

# SUMMARY

1. This consultation paper follows up the commitment made in the Rural White Paper to consult on how a *QUALITY* parish or town council might work. It sets out our detailed proposals for putting the “*QUALITY*” concept into practice following formal discussions with the Local Government Association, National Association of Local Councils and the Countryside Agency.
2. *QUALITY* parish and town councils (or local councils) will work closely in partnership with their principal authorities and, through their enhanced role, give their communities a better deal on local services and a stronger voice in the decisions that affect people’s lives.
3. The consultation paper sets out proposals for:
  - a model charter covering relations between all parish and town councils and their principal authorities setting out how principal authorities and local councils will work in partnership;
  - the additional benefits that a local council can expect from achieving *QUALITY* status (bigger role in delivery of services, access and information point and integral part of consultation arrangements);
  - guidance to principal authorities and local councils setting out how the *QUALITY* system will work, including the model charter and guidance to principal authorities for their financial arrangements with parish and town councils, supported by further advice that Best Value Performance Plans should include a summary of the charter;
  - a series of tests that town and parish councils should pass to achieve *QUALITY* status;
  - self assessment validated by the external auditor.
4. The consultation paper concerns England only. It is aimed particularly at parish and town councils, their principal authorities and other partners at all levels in England. But we also welcome comments from any organisations or individuals with an interest in the work of parish and town councils.
5. The questions on which we are seeking views are on the next page.

# LIST OF QUESTIONS

## Parish and Town Council Charter and Partnership Working

- Q1 We invite views on the content of the model charter (pages 18-23 below) and on the arrangements for agreeing and reviewing individual charters.
- Q2 In particular we invite views on the additional provisions for *QUALITY* parish and town councils in Part 2 of the model charter.
- Q3 Do you agree with the proposed additions to guidance on Best Value?
- Q4 Are there any other actions that might be taken to bring about closer working between principal authorities and local councils?

## “Tests” for *QUALITY* Parish and Town Councils

- Q5 We invite views on the test that a local council should have all its seats filled by election at the beginning of each 4-year term to qualify for *QUALITY* status.
- Q6 Do you agree with the test on the proposed number of meetings a year which a local council should hold to qualify for *QUALITY* status?
- Q7 We invite views on the test for a competent clerk and the proposed approach to training for clerks, the thresholds for categorising councils and what will be appropriate training or qualifications.
- Q8 We invite views on the proposed annual report test, its timing and contents, the extent to which they should mirror those of Best Value Performance Plans and the value of distributing copies to local households, local businesses, voluntary interests and other service users.
- Q9 We invite views on the proposed newsletter test for *QUALITY* status, and examples of good practice, particularly in relation to distribution methods.
- Q10 Is there a need for parish and town councils to do more to provide access to the accounts for interested members of the community if they are to be given *QUALITY* status?
- Q11 Do you agree with the test framework, as a whole? Should any of the tests be omitted, or others added?

## Assessment of *QUALITY* Status and Accreditation

- Q12 We invite views on proposed assessment format and whether there are other options that should be considered.
- Q13 We invite views on whether external auditors should undertake *QUALITY* assessments and on whether there is a role for national and/or local advisory assessment panels.
- Q14 Is four years the right length of time for *QUALITY* accreditation to be valid before it needs to be re-confirmed? What is the best point within the electoral cycle for the assessment?
- Q15 We invite views on the proposed re-accreditation process and whether there are other options that should be considered.
- Q16 Do you agree that parish and town councils should meet the costs of the assessment process for *QUALITY* status?
- Q17 Do you agree that it is appropriate to place the responsibility for maintaining up to date lists of *QUALITY* Parish and Town Councils on principal authorities?

### **Parish and Town Council Charter – Proposed model for individual charters for principal authorities following consultation and discussion with their local councils**

1. The councils in the area of *[principal authority]* have agreed to publish a charter which sets out how they aim to work together across the *[two]* tiers. This Charter is the result of discussions locally and across the *[principal authority]* to establish a new way of working and to confirm existing good practice. There are *[x]* parish and town councils in the *[principal authority]*, all playing a valuable role in local democracy and service provision.
2. The Councils (together with the *[County Council/District Council]*) jointly represent all levels of democratic local government, to whose principles they are both committed. They are both keen to see continued efforts made to improve our system of local democracy and to see greater public participation in and appreciation of this system.
3. The *[principal authority]* acknowledges and recognises that parish and town councils are the grass-roots level of local government. By working with them and the *[name of any Local Area Committees/Partnership groups]*, the principal council aims to act in partnership with local communities, while balancing the needs of the wider locality.
4. In their role as democratically accountable bodies, parish and town councils offer a means of shaping the decisions that affect their communities. They offer a means of decentralising the provision of certain services and of revitalising local communities. In turn, they recognise the strategic role of the principal council and the equitable distribution of services which they have to achieve.
5. This Charter reflects the increasing importance attached by Central Government to partnership working and the development of *QUALITY* status for parish and town councils. The first part of this Charter (Part 1) applies to all parish and town councils. The second part (Part 2) applies to *QUALITY* councils only. It will be formally reviewed after five years in operation.

#### **Part 1 All Parish and Town Councils**

##### **Sustainability**

6. The *[principal authority]* will work in partnership with parish and town councils to promote sustainable social, economic and environmental development in the area of *[principal authority]*.

### **Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships**

7. *[The principal authority and relevant local strategic partnership(s)]* will involve parish and town councils in the processes of preparing and implementing the community strategy to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area, and the role which local councils should take. *[The principal authority and local strategic partnership(s)]* will consult and involve local councils accordingly about the content and direction of the community strategy as it affects the local communities they represent.

### **Local Governance**

8. *[Paragraphs drafted locally on arrangements for engagement of parish and town councils in principal authority local governance arrangements and for liaison between them]*

*[possible examples:*

- Representatives of the *[local area parish and town council committee/association]* sit on the Council's *[name of locality]* area advisory committee.
  - *[ ]* will hold liaison meetings with parish and town councils.
  - The *[principal authority]* will maintain its close working relationship with the *[local area committee/association]* through an annual meeting between senior Council Members and the Committee.
  - Parish and town councils will invite appropriate members and officers of the *[principal authority]* to their meetings.]
9. The *[principal authority]* will help organise the administration of parish and town council elections. The respective authorities will work together to limit the costs of holding such elections.

### **Consultation**

10. The *[principal authority]* will aim to give parish and town councils the opportunity to comment before making a decision which affects the local community. In furtherance of this, the *[principal authority]* will circulate its public reports to committees and sub-committees to the Clerk to the local councils at the same time as they are sent to members of the Council so that the local council can respond directly or through the local district/county councillor(s).

*[List relevant Council Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee and other agendas and reports, indicating where available on web sites]*

Only in exceptional circumstances will appropriate consultation not take place, in which case a written explanation will be given on request.

11. To help achieve the objectives laid down in this Charter, liaison and consultation (both formal and informal) will be further developed at parish and town council level through regular meetings or specific service consultative groups and, at officer level, individually or through working parties and groups.
12. The *[principal authority]* will attend meetings with parish and town councils (or groups of local councils) at a mutually agreed time to discuss matters of common interest when requested to do so and given sufficient notice.
13. Parish and town councils will send copies of their agendas and papers to the *[principal authority]* and to local councillors. Officers and councillors of the *[principal authority]* will be given an opportunity to speak at local council meetings on matters of mutual interest if they request to do so.

#### **Information and Complaints**

14. When the *[principal authority]* consults local councils, it will provide them with sufficient information to enable them to reach an informed view on the matter, and give them adequate time to respond in accordance with the statutory requirements where applicable.
15. The *[principal authority]* will communicate with local councils and other communities by publishing *[name of principal authority newsletter]* regularly and distributing it free of charge to all households. It will also keep local councils informed by sending them as many copies of *[other relevant newsletters/local promotional material]* as they require.
16. The *[principal authority]* and parish and town councils will acknowledge letters, and provide substantive answers to letters which need a reply *[as follows/in accordance with the provisions of its Customer Charter]*. A full substantive reply or an acknowledgement will be sent by the *[principal authority]/local council* within *[seven]* days. If an acknowledgement is sent, the full substantive reply will be sent within *[28]* days.
17. If a local council is dissatisfied with the principal Council's actions, their response to a request for information, or their failure to consult, it may initiate that Council's formal complaints procedure.

#### **Standards Committee**

18. Both the *[principal authority]* and the parish and town councils have adopted codes of conduct, based on the national model code of conduct. The local councils will work with the *[principal authority's]* Standards Committee to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. The *[principal authority]* has consulted and agreed the following arrangements with the parish and town councils for the appointment of representative(s) to the Standards Committee (and sub-committees, if any) *[locally drafted arrangements]*.

### **Delegating Responsibility for Service Provision**

19. If a local council (or group of local councils) wishes to take on delegated responsibility for service delivery, the [*principal authority*] will actively encourage this, where it is best value (taking account of cost, quality, local preferences and practicability). Where it is not good value or practicable the [*principal authority*] will, in consultation with the local council, explore alternative solutions to encourage more local-level input into service delivery.

### **Financial arrangements**

20. The [*principal authority*] has set out its financial arrangements for parish and town councils at Appendix 1 in accordance with the principles and good practice guidance [*draft financial principles as set out in the Annex to Chapter 3*].
21. Where a parish or town council takes on the provision of certain services, the level of funding will be agreed by the principal council and the local council. A list of possible functions which will be considered for delegation by mutual consent is given at Appendix 2.

### **Local Community Life**

22. The [*principal authority*] will promote local community life through [*list schemes available: e.g. capital grants and loan schemes to village halls, community centres, and other similar organisations, and community discount scheme for the disposal of surplus property*].

### **Practical Support**

23. The [*principal authority*] will, where practical, offer local councils access to their own support services, to enable them to take advantage of facilities such as printing and purchasing, at a mutually agreed price. In particular, assistance will be offered in identifying and helping to meet the training needs of local councils.

## **Part 2 *QUALITY* Parish and Town Councils**

24. In addition to the above, the [*principal authority*] has agreed to work in the following ways with those local councils which are recognised as having attained the *QUALITY* standard.

### **Community Strategies**

25. Where a *QUALITY* council (or group of *QUALITY* councils) has prepared an area plan the principal authority will take account of its proposals and priorities in developing and implementing the community strategy as it affects the local areas concerned. The [*principal authority*] will strengthen links between these local councils and the local strategic partnership in order to improve delivery of local priorities.

[*further details depending on local arrangements for Local Strategic Partnerships and community strategy preparation*]

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### **Information and Access Points**

26. If a *QUALITY* local council (or group of *QUALITY* local councils) wishes to become a local information and/or access point for the [*principal authority*] services the [*principal authority*] will help it to do so. In particular it will:

- issue to the local council (and up-date as necessary) relevant written information and application forms on its services;
- give electronic access to similar information and forms (where it provides these electronically) provided the local council has appropriate technology;
- provide suitable briefing, training and support to staff of the parish or town council;
- [information on local arrangements – eg availability of principal authority staff to run regular surgeries in local council offices.]

### **Land Use and Development Planning**

27. Where a *QUALITY* local council (or group of *QUALITY* local councils) has prepared (in consultation with the [*principal authority*]) a village or town plan which includes proposals concerning land use and development planning issues (eg a village design statement) the [*principal authority*] will adopt this as Supplementary Planning Guidance (provided it meets the requirements set out in national planning guidance).

28. Where the village or town plan proposals imply some changes to the current development plan for the area, the [*principal authority*] will consider and discuss the proposals with the local council (or councils) as part of its next review of that plan.

[*information on local arrangements*]

### **Delegation of Functions and Service Provision**

29. The [*principal authority*] has agreed to offer a *QUALITY* local council (or group of councils) the opportunity to take on one or more of the services and functions listed in Appendix 3, or parts of them, in accordance with the practical and financial arrangements set out there.

30. As part of its Best Value arrangements, the [*principal authority*] will give *QUALITY* councils (or groups of *QUALITY* councils), who wish to, the opportunity to put forward proposals to take on aspects of the delivery, management and monitoring of services provided by the [*principal authority*].

[*information on local arrangements*]



## **Appendix 1**

*[Local financial arrangements for parish and town councils in accordance with paragraph 20 above]*

## **Appendix 2**

**Possible functions which might be considered for delegation to all parish and town councils by the principal authority by mutual consent**  
(in accordance with paragraph 21 above)

Control of Markets

Street Cleaning

Maintenance of Highway Verges, footways and footpaths

Litter Collection and Litter Control Measures

Street Lighting (other than principal routes)

Recycling provisions

Street Naming

Parking restrictions (and related matters)

Issue of bus and rail passes

Road Safety Measures

Noise and Nuisance Abatement

Tree Preservation Orders

Some aspects of Development Control

Some aspects of the management of Libraries and Museums

Some aspects of Leisure and Tourism provision (eg. bowling greens, playing fields, issue of Leisure permits)

Public conveniences

Allotments

**[Note: this list is illustrative not exhaustive]** This list is intended only as a summary of the principal functions of parish and town councils. It is not intended to be a definitive list of such functions.]

## **Appendix 3**

*[Locally drafted arrangements for delegation of functions and service provision to QUALITY parish and town councils in accordance with paragraph 29 above]*

