going nowhere.
- Communication is vital, especially the ability to build up personal relationships which can assist with getting things done.
- It's important to be clear around what good communication looks like and that there is a clear action i.e. ten working days to respond, but no substantive response.
- Good communication helps build trust

It was recognised that there are difficulties with communication due to high staff turnover and limited budgets at the district council, with a recognition that the expectations of towns and parishes might need to be managed accordingly. Ways of tackling this:

- A popular suggestion was that updates on staffing were provided regularly, so there is a document making it clear who is the current contact (and how to contact them) for different areas so the towns and parishes know who they can contact and aren't taking up the time of other officers.
- A self-service portal where councils could log-on and get information that they needed (perhaps including a staff directory) and other important bits of information. This could be just open to clerks if there is a concern around managing numbers/circulation. This would be helpful for information sharing as well, where it is sometimes the case that staff resource makes it harder to disseminate information.

Forums were discussed, with a suggestion that TALC could be brought back. It was noted that this might need to be structured differently so it can remain a useful forum. Suggestions were for a forum that met online and in-person, perhaps quarterly. It was raised that there is an existing town and parish council forum which some members had found very useful, but others were not aware of this forum.

There appears to be some confusion about planning forums, which were focused on planning matters, but may have now evolved into being forums for general discussion around towns and parishes (meeting 3 times a year, and with a meeting coming up in June). The lack of clarity here was suggested as an example of where communication could be improved.

There was praise for a meeting held previously at the Courtenay Centre in Newton Abbot.

Linked to this was a discussion around informal cluster meetings, and the benefits of getting together with other councils or parish meetings where you may share common issues (such as local issues, geography, demographic etc). This may be something which Teignbridge or DALC could support (NB: DALC do offer some support to informal or formal cluster meetings in Devon).

A section from the County Durham charter (under the topic of information, communication, and customer feedback) was raised as a good phrase:

"Sets out clear arrangements to improve communications and effective sharing of information between councils, including better use of Information Technology"

Mutual respect was another significant topic, demonstrating the need for respect on both sides and a recognition that towns and parishes have their own legal status and are authorities in their own right. Towns and parishes are the first tier of local government, and the closest to their communities.

The district and the towns and parishes need each other and can work well together on that basis; it is an important partnership.

A key part of mutual respect is understanding each other, and there was a feeling that the district would benefit from a deeper understanding of towns and parishes; perhaps this could be included in the induction for new staff and members. Part of this understanding would be recognizing the different challenges faced by the clerks and councils at town and parish level.

NB: DALC explained that they had recently delivered training to TDC officers on this topic.

It was highlighted that respect comes from understanding and positive, regular communication.

The importance of civility was also raised, as a key issue in the town and parish sector, and the need for both sides to act with civility.

Guidelines around councillors were raised as a potential topic for inclusion; it is sometimes unclear what role ward councillors might play with parishes and towns, and what might be expected of towns and parishes in relation to their ward councillors. If there is an existing document, then this could be a 'bolt-on' to the charter, or perhaps a document could be created setting out what expectations there might be.

Sustainability was raised as a potential inclusion, with attention drawn to the importance of climate change which is already impacting many areas, including in Teignbridge. Councils will be expected to help their communities through climate change. This also links to a broader topic of resilient communities, and being prepared to handle change or significant events such as flooding. LGR is another example of potential change for communities and councils.

Other issues that have been raised:

- Training – could Teignbridge bring parishes and towns into their training on occasions, even if that is at a discounted rate. This might enable parishes and towns to be more helpful to the district. For example, if planning training is delivered by the district then parishes and towns might be able to ensure that planning responses deliver information that will be useful to the planning team.
- Parish meetings – it's important not to overlook the parish meetings in Teignbridge
- Differing experiences – parish councillors are volunteers. Many parish clerks and councillors may work in the evenings, or have other jobs (often full time) alongside their parish role.

Issues raised outside of the meeting:

- The timing of meetings – on a similar note as above, it has been reflected that councillors in full-time employment can only attend in-person meetings if they are in the evening. Many TDC meetings are scheduled for daytime which can make it impossible for those who work to attend.