

Thanet District Council Collaboration Scrutiny Review 06 March 2023

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

Thanet District has a population of about 140,600 and is served by Thanet District Council and ten Parish and Town Councils that include Acol, Birchington, Cliffsend, Manston, Minster, Monkton, St Nicholas-at-Wade with Sarre Parish Councils, Broadstairs, Ramsgate, Westgate-on-Sea Town Councils and the Margate Charter Trustees. Parish and Town Councils, being second tier level Local Authorities after the District Council, provide a number of services that they fund through precepts. Improved collaborative working between the District Council and the Parishes would enhance service delivery for Thanet residents.

The investigation by the collaboration working party took evidence from the District Council Leader, Cabinet Members and senior officers, Parish and Town Council Chairs and Clerks.

The Review Panel hopes that its recommendations will act as a useful catalyst to further and better engagement between Thanet District Council and Parish and Town Councils with the aim of ensuring good quality service for the local communities in Thanet. A digest of recommendations is set out below and the full conclusions included in the full report.

Digest of Recommendations:

1. Reconstitute the Parish Forum, meeting quarterly with a strictly controlled agenda. Its membership would be Parish & Town Council Chairs and Clerks, it would be chaired by the Leader of Thanet District Council, and other officers and members could attend by invitation;
2. Provide clarification on options for delegation of responsibilities from TDC to Parish and Town Councils, with a view to further developing these responsibilities over time;
3. Encourage a spirit of learning and sharing so Parish, Town and District Councils can learn from each other, and Councils can share their experiences of carrying out certain delegated functions;
4. Establish a dedicated officer role to act as the point of contact between Parishes and the District. Identify a Cabinet Member to support and monitor any transition of functions between TDC and Town/ Parish Councils;
5. Provide a regular circular for information to Parish & Town Councillors and Clerks, based on information in The Loop and the CEX's fortnightly mailing to TDC members;
6. Invite Parish/ Town Councillors to attend training provided for District Councillors as appropriate to help establish a shared understanding and approach on important issues. Invite Chairs and Clerks to Members' Briefings on matters of mutual interest;
7. Work with the Parishes to jointly develop a Parish Charter, which would detail a framework for collaborative working between the District Council and Parish and Town Councils. The Charter would also explain how Parishes could take on additional responsibilities from the District Council and highlight the need for mutual respect between the two tiers;

8. Establish good communication between the District and Town/ Parish Councils, so that Town & Parish Councils are routinely kept informed of, and where appropriate consulted on, District Council plans affecting their areas - for example, planned Asset Disposals (which will require a review of the current Asset Management Policy), events plans, funding bids and regeneration proposals;
9. Share an up to date TDC officer and Member structure chart with contact details that can be shared with Parish and Town Councils.

Foreword



I wish to thank my small group of fellow Councillors who were members of the TDC & Parish/Town Councils Collaboration Working Party, Parish & Town Council representatives, Cabinet Members and senior officers who attended the various sessions where the working party was taking evidence that was then used to come up with this report.

It's been a really interesting exercise for us as Councillors to get an insight into what Parish and District Councillors as well as staff for the lower tier Councils think about how we can improve collaborative working between the District and Parishes. A number of ideas have been identified in this report, many of which were proposed by all parties, which if implemented will successfully lead to a more effective approach for collaborative working for the benefit of our residents around the District. I would also like to thank Thanet District Council officers for their input to support this review project and officers from Democratic Services for their help in putting this report together.

With the ever tightening of the budgets year on year we feel that if the recommendations can be implemented this will hopefully make a big difference to how services are delivered for our local communities.

Once the report is presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, Members will forward the report and its various recommendations to Cabinet for action in due course.

Cllr Alan Currie
Chairman TDC & Parish/Town Councils Collaboration Working Party

Members of the TDC & Parish/Town Councils Collaboration Working Party



Councillor Alan Currie (Chair)



Cllr Trish Austin



Cllr Phil Fellows



Cllr Ruth Bailey

Introduction

As part of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's scrutiny review topics, the Panel agreed to carry out a collaboration review. A working party comprising four Members from the Panel membership was established on 26 May 2022 to investigate and report on the potential for closer working between Thanet District Council and the Parish and Town Councils in order to improve services to Thanet residents and make recommendations for consideration by the Panel and subsequently Cabinet.

Original Scope and Methodology

The investigation was specifically asked to review how the Council could improve collaborative working between itself and Parish and Town Councils.

The investigation could only be successfully carried out by talking to Parish and Town Councils, District Council leadership and senior officers and making recommendations that the Panel concluded would improve collaborative working between the District and the Parishes.

The working party held three meetings in which they engaged Parish and Town Council Chairs and Clerks, TDC Cabinet Members and senior officers in discussion to get different views to the suggestions for collaborative working. These evidence gathering sessions were conducted as follows:

An in-person meeting with TDC Cabinet Members was held on 27 October 2022.

An online meeting was held with Parish and Town Council Chairs and Clerks on 03 November 2022

An online session was held with TDC senior officers on 09 November 2022.

Key Questions

The working party used a series of key questions to initiate discussions and gather feedback responses from the attendees at the review sessions. The questions included the following:

Questions for Parish and Town Council Chairs and Clerks:

- Which Parish or Town Council do you represent?
- What is your role at the Council?
- How long have you been involved with your local Council?
- How do you view the current working relationship between Thanet District Council and your Parish/Town Council?
- How does this current working relationship affect the way services are delivered in your area?
- Do you have any suggestions for how collaborative working between Thanet District Council and Parish/Town Councils could be improved; and if yes what are they?
- Does your local Council have capacity to take on additional roles on a long-term, sustained basis?
- If yes, what additional roles or responsibilities would you suggest?

- Is there anything else that you would like to add regarding the relationship between District and Parish Councils?

Questions for Cabinet Members:

- Which Cabinet Portfolio area(s) are you the lead Member?
- How do you view the current working relationship between Thanet District Council and Parish/Town Councils?
- How does this current working relationship affect the way services are delivered in the District?
- Do you have any suggestions for how collaborative working between Thanet District Council and Parish/Town Councils could be improved; and if yes what are they?
- From your experience working with Parishes, do you think they have the capacity to take on additional roles on a long-term, sustained basis?
- If yes, what additional roles or responsibilities would you suggest?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add regarding the relationship between District and Parish Councils?

Questions for TDC senior officers

- Which Council Department do you represent?
- What is your role at Thanet District Council?
- How do you view the current working relationship between Thanet District Council and Parish/Town Councils?
- How does this current working relationship affect the way services are delivered in the District?
- Do you have any suggestions for how collaborative working between Thanet District Council and Parish/Town Councils could be improved; and if yes what are they?
- From your experience working with Parishes, do you think they have the capacity to take on additional roles on a long-term, sustained basis?
- If yes, what additional roles or responsibilities would you suggest?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add regarding the relationship between District and Parish Councils?

Evidence heard by the Scrutiny Review

The working party heard evidence from witnesses through sessions held on the dates below. These sessions were a mixture of virtual and in person meetings:

- 27 October 2022 in-person meeting with the Leader and Cabinet Members
- 03 November 2022 virtual meeting with Parish and Town Council representatives
- 09 November 2022 virtual meeting with TDC senior officers

Evidence from TDC Cabinet members:

The working party met the Leader of Council and Cabinet Members at an in-person meeting to share views on how the Council could enhance closer working relations with Parish and Town Councils. Cabinet Members highlighted the following key points:

1. As the pressures on the District Council budget increase, TDC will almost certainly have to decide to let go of some non-statutory functions. This is where closer working with Parish and Town Councils could help by taking over some non-statutory functions and sharing such responsibilities as the management of toilets. These ways of working could enhance connectivity between the Parishes and District Council;
2. For example, Parishes could take over parking. Birchington Ground is now managed by the Parish Council, which has provided an opportunity for local participation. KCC could perhaps lead & manage discussions with Parish & Town Councils on car parks;
3. Parishes and the District Council could co-manage some functions – with, for example, the District Council providing backup on emergency matters;
4. Parish and Town Councils have more flexibility and fewer responsibilities than the District Council, so could potentially offer a better service on non-statutory functions, particularly if they were willing to raise their precepts to cover costs, which TDC cannot do.
5. There would be a need to agree on the mechanics for collaborative working that identified who was responsible for decision making and where the supervisory role would lie. For example, there could be a designated officer responsible for managing collaborative arrangements, which would reduce the time taken to resolve issues being raised by Parishes. A designated Cabinet member could supervise this;
6. Re-establishing the formal Parish Forum, meeting bi-monthly with new terms of reference, would be useful and would improve collaborative working. Attendees could be Parish Chairs and Clerks, TDC leader and appropriate Cabinet Members and senior TDC Officers. There should be a clear agenda and a strong Chair;
7. Once there was an agreement on how TDC and the Parishes would work collaboratively, a joint communications message to residents on the new way of working would be a good idea.

Evidence from Town and Parish Councils:

Discussions with Town and Parish Councils were an eye opener into different views and into new possibilities that could be considered in trying to improve the working relationship between the District and Parish and Town Councils. A number of views were conveyed through a virtual meeting and these are highlighted below as follows:

1. There was a foundation on which to build on a stronger and closer working relationship between the two tiers;
2. Parish Forum meetings used to be regularly held and were very useful;
3. Parish Forum and other meetings need to be planned in advance to enable maximum attendance. There was also a need for agendas for these meetings to be clear;

4. There should be a improved way of sharing information between Parishes and the District Council;
5. Currently there was a Thanet Area Committee that could be attended by a TDC officer to share information;
6. Parish and Town Councils would welcome additional responsibilities provided they came with additional funding;
7. In the past TDC has proposed passing on legal fees to Town & Parish Councils taking on responsibilities/ assets, which left lower tier Councils feeling they were being charged for being helpful. Any future such negotiations should embody full transparency on additional costs to Towns & Parishes;
8. It might be worth considering coming up with an agency agreement between Parishes and TDC over delegation of functions and resources to be given to Parishes;
9. There was a danger of residents feeling that there were being taxed twice; for the Council tax and the precepts;
10. Once an approach for collaborative working has been agreed, there would also be a need to agree on the delivery dates for the functions to be handed over to Parishes;.

Evidence from TDC senior officers:

1. During Covid, TDC hosted weekly meetings with Parishes (Parish Conference Calls) and officers produced a Google document that contained queries from Parish and Town Councils which officers would complete with responses to those queries. This worked well and established regular contact. Getting back to this way of working would benefit everyone: perhaps officers could identify the top ten transactions that take place between TDC & Parishes and develop notes to signpost Parishes & residents;
2. A regular news update based on The Loop could be produced for Parishes;
3. Having a dedicated officer as the contact between TDC and Parishes was in principle a good idea, but the big issue was resourcing such a role;
4. The Waste Team now holds weekly meetings with Town Councils; main areas of interest for these Councils are waste collection and open spaces, so Open Spaces and Enforcement teams are now also represented. This model could be extended to other services and involve Parish as well as Town Councils if they wish;
5. The annual residents' survey shows the services that TDC provides. Bin collections, street cleaning and keeping areas safe tend to be residents' primary concerns. If Towns and Parishes ask for extra precept to take on non-statutory functions from TDC, they could take the lead in explaining to residents what they are using that for;
6. It would be valuable to support newly elected Parish and Town Councillors as part of the induction process – eg by giving them access to TDC members' training;
7. There used to be PACT meetings with Parishes that TDC officers would attend: it would be worth considering reviving these.

Recommendations of the Scrutiny Review

The working party then met for a private session on 24 November 2022 to carefully consider and evaluate the evidence it had heard and create its recommendations. In the process of doing this it identified some areas where collaborative working could be started and other areas where existing informal arrangements could be made more formal.

The panel has created nine recommendations, some of which cut across themes. The panel has further collated these recommendations into three broad themes, these are:

Improving Communication: Restructure and formalise channels of communication

Recommendations 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9

Identifying Financial Resources for functions delegated to Parish and Town Councils: Identify resources for Parishes to take on additional functions and agree a memorandum of understanding between TDC and Parish and Town Councils

Recommendations 2, 4 and 7

Prioritising and resourcing: Establish formal arrangements for collaborative working

Recommendations 1, 2 and 7

Justification for the proposed recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

Reconstitute the Parish Forum, meeting quarterly with a strictly controlled agenda. Its membership would be Parish & Town Council Chairs and Clerks, it would be chaired by the Leader of TDC, and other officers and members could attend by invitation

We are recommending this because:

There is a prevailing view by all who gave evidence that these meetings had previously provided a very useful forum for officers to network, clarify issues and improve efficiency.

Recommendation 2:

Provide clarification on options for delegation of responsibilities from TDC to Parish and Town Councils, with a view to further developing these responsibilities over time

We are recommending this because:

All parties, be they officers, Councillors or members of the public, will benefit from knowing where the respective responsibilities lie at any time. Parish and Town Councils considering taking on extra functions need to have clarity on the financial implications for taking on those functions and how it would work in practice.

Recommendation 3:

Encourage a spirit of learning and sharing so Parish, Town and District Councils can learn from each other, and Councils can share their experiences of carrying out certain delegated functions

We are recommending this because:

Officers and Councillors will benefit from the experience of their colleagues and will learn from positive outcomes and any difficulties encountered.

Recommendation 4:

Establish a dedicated officer role to act as the point of contact between Parishes and the District. Identify a Cabinet Member to support and monitor any transition of functions between TDC and Town/ Parish Councils

We are recommending this because:

A dedicated, single point of contact would provide stability and continuity for all parties.

Recommendation 5:

Provide a regular circular for information to Parish & Town Councillors and Clerks, based on information in The Loop and the CEX's fortnightly mailing to TDC members

We are recommending this because:

This will keep Town and Parish Council officers and members up to date with regard to developments at TDC and will not be onerous to produce as the information is already circulated to TDC members.

Recommendation 6:

Invite Parish/ Town Councillors to attend training provided for District Councillors as appropriate to help establish a shared understanding and approach on important issues. Invite Chairs and Clerks to Members' Briefings on matters of mutual interest

We are recommending this because:

This will enable Town and Parish Council officers to align with Councillors in regard to developments at TDC and to work together on areas of mutual concern.

Recommendation 7:

Work with the Parishes to jointly develop a Parish Charter, which would detail a framework for collaborative working between the District Council and Parish & Town Councils. The Charter would also explain how Parishes could take on additional responsibilities from the District Council and would further develop mutual respect between the two tiers

We are recommending this because:

There is a perceived need for closer collaboration between the tiers, with a view to developing a shared vision and the potential devolution of responsibilities.

Recommendation 8:

Establish good communication between the District and Town/ Parish Councils, so that Town & Parish Councils are routinely kept informed of, and where appropriate consulted on, District Council plans affecting their areas - for example, planned Asset Disposals (which will require a review of the current Asset Management Policy), events plans, funding bids and regeneration proposals

We are recommending this because:

It is appropriate that Town and Parish Councils are kept apprised of, and consulted on, TDC's plans in respect of any asset disposals, major infrastructure plans and events within their respective areas.

Recommendation 9:

Share an up to date TDC officer and Member structure chart with contact details that can be shared with Parish and Town Councils

We are recommending this because:

This information is key to effective communication and would be equally useful to officers and Councillors.