



The 21st Century Parish and Town Councillor and Clerk

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About the research

This research highlights the unique and essential role played by parish and town councillors and clerks. These are individuals who are making a difference for their communities despite an extremely challenging environment and a period of rapid local government change. The work forms part of the wider 21st Century Public Service research portfolio and complements recent reports into the 21st Century Public Servant and the 21st Century Councillor.¹ The aim is to look the work of parish and town councillors and clerks through a 21st Century Public Servant lens, focussing in on the positive and creative ways in which they are having an impact at this most local of levels.

The research was carried out by a team of researchers from the University of Birmingham. Alongside a review of relevant academic and policy literature, data was collected through two interactive online sessions – one for councillors and one for clerks – and a subsequent roundtable of subject experts. Participants for the two sessions and for the roundtable were identified by our project partners: the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO). In total 164 participants contributed to the research including 145 at the two online sessions and 19 at the roundtable. Ethical approval was given by the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Committee. Participant contributions have been anonymised.

We are grateful for all the participants who gave their time to speak with us and to NALC, SLCC, ADSO and the University of Birmingham for supporting and funding the research.

More information and resources are available on our website.²

Executive summary

Parish and town councillors and clerks play a unique and essential role in local democracy in the UK.³ Councillors are the elected members who sit on parish and town councils. Clerks are the appointed officials who support the councillors.

The conditions in which councillors and clerks are operating are becoming more challenging, and a period of rapid local government change in many areas means new pressures and uncertainties. It is essential for local democracy that councillors and clerks are able to survive and thrive in these challenging times. But what does this mean in practice and what might principal councils do to support parish and town councillors and clerks in their role?

In this report we look at the changing roles of parish and town councillors and clerks through a 21st Century Public Servant lens. We set out the challenges they face and highlight the ways of working that they have begun to develop in response. These roles place them firmly in the world of 21st Century Public Service, a world in which dedicated individuals navigate increasingly complex systems through a carefully curated network of relationships.⁴

Challenges for councillors and clerks

The 21st Century Councillor research (published in 2016 and refreshed in 2025) was focused on councillors working in principal councils.⁵ It described how what it meant to be a councillor was changing in response to the context in which they were operating. That

research identified a range of contextual challenges which were reshaping local government. Many of these challenges are the same for parish and town councillors and clerks, including perma-austerity, changing citizen expectations, new technologies, different scales of working, the changing boundaries and organisation of public services at local level, incivility in public life, the rising profile of equality, diversity and inclusion, and remote and hybrid working.

¹ <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

² <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/the-21st-century-parish-and-town-councillor-and-clerk/>

³ The research has focussed on England, but has included views from Wales and, where relevant, references apply to community councils in Wales.

⁴ <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

⁵ <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/21st-century-councillor/>

During the online interactive sessions held as part of this parish and town councillor and clerk research, we heard how the challenges experienced were both similar and distinctive to those experienced by the councillors and officers of principal councils. Crucially, the diversity of the parish and town sector, particularly in terms of council size, can mean a wide range of experiences of how different challenges are experienced.

The key challenges that have an impact on the way in which parish and town councillors and clerks need to work include:

- **Principal councils withdrawing services** - austerity across local government has created service gaps in many areas that directly affect the work of parish and town councils
- **Complexity of place** - different structures for delivering different services make partnership working challenging. The current phase of local government reorganisation in many areas is adding to this complexity.
- **Communities in distress** - parish and town councillors and clerks are at the frontline of dealing with the increasing stress facing the communities that they serve.
- **Behavioural issues** - bullying or disrespect is a challenge for many parish and town councillors and clerks, affecting their ability to make a difference.⁶
- **Councillor engagement** - many councillor positions are hard to fill, and some councillors are elected unopposed or co-opted. Once elected, some councillors contribute little to the work of their town or parish council.
- **Clerk isolation** - the small size of many parish councils can leave clerks feeling isolated or even vulnerable.

Developing roles for councillors and clerks

Alongside their formal responsibilities to represent their communities and to manage services and amenities, parish and town councillors and clerks are working in new ways in order to survive and thrive. In this report we identify three developing roles for parish and town councillors and clerks. These resonate with the themes we used in our 21st Century Public Servant and Councillor reports.⁷ The three developing roles for parish and town councillors are:

Connectors - working in and with complexity

As connectors, councillors and clerks help to coordinate the complexity of place that exists around every parish and town. They have a credibility that comes from a combination of their formal status and their soft skills. Through formal liaison structures, joint projects and careful relationship building, they bring together different layers of government as well as different services and voluntary organisations.

Communicators - developing and valuing new ways of working

As communicators, councillors and clerks can offer influence in their communities and provide residents with vital information. Using their extensive knowledge, they use a broad range of communication channels and make use of new technology. Ultimately, however, it is human connection, at the very local level, that is central to their effective communication.

Catalysts - helping others to thrive in this new environment

As catalysts, councillors and clerks can 'make a big difference in a small way' (as one participant in the online session put it). This is increasingly important as councils seek to be more 'pre-emptive' and deal with new types of social issues. Often this means facilitating community engagement and events that have wider social benefits or finding interventions that can spark wider positive reactions.

⁶ A survey of parish, town and community clerks as part of a report by the Society of Local Council Clerks and De Montfort University, published in 2023, found that over half of local councils had experienced behavioural issues from councillors, such as bullying and disrespect towards other councillors or clerks. For more details see: <https://www.slcc.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SLCC-Future-Report-2022.pdf>

⁷ You can read more about these roles at: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

Introduction

Parish and town councillors and clerks play a unique and essential role in local democracy in the UK and these roles are changing. Whilst the conditions in which councillors and clerks are operating are becoming more challenging, so a period of rapid local government change in many areas means new pressures and uncertainties. Against this backdrop, how are councillors and clerks coping? How are their roles changing? How are they able to make a difference? These are the questions we consider in this report. It is not possible to answer these questions, however, without first understanding the distinctive nature of this most local level of democracy.

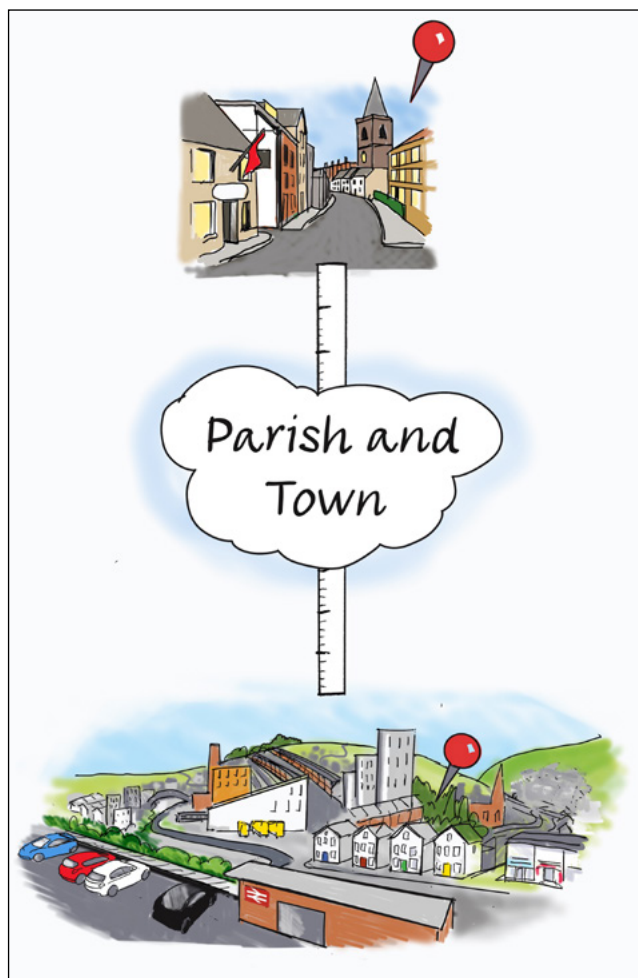
A diverse sector

There are around 10,000 parish and town councils in England of which over 300 have been created in the last two decades.⁸ There is a huge diversity - from large town councils covering over 100,000 residents to very small parishes covering less than 50. Many areas have no town or parish councils: roughly 40% of the English population is covered although this represents around 90% of the land area.

Parish and town councils sometimes have a low public profile and caricatures can dominate in the popular imagination. Unlike principal councils, the majority are not run on party lines. Whilst around 30% of councillors are elected via a competitive election, the majority are elected unopposed or co-opted onto the council.⁹ Some councillors also sit on principal councils (often known as 'double hatters', or even 'triple hatters' in existing two-tier areas). Councillors in this sector do not generally receive any form of allowance. Some councillors see themselves primarily as volunteers. Around two thirds of clerks work part-time with a quarter working for more than one council.¹⁰

The power to make a difference

Parish and town councils are well placed to make a difference. The Localism Act (2011) gave new planning and community powers to parish and town councils, and 'general competence' powers to some. However, a report by the Society of Local Council Clerks and De Montfort University found few eligible councils had used these powers.¹¹ Whilst parish and town councils do not benefit from direct central government grants, they are able to raise funding through a precept as well as through charging and fees and through schemes such as the Community Ownership Fund and Levelling



Up via principal councils. As Democracy Club argue: 'their powers and responsibilities can be substantial, ranging from allotments to water supply, and including touchstone issues such as litter bins, footpaths, and cemeteries'.¹²

⁸ There are over 700 community councils in Wales that have a similar role to English parish and town councils (if you want to know more about community councils in Wales see Welsh Parliament (2025) Role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector. Community councils in Scotland perform an advisory role and do not have elected members. There is no equivalent in Northern Ireland.

⁹ <https://democracyclub.org.uk/blog/2021/03/30/parish-councils-on-whocanivotefor/>

¹⁰ <https://www.slcc.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SLCC-Future-Report-2022.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.slcc.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SLCC-Future-Report-2022.pdf>

¹² <https://democracyclub.org.uk/blog/2021/03/30/parish-councils-on-whocanivotefor/>

A changing context

Parish and town councillors and clerks have been at the forefront of the changing context in which public services have been operating, providing emergency response both for the pandemic and for climate related incidents such as floods, storms and power cuts.¹³ Key shifts which affect the ways in which our communities live together, including the rising profile of equality, diversity and inclusion movements and global conflicts, impact on how councillors operate and create relationships with residents. Financial austerity is a permanent fixture, experienced by residents through the cost-of-living crisis, and by councillors as a constant need to prioritise scarce resources against ever increasing demands.

The types of issues that councillors and clerks are dealing with have also been changing. One participant pointed to the 'pre-emptive' nature of much of their work such as in relation to youth services and anti-social behaviour, or the mental health benefits of allotments. Another highlighted that 'there has been exponential growth into areas which historically we would never have touched, you know, sexual health for teenagers.'

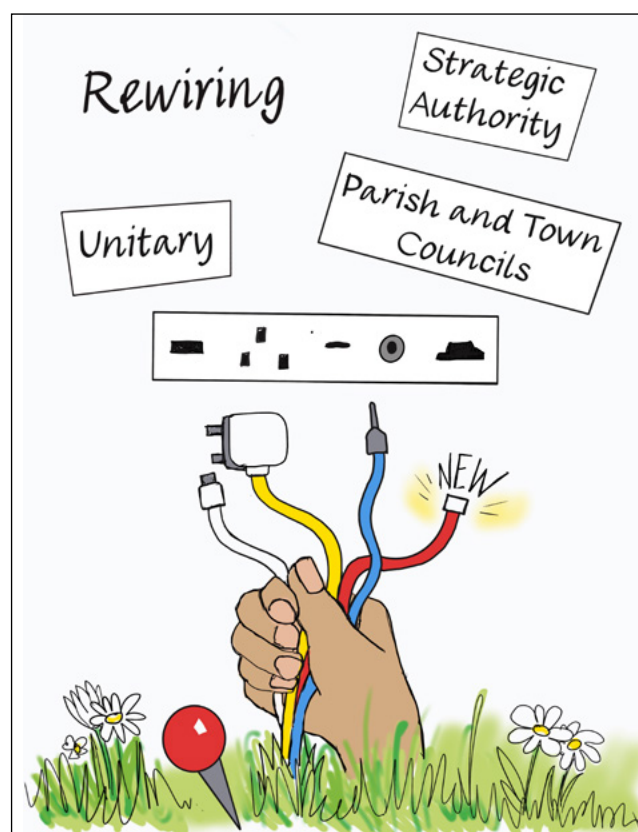
The devolution agenda

The current Labour Government has introduced a process for further devolution of powers and funding to strategic authorities at a sub-regional level, and a restructuring of councils across England, leading to the creation of single councils ('unitarisation') in areas which currently have two tier arrangements (i.e. the county and district model). This local government reorganisation (sometimes referred to as LGR), builds on previous rounds of reorganisations, and will have significant implications for the ways in which councillors in some areas operate and engage with residents.

In the English Devolution White Paper (2024),¹⁴ the government said that it would 'rewire the relationship between parish and town councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice'.¹⁵ Principal councils are required to establish effective structures for neighbourhood governance, such as neighbourhood boards. For the first wave of new unitary councils, successful bids submitted by principal councils show a recognition of the important role of parish and town councils. This includes a willingness to

involve them and, in some cases, proposals to create new engagement structures with parish and town councils alongside other partners. With districts being abolished, 'Parish and town councils have the potential to be representative bridges between "local" level of community and "meso" government layers, including the mayoral strategic authorities'.¹⁶

The changes associated with local government reorganisation are not new for this sector. Participants in the research noted that many parish and town councillors and clerks have navigated similar processes in the past. As one participant put it, in previous rounds of reorganisation; 'they just got on with it, you know, and just stepped up and worked their way through that complexity'. At the same time, there is a recognition that reorganisation has had benefits. As one participant noted: 'The experience that we've had across the country where LGR's happened is that there's been a greater clarity and distinction between our tier and the principal council tier. [That] has probably made life a bit easier in terms of having a relationship with the principal council as well.'



¹³ <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/resource/new-report-finds-parish-and-town-councils-are-the-unsung-heroes-of-emergency-responses.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

¹⁶ [the-future-of-local-democracy-burnett-et-al-2025.pdf](#)

Councillors and clerks – working as a team

In this report we are consciously presenting parish and town councillors and clerks as a team. We had feedback during the research that it was important to reflect them working together, and whilst the roles are distinct, we believe that the same themes apply, albeit in different ways. As one participant said: 'Of course, for example, communication by clerks and by councillors will look different and have different aims and methods, but by having them under the same themes highlights clerks and councillors as a team/whole that will approach those themes from different, but hopefully complementary, perspectives'.

At the same time, we recognise that this relationship is often far from perfect and that there can be tensions. So, for example, some councillors said that too much of the precept is spent on staffing (i.e. clerks), and some clerks said councillors don't understand their role. Nonetheless, to thrive as a 21st Century parish and town councillor or clerk depends upon working well together.

Challenges for councillors and clerks

The 21st Century Councillor report described how what it meant to be a councillor was changing in response to the context in which they were operating and identified a range of contextual challenges which were reshaping local government.¹⁷ Many of these challenges also affect parish and town councillors and clerks, including perma-austerity in the public sector, changing citizen expectations, new technologies, different scales of working, the changing boundaries and organisation of public services at local level, incivility in public life, intimidation of public officials by the public, the rising profile of equality, diversity and inclusion, and remote and hybrid working.

From the online interactive sessions held as part of this research, we heard how the challenges experienced by parish and town councillors and clerks are both similar and distinctive to those experienced by the councillors and officers of principal councils. Crucially, the diversity of this sector, particularly in terms of council size, but also in terms of councillor numbers, precept level and population covered, can mean a wide range of experiences of how different challenges are approached.

The key challenges that have an impact on the way in which councillors and clerks need to work include:

Principal councils withdrawing services

Austerity remains the most pressing challenge for public services. The subsequent decade has seen a steep reduction in the budgets of principal councils. Some of these have struggled to meet even statutory requirements. For the first time in twenty years, some local authorities have issued Section 114 notices –

indicating severe financial crisis – with other councils likely to follow. This requires local authorities to pare back to basic services and may necessitate the closure of amenities such as libraries and leisure centres.¹⁸

Parish and town councils are not dependent on central government for funding and raise their own funds, including through a precept (which has no cap). Nevertheless, austerity has an impact on parish and town councillors and clerks. Many principal council

¹⁷ <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/21st-century-councillor/>

¹⁸ Hastings A, Bailey N, Gannon M, et al. (2015) Coping with the cuts? The management of the worst financial settlement in living memory. *Local Government Studies* 41(4): 601–621.

services have been disappearing, with parish and town councils often being asked to pick up the slack. In some cases, this includes taking over services, such as street cleaning, libraries, tourist information centres and recreation grounds.¹⁹

At the same time, some participants report that people are turning more to their parish and town councils because principal councils are hard to contact through off-line channels. According to one: 'So we are picking up essentially the communication failures of the principal councils because they've taken out the human element. Not everybody wants to do things online...We sort of end up being piggy in the middle, doing their job as well as our job.'

Complexity of place

Local government is a complex institutional patchwork which varies from place to place. The current local government reorganisation aims to bring in unitary councils and strategic authorities in areas that don't currently have this, and to establish effective structures for neighbourhood governance. In some areas new parish and town councils are being created and gaining some of the roles previously undertaken by districts. In other areas, there is uncertainty what the new landscape will look like until central government decides on how counties will be divided up. Participants indicated that parish and town councils have gone through similar upheavals in the past and argue that they can 'rise up and fill that void', even where principal councils have not 'reached down'.

Communities are in distress

Parish and town councillors and clerks are at the front line of dealing with the increasing stresses experienced by communities that they serve. Welfare cuts and reductions in services have contributed to an intensification of poverty and destitution, and worsening inequalities in health and wellbeing.²⁰ These effects, which have impacted disproportionately in poorer areas of the country, were further intensified by the pandemic from 2020 and the cost-of-living crisis from 2022 onwards. Climate change and extreme weather are also creating new risks for communities. As one participant said: 'Our office is regularly visited by residents in crisis - homeless, no money for food. They know where we are and know that we will do our best to help'.

Behavioural issues

- bullying or disrespect is a challenge for many parish and town councillors and clerks, often affecting their ability to make a difference. The report by the Society of Local Council Clerks and De Montfort University found that:

“ ‘In the last four years, over half of local councils had experienced behavioural issues from councillors, such as bullying and disrespect towards other councillors or clerks. 11% of local councils had experienced at least one incident so serious that it prevented the council or its officers from carrying out some or all of their functions.’ ²¹

Similarly, in the online session we ran with councillors, many had examples of difficult behaviour from other councillors and a frustration that they did not have effective mechanisms to challenge and deal with this behaviour.

Councillor engagement

- many councillor positions are hard to fill, and some councillors are elected unopposed or co-opted (i.e. formally appointed when elections do not take place). Once in post, some councillors contribute little to the work of their town or parish council.

Clerk isolation

- many clerks work part-time and may work across several councils. The small size of many parish councils, in particular, can leave clerks feeling isolated or even vulnerable, lacking a community of colleagues and without the governance/Human Resource support of a larger organisation.

¹⁹ <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/resource/nalc-publishes-new-devolution-case-studies-resource-for-parish-and-town-councils.html>

²⁰ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/income-savings-and-debt/the-cost-of-the-cuts-the-impact-on-local-government-and-poorer-communities>

²¹ <https://www.slcc.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SLCC-Future-Report-2022.pdf>

Developing roles for councillors and clerks

Alongside their formal responsibilities to represent their communities and to manage services and amenities, parish and town councillors and clerks are working in new ways in order to survive and thrive. These role changes are being felt keenly by some; participants in the research told us that they are becoming 'comfortable not being comfortable'.

To capture these changes, in this report we identify three developing roles for parish and town councillors and clerks. These roles resonate with the themes we used in the updated 21st Century Public Servant and Councillor reports.²² The three roles are:

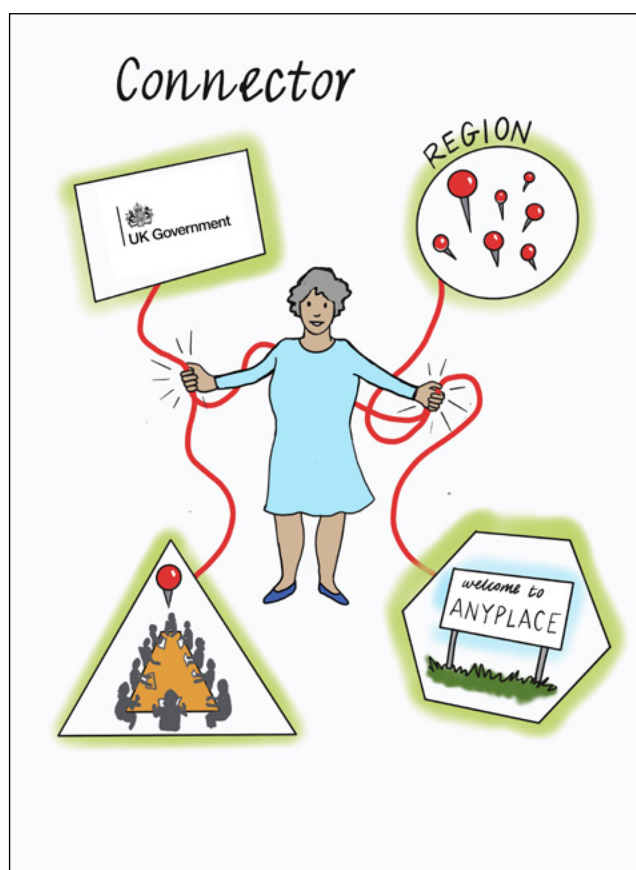
- Connectors - working in and with complexity
- Communicators - developing and valuing new ways of working
- Catalysts - helping others to thrive in this new environment

Connectors - working in and with complexity

As connectors, councillors and clerks help to coordinate the complexity of place that exists around every parish and town. They have a credibility that comes from a combination of their formal status and their soft skills. Through formal liaison structures, joint projects and careful relationship building, they bring together different layers of government as well as different services, agencies and voluntary organisations.

Whilst complexity of place means that parish and town councillors and clerks must already navigate many tiers of government and partnership arrangements, so local government reorganisation will create new institutions and new roles, varying by area, adding to system complexity. Variance across localities means there is no roadmap to help guide councillors and clerks. As one report put it: 'Neighbourhood governance is not a single model or organisational structure. Rather, it functions as an ecosystem of relationships, partnerships, community assets and democratic forums operating at different scales.'²³

At the same time, the government's focus on neighbourhood health²⁴ and neighbourhood governance²⁵ provides opportunities for parish and town councillors and clerks as they know the community, represent places that people identify with (rather than artificial new boundaries) and provide continuity through a time of change.



²² <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>

²³ <https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/communityandleisure/communities/our-community-powered-approach>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neighbourhood-health-framework/neighbourhood-health-framework>

²⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/devolution-and-lgr-hub/neighbourhood-governance-hub>

Hence 21st Century parish and town councillors and clerks have a role as connectors, playing an important role networking between different levels. They are already working with multiple partners such as police, health and volunteer groups and this will increase in the future. The importance of acting collaboratively was highlighted in the online sessions with one participant pointing to the difference made when 'interacting with other agencies, national highways for example, and understanding the effects on residents'.

Councillors and clerks will undertake this connector role in different ways. Councillors can ensure effective working with principal councils through formal liaison structures, joint planning or individual relationships with councillors and staff. We heard from participants how 'double hatters' (also representing principal councils), in particular, can help to 'leverage connections' between different tiers of local government and even Whitehall. Clerks will often be well connected to clerks in other parish and town councils (and may work for more than one council), and can use local, regional and national networks to share insights and learning.

Communicators - developing and valuing new ways of working

As communicators, councillors and clerks can offer influence in their communities and provide residents with vital information. Drawing on their extensive knowledge, they use a broad range of communication channels and make use of new technology. Ultimately, however, it is human connection, at the very local level, that is central to their effective communication.

Both councillors and clerks see being knowledgeable as one of the most important qualities in their work and this provides a foundation for being an effective communicator. Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be a route to support councillors and clerks in rapid data gathering and analysis, although with recognition of the ethical and accuracy challenges of AI platforms.

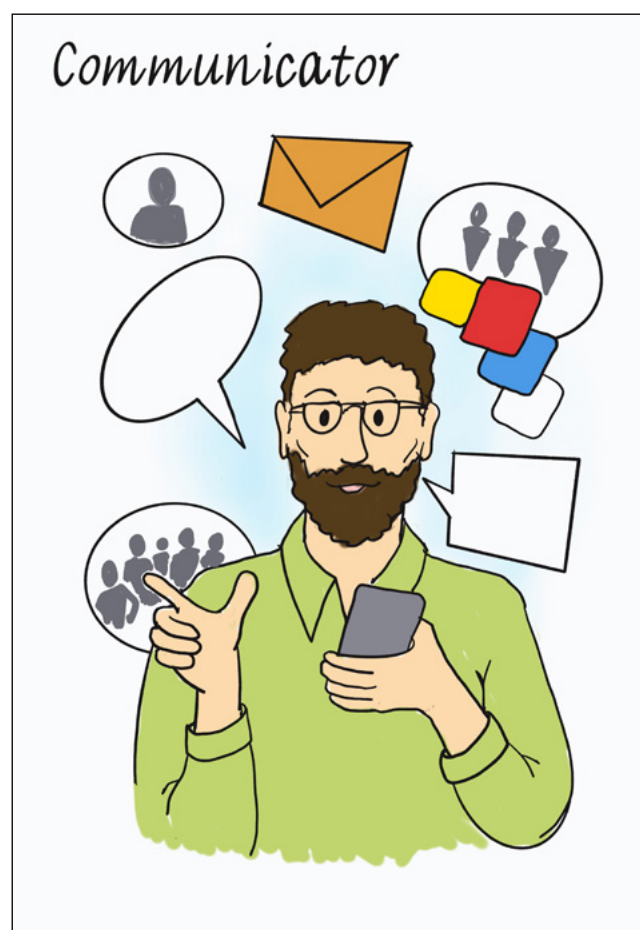
Communication at the level of the parish and town can be personal and tailored in way that is more of a challenge for larger public bodies. Sometimes communication involves explaining the work of the council and the level of the precept that is being collected from the public. Even where finance is an issue, communication can make a difference - 'It is all we can afford, as it's free and human' as one participant in the online sessions put it.

New communication technologies are increasingly being used to promote local campaigns and connect with residents. Whilst 'actually getting to residents is really quite difficult for us', as one participant put it, councillors and clerks are using a diverse range of communication techniques to engage with residents. One participant explained how they used Youtube in a campaign to encourage local businesses to be more autism friendly:

“We didn't have to go through the efforts of working with a principal [council]... We've got general power of competence, which meant that we could spend the money and we ended up with a situation which was a nice, happy, positive story that the town council did. Everybody that took part felt good about it - if we just produced a paper saying, read this, nobody would have looked at it, but they were able to watch our nice, friendly film, filmed in the town.’

In another example a council used a petition system to generate support for local projects and keep in touch with residents: 'So we've had...7,500 people already signed a petition, so we could email them all last night and give an update and ask for help.'

Councillors and clerks will undertake this communicator role in different ways. Councillors may be highly visible in communities, understanding local issues and supporting local residents. Clerks can use their networks to understand the potential of new technologies to expand the reach of parish and town councils - for example through using AI to build analytical capacity and data insights.



Catalysts - helping others to thrive in this new environment

As catalysts, councillors and clerks can 'make a big difference in a small way', as one of the participants put it. This is increasingly important as councils seek to be more 'pre-emptive' and deal with new types of social issue. Often this means facilitating community engagement and events that have wider social benefits or finding interventions that can spark wider positive reactions.

From the perspective of councillors and clerks, one of the most important ways they make a difference is through community engagement and events. Whilst activity often focusses on small improvements such as litter picks or painting benches, the result is often a much greater benefit in terms of community connection and wellbeing. In one example a crowdfunding platform was used to pull together funding to protect a local green space:

“ ‘Last year we wanted to buy a piece of land, 14 acres of wood ... We had 100 days to raise the money, 200,000 pounds. And we said to the public we would match pound for pound. We raised £100,000 from people, and that was via video link.’

One town councillor described to us how 'we have seen a real need to support local people with health and wellbeing issues. We have set up a youth club, run a holiday lunch club and organised day trips for older residents. Without the town council, none of these would exist'.

Another described this small intervention that had a wider positive impact:

“ ‘An example I often think back to is a clerk I met who told me in her very small rural council there was a park that everyone loved and many residents took their daily walks there - but it was also very hilly and people would often feel sad when they got to an age (or due to other health issues) and weren't able to walk the loop of the park anymore. So, the council put a bench at the top of the biggest hill - and it meant that people were able to keep using the park for much longer (impacting their mental and physical health so much). It's such a small thing in the grand scheme of things but it was their local knowledge that meant they knew a bench in that spot would make a significant impact for a lot of local people.’

These examples of 'making a big difference in a small way', alongside other more significant projects such as initiatives to support teenage sexual health, for example, have become more important as communities have come under increased pressure from cost-of-living challenges and wider threats to wellbeing.

Indeed, councillors and clerks have noticed that these wellbeing challenges have become a greater part of their work over recent years with a need to focus on preventative work taking more time and attention. This may be in part due to funding cuts by principal councils. Establishing partnerships with voluntary organisations such as local charities, including funding and other support, has been another aspect of the way that parish and town councils have responded to this.

Councillors and clerks will undertake this catalyst role in different ways. Councillors bring the vision and commitment to new initiatives with democratic accountability to local residents. Clerks can support effective governance of new services and partnerships, ensuring that councils appropriately discharge new powers.



Messages for principal councils

To undertake the three roles as effectively as possible, councillors and clerks recognise that they need to work well with principal councils, other services and organisations.

As part of this research, we asked councillors and clerks what their messages for principal councils might be.

Building on what we heard, we hope that any principal councils reading this research will:

1. Learn from the many examples of principal councils working well with parish and town councils. We can see from recent local government reorganisation bids, for example, an expressed willingness to engage with the most local level of democracy in creative ways. The new appetite for partnering with parish and town councils needs to be sustained as new unitary councils are established – learning from areas which already have effective models of unitarisation.
2. Consider the benefits of working with parish and town councils as partners. There are many examples of services being provided at a hyper-local level that not only replace those that principal councils can no longer deliver, but also those that complement and add value to principal council services. Strategic conversations around service delivery can be of real benefit to citizens, recognising the contribution that parish and town councils can make to individual and community wellbeing. Capacity building in this tier might be considered as a way to 'invest to save'.
3. See personal development and support for parish and town councillors and clerks as a shared endeavour. Investing in current and future councillors and clerks is something that will also be of benefit to principal councils and their residents, ensuring that this is an effective 'ecosystem' of local democracy.²⁶

²⁶ <https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/communityandleisure/communities/our-community-powered-approach>

Conclusion and next steps

It has been a turbulent decade for public services, and parish and town councillors and clerks have been exposed to a range of challenges as they support their communities. Despite these pressures, councillors and clerks in many areas still manage to survive and thrive.

We are full of admiration and appreciation for the work that councillors and clerks do, often for little reward. As one participant in the online sessions said; 'we became parish/town councillors because we care about our community and want to make a difference'. We hope that this report will bring more attention to this vital work. We hope also that councillors and clerks will get the support they need and deserve as they struggle in the face of challenges and change, often having to work with outdated legislation and rules.

Councillors and clerks help to provide vital services, but their contribution is much wider than a narrow definition of their role might suggest. They are torchbearers for the places they represent, keeping civic tradition and local identity alive in the face of major change.

We have highlighted the scope for parish and town councillors and clerks to be connectors, communicators and catalysts in their communities. As connectors, they bring the right people together. As communicators, they marshal the required knowledge and engage in effective two-way communication with key stakeholders and communities. As catalysts, they stimulate positive change, making a difference for residents and the environment. Councillors and clerks will perform these roles in different ways, but it is through working effectively together that they can make the strongest contribution.

Using this report

If you are a councillor or clerk, we hope that this report will be useful for thinking about your approach to your work. This report, and its three roles, is not intended to provide a blueprint – every councillor and clerk is different after all. It aims to stimulate reflection and provide prompts for conversations with colleagues, coaches or mentors.

For example, as part of a coaching conversation, you could ask:

- Which of these three roles is most important to your work?
- Which ones are you good at already?
- Which ones do you need support to improve?
- How might you get that support (within your council or externally)?

For councils, we hope that this report can usefully contribute to support for parish and town councillor and clerk development. The importance of investing in self-development was raised by participants in the research, and we think this comment from one of the sessions captures an important part of this:

“ I like the conversation about change and growth and there is a skill there somewhere about being able to embrace change and imagine doing something you’ve never done before... The mindset and skills to move at that pace yet still also be comfortable operating in very small organisations, as most still are, is quite unique. ”

To facilitate this development, the research might be used:

- To help structure programmes
- As the focus for individual sessions, for example induction
- To inform questions for councillor and clerk development research and surveys

Further reading

In addition to the reports referenced in the footnotes to this report, you might want to follow up on the reports and slidepacks for the 21st Century Public Servants projects, including the 21st Century Councillor: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>

You might also find the LGA's Local Leadership Framework a useful guide to councillor development. This framework describes a series of skill sets that are intended to complement the 21st Century Councillor research: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-leadership-framework-councillors>