

The 'Parish partnership' model of an effective community anchor

Government policy promotes the concept of community anchor organisations to deliver:

- improved empowerment and engagement of citizens and communities in local areas
- better use of local assets and facilities; and
- a more sustainable and enterprising local third sector.

Rural communities benefit from existing local structures which can be harnessed to deliver these aspirations, but only if the role and potential of parish and town councils are recognised and included in any formal definition of community anchor organisations. ACRE and NALC are advocating for a model of **parish partnerships** to recognise the unique strengths of parish councils and their relationships with local community organisations in parished areas.

The Local Government Act includes measures to build the capacity and effectiveness of parish councils by developing their powers of community well-being. This would support and complement policy aspirations for community anchors. The biggest risk is that by not including parish councils in the formal definition of community anchor organisations, government is setting up conflicts in roles and responsibilities within parished communities, creating ineffective use of local finance and volunteer effort and causing confusion in external public sector agencies and potential funders, all of which are inconsistent with its objective of strong and effective neighbourhood management.

Not all parish councils will wish to deliver all community anchor roles themselves and will work, as they do now, with the third sector organisations within their communities. However, their role in providing local community finance, representation of local needs in their relationship with local government and ownership of land and facilities within their local area means they must take a leading role in developing the community anchor concept in parished areas if the policy is to be effective. They are often the only local organisation with professional capacity (via the parish clerk), and externally audited finance and accountability. There is little likelihood of volunteers in 'proxy' organisations stepping forward through which to channel communication and finance relating to the community anchor concept.

Relating their role to the principles underlying community anchors, as proposed by Communities and Local Government, parish councils:

- are democratically elected and with an independent source of finance via the parish council precept, which ensures **local control**
- have recognised responsibilities for the health and wellbeing of their area, which provides a strong and well-defined **neighbourhood focus**
- have a recognised quality system that promotes **inclusivity**, serving the needs of all sections of the community
- act as a focus for **empowering** the local community, by stimulating action to improve services, providing facilities and supporting local community aspirations.

Key roles of community anchors (as proposed by Communities & Local Government)

1. Parish councils are closely involved in **provision of a meeting place** for activities such as parish meetings. Securing adequate provision of community facilities is a major focus of their work. The 9,000 village halls are often the only place to meet and host community activities in the thousands of smaller rural communities across England. However, these are owned and managed by volunteer hall management committees who do not consider the wider role of community anchors as being within their remit (confirmed through multiple consultations and research).

Management committees are primarily concerned with managing the use and maintenance of their building, not in direct support for its user organisations, nor in direct advocacy on community needs. Parish councils traditionally work in conjunction with village hall management committees to ensure local community space is adequate and sufficient for the needs of the community.

2. Parish councils support **local community sector activities** through grant aid to local groups. Their Section 137 powers directly relate to this, but many go further than this power in supporting local community facilities. External funding agencies often look to parish council match-funding as a demonstration of local community support for any funding application made by local groups.
3. Parish councils normally **provide direct services** in enhancing the local area (e.g. provision of car parks, recycling initiatives, lighting, information boards, owning and maintaining green space and making environmental improvements). They also liaise with other public service providers to enhance services in, for instance, transport, health and social care services. In many cases, they take on direct service provision, in others, they negotiate with local groups to take on delivery. Agency agreements with public service providers are already a feature of parish charters, agreed between parish councils and local government
4. No other local body other than parish councils has a defined and democratic remit for overall **advocacy and voice for the community**. Parish councils are statutory consultees of local government and already have established relationships with Local Strategic Partnerships and in multiple arenas within which negotiation with local government can take place. Developing a community anchor concept in a parished area should not undermine this.
5. The Quality Parish scheme is underpinned by efforts designed to stimulate community involvement. **Community engagement** and identifying local priorities and needs is so well-established in rural areas through the parish plan approach that setting up separate initiatives to involve local people in community issues will cause confusion and result in loss of community cohesion. Instead, existing approaches to community engagement and the role and remit of parish councils can be built on to further develop local empowerment and local community action.
6. With better definition of their remit on community well-being, parish councils can make a step change in helping **mobilise opportunities and resources** for their local community. At the moment, they are generally the first port of call for grant aid for local groups. However, changes to the policy on planning obligations and the input to Sustainable Community Strategies means their existing advocacy needs to be built on to deliver a more proactive approach to generating local resources. With their responsibility for their whole community, they can take a lead in ensuring maximum effective use of community facilities and resources, brokering between local community groups owning assets or delivering services, to encourage shared improvements to providing community well-being. Parish plans are integral to the success of this model.

Whilst this clearly identifies the contribution parish councils can make to developing the community anchor concept in parished areas, it does not fully describe the benefits of doing so. As shown overleaf, the 'parish partnership' model of community anchors can also:

- Re-connect the government's aspirations for both representative and participatory democracy
- Re-invigorate public policy on the development of the parish council role
- Secure the means by which community engagement initiatives can become instrumental in developing local neighbourhood management.

On the other hand, excluding parish councils from consideration in public policy on community anchors will cause conflict and confusion within local parished communities, dissipate local volunteer effort and negate the significant achievements already made in improving effective community engagement through the parish planning model.

Reconnecting representative and participatory democracy

The democratic remit and accountability of parish councils is an integral part of representative democracy. It is well-connected into local government and the government's aspirations for the future role of councillors in delivering sustainable communities.

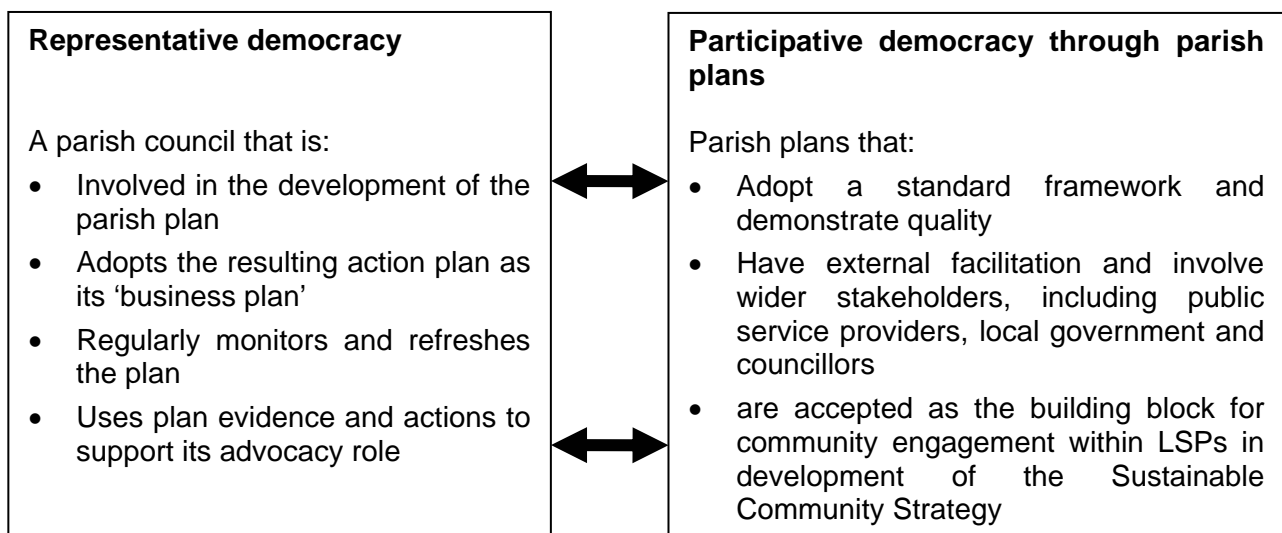
Parish councils are also integral to community budgeting initiatives in parished areas, community engagement input to the work of Local Strategic Partnerships and advocacy on behalf of local communities.

Under the 'parish partnership' model of community anchors, a parish council would work with local community groups via the parish plan process, which identifies the needs of the local community sector and results in the creation of an action plan which involves co-ordinated activity amongst all community groups.

Parish councils should then take on responsibility for monitoring and implementing the action plan, through work with individual community groups and advocacy with external agencies. Refreshing the plan becomes an ongoing part of its work, just as any effective third sector organisation currently manages and monitors its business plan.

ACRE and NALC have been working together to promote this concept over the past few years. Response from local community groups and from parish councils has been overwhelmingly positive. Each of the elements can be taken forward through development of existing structures and reach of:

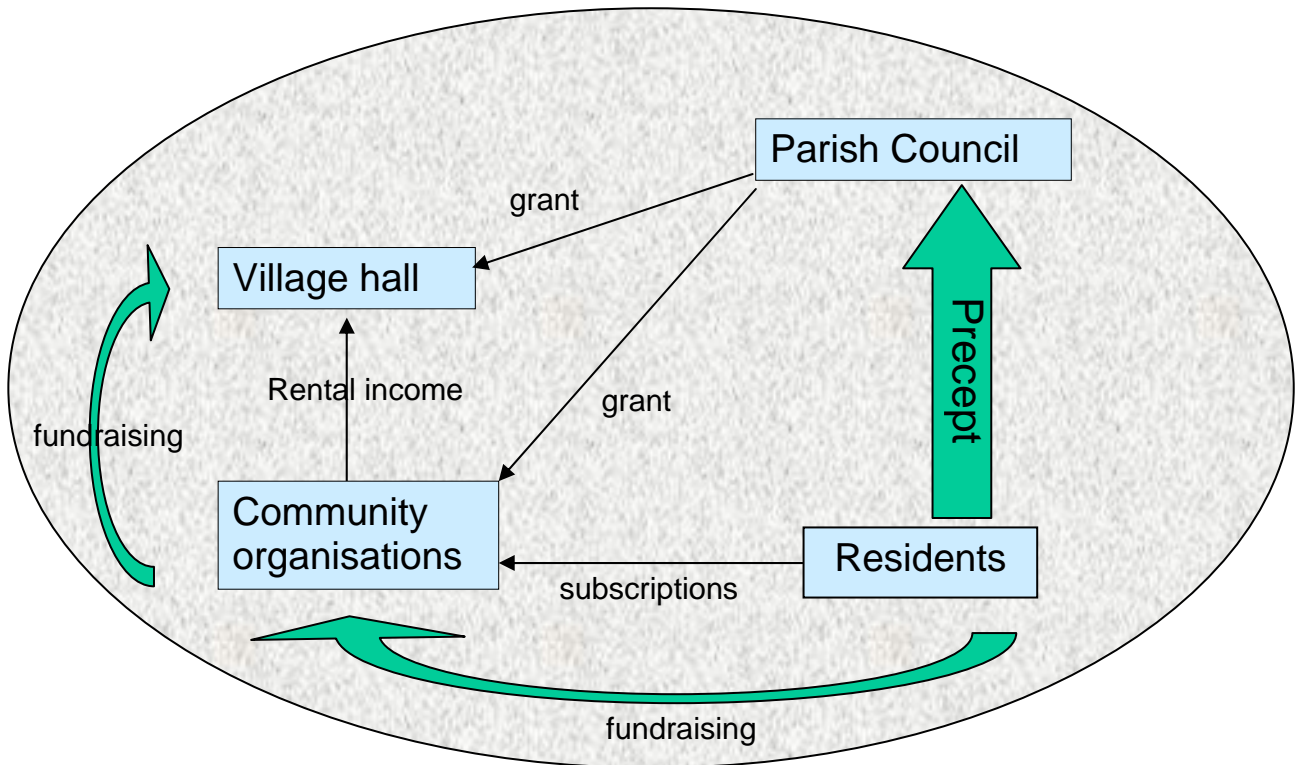
- NALC parish council training structures
- ACRE parish plan toolkit and facilitation
- Implementation of the Local Government Act's grant of the power of well-being for parish councils
- Implementation of community budgeting initiatives
- Development of the role of councillor training
- Policy and implementation on developing sustainable communities



Delivering a whole community approach to local community finance

The community anchor concept aims to provide a cohesive approach to optimising the use of local community assets, finance and third sector resources.

In smaller rural communities, the interaction between community groups is dominated by significant mutual reliance on finance and facilities:



Under the 'parish partnership' model of community anchors, a parish council would work with local community groups via the parish plan process to:

- Understand collective finances, opportunities and risk
- Work to maximise and grow their collective value in creating a sustainable community sector
- Organise its precept to maximise community finance
- Represent the collective needs and opportunities in dealings with statutory bodies
- Act as the guardians of a sustainable community vision within the parish plan

This would deliver the appropriate links:

- In representation of third sector interests under the Local Government Act proposals
- In providing input to Sustainable Community Strategies
- Input to Comprehensive Area Assessments
- Strengthening advocacy by local councillors

NALC and ACRE are working to take this forward through relevant parish council training structures and support and facilitation of parish planning.