



# a broader parish

working together,  
improving rural communities

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## Executive Summary

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Community governance is high on the political agenda. And parish councils are in the spotlight. As the government considers how decisions can be made at a community level it is important to examine and learn from existing structures and relationships.

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) has long had a role in bridging the gap between citizens, communities and government. In addition to providing services, advice and information to communities, voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) also enable the voice of particular communities to be heard and influence decision making.

The report *A Broader Parish* examines the relationships between parish councils, VCOs and the individuals involved in their activities. The research focussed on three projects in rural Devon and highlighted the particular dynamics of the relationships between parish councils and other community groups in the area. The report demonstrates that:

- Most people are attracted to short-term action based roles rather than sustained participation in neighbourhood governance structures.
- Both parish councils and VCOs contribute to community governance and at different times take on a community leadership role. There can often be a blurring of boundaries between their respective roles.
- The relationships between parish councils and VCOs vary over time as circumstances change. However they can have a lot to offer one another as partners especially when trying to influence other tiers of governance.
- By undertaking activities and also by advocating on behalf of their community, together parish councils and VCOs can improve the lives of residents.

## Case studies

The research focussed on projects in three parishes in rural Devon:

**Case study 1** looked at the parish planning process. It showed how the parish clerk and two parish councillors played a pivotal role in the process, encouraging a range of community consultation and participation initiatives. The case study highlighted how the parish council and VCOs had distinctive roles within the parish and a range of mutually beneficial informal links, which proved particularly useful for engaging people in the parish plan process.

**Case study 2** looked at how the community had responded to the closure of the village shop/post office and were proposing plans for the construction of a new facility. While the case study showed a supportive parish council, it also illustrated how difficult it was at times for the council to accommodate the views of the entire community. It revealed the pressures on the small but active shop/post office committee who struggled with the increasing ambivalence of the community towards the project and insufficient numbers of active volunteers.

**Case study 3** focused on a community group which was set up to retain the community centre. The case study looks at a parish where other pressing issues have dominated the agenda of both VCOs and the parish council and explores the difficulties this has caused the community centre support group. Differences in decision-making processes and ways of working have at times been challenging for both.

## Who gets involved and why

Our research identifies a number of factors that motivated people to participate. This included where they:

- had a specific skill to offer;
- had a personal interest in the issues involved;
- had a sense of duty to the community or loyalty to someone already involved; and
- saw the social benefits of involvement.

It was apparent that **it was easier to get people involved in one off or action orientated roles than it was to get them involved in more formal or procedural activities associated with governance.**

**Our case studies showed that many activities taking place in the parishes depend upon a limited number of key individuals.** Those active individuals were often involved in several activities. Multiple membership has both advantages and disadvantages. It promotes collaboration: indeed informal connections of any kind e.g. getting friends and family involved, were found to be common. However, the reliance on personal connections and key individuals can raise questions of sustainability, if the individuals move on then knowledge and links with other organisations can be lost.

**Cross membership between the sectors was also demonstrated.** Most of the parish councillors we interviewed were also routinely involved in voluntary and community groups. However, the reverse was not true, many of those solely involved in those VCOs would not consider becoming parish councillors.

The recruitment of participants based on social connections tends to engage those with high social and human capital and therefore continues to reproduce existing social structures. We know that in rural areas that this means volunteers are likely to be white and middle aged. Where a group is seeking to represent or serve an entire community, as a parish council arguably should be, the extent to which that group reflects the diversity of the community becomes more important for the group's own legitimacy and for the quality and fairness of the decisions it is able to make.

## Representation and leadership

**Most of the interviewees said that they thought that the role of parish councils was to represent the whole community and that community groups were more likely to represent particular issues or groups within the community. However, these roles are often blurred.** Some community groups have a whole community remit and in some circumstances the parish council will focus its activity on a particular part of the community. It is clear that these roles are fluid and change according to the situation.

Whilst sometimes similar, the respective roles of parish councils and VCOs do have differences. It is when the roles, positions and capacity are not clear that tensions can arise. Such a lack of clarity can also be confusing for the community. Also, where there are unrealistic expectations placed on parish councils and community groups there is the potential for local residents to feel disappointed and frustrated. Therefore it is important that parish councils and community groups are clear about their respective remits and responsibilities and are as transparent as possible.

**Parish councillors, because they are democratically elected, have a clear role as community leaders.** They have an underlying responsibility to the whole community even when this means they have to reconcile conflicting views. Parish councils often make great efforts to be impartial and weigh up all the evidence before taking action.

There is also potential for community groups to undertake community representation roles, particularly in their own areas of expertise. VCOs usually work from a single issue perspective and are able to be responsive and flexible.

**Some interviewees identified a role for parish councils as a “middle man” sitting between local residents and other tiers of government.** Such a position makes the parish council ideally placed to coordinate activity and undertake strategic activities such as parish planning.

## Working together and shaping local services

**Parish councils have a role to play in influencing other tiers of government on behalf of the community.** As the most local tier of elected local government, parish councils usually have formal relationships with the other tiers. This is strengthened by overlapping membership between the tiers. Recent LGIU research found that 26% of parish councillors are also serving as councillors in district, county or unitary authorities which, for some parish councils, provides a direct link into these authorities (although this can also raise potential conflicts of interest).

**VCOs also play an important part in influencing other tiers of government.** Individuals in VCOs have their own contacts in government bodies that relate to their specific interests. For example a group concerned with youth activities may have links with the youth services

part of the local authority. By collaborating on specific projects, parish councils and VCOs can provide a unified and hence stronger voice for the community.

**The Quality Parishes Scheme and parish planning provide opportunities for local communities to influence decisions.** The Quality Parishes Scheme is intended to improve the way parish councils serve their local communities. This includes improving communication with local residents and VCOs. Parish plans are developed in wide consultation with local residents and VCOs and provide important evidence for decision makers at all tiers of local government. Although they do not currently have any statutory standing they are powerful documents that the parish council and the VCS can use when seeking to influence the tiers of government that have far greater spending power including Local Strategic Partnerships.

The current political agenda emphasises partnerships and, at a local level, Local Strategic Partnerships. There is a clear need for parish councils and local VCOs to be involved in these partnerships. Their local knowledge and expertise is valuable to partners that work at a district, county or unitary level and they can help articulate the needs and opinions of the local community.

**Our case studies demonstrated that the community ownership and management of assets can be difficult.** It requires the commitment of individuals with sufficient time and skills to devote to the project. The community ownership of assets (such as a village hall or community centre) has, in some quarters, been promoted as a way for local communities to define and determine their own services. The two projects discussed in the case studies confirmed that there is enthusiasm in principle within communities for community run services but that it can be difficult to mobilise practical help to undertake the projects.

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Charity Registration: 225922

The paper used for this publication is sourced from sustainable forests.

October 2006

design: [wave.coop](http://wave.coop)

ISBN 0-7199-1690-9



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