



Clerks' Conference Outputs | 19 October '22

Clerks' Conference Session 1 & 2

- In this pack are the outputs from the table discussions held on 19 October 2022
- The objective of the exercises were to bring clerks up to speed on the idea to develop an agreement between Dorset Council and parishes /towns
- The other objectives centred on how to engage elected members and then gather inputs from the 160+ councils across the Dorset Council area
- The delegates were set some questions to help discussions and the answer to those questions are in this pack. At the start of each section there is a summary / highlights page.

Session 1 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

What benefits could be realised through a Working Together Agreement?



Keep it simple

Don't over complicate the document

Better understanding

Opportunity to understand each other's roles – mutual support, more cohesive, partnership working

Build into training

Opportunity to educate DC officers as well as new clerks and councillors

Better for residents

Make a big impact with professional slides, charts, infographics and more.

Accountability	Effective Communication and collaboration/partnership working	Mutual Respect
Shared Principles	Shared Goals	Understanding of each other's priorities
Positivity/optimism	Reduce duplication	Better identify responsibilities (e.g. verges, hedge cutting)
Improve communication and identifying contacts	Improved ownership	Better consistency of standards
Encourage election take up	Better creative opportunities	Better resident engagement/understanding
Better county level officer engagement	Need a booklet from DC to Clerks – easy reference guide o what you need to know	Saving both sides time and effort e.g. parishes help DC make better decisions e.g. policy changes e.g. provision of bins
Clarity to DC around what parish councils can do and can't do – need training/interaction between parishes and DC – what can we do for you, what can you do for us	Time saving	Better understanding of Town and Parish level of working and day to day issues
Accountability and process	Certainty	DC staff understand the role of town and parish councils and councillors
Understand the diversity of towns and parishes and reliance on volunteers	Clear lines of communication (Telephone number has helped)	Town and parish councillors understanding role of common departments within DC
Visual community changes e.g. minor highways work	Could encourage more town and parish councillors training, especially in Planning to understand how planning works and department structure	Improved understanding of respective organisations
Could save time on both sides	More cohesive	Better for residents
Clarity in responsibility and communication	Reduces duplication and ensures more consistency	Good way of gathering information, sharing experiences/mutual support
Document will give clarity from both sides – DC and town and parish councils – 'a commitment' to delivery together	If 'bought into' could be really good	Promotes more collaborative approach

Consistency – Large vs small councils have different needs	Consistency – some DC departments are better than others	Developing local network – clerks supporting one another – over and above DC charter
Organogram – key contacts to improve efficiency	Culture change – recognition town and parish councils are grass roots – ‘we are the face’ and we signpost	Clear expectations for DC and town and parish councils
Understanding of rules/responsibilities and contacts	‘one sector’ approach	Establish expectations – either party can hold the other to account
Provide certainty and consistency	Demonstrate commitment to working together	Provide a training tool to DC to spread ‘working together’ ethos
Ensure new recruits (both staff and members) understand relationships	Help smaller councils gain traction	

Session 1 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

What obstacles might we have to overcome? Page 1



It could sit on a shelf

Hard work developing an agreement fails to deliver necessary change

Capacity in smaller parishes

Smaller parishes need to be fully included and their operational capacity needs to be considered

DC dominate the output

Strike the right balance of inputs across DC, towns and smaller parishes

Communications and flow of information

Finding the best ways to land key messages and ability to follow up issues.

Clarity and agreement on roles and responsibilities	Contact points and internal communications culture	Who will own each responsibility?
Practical timescales for consultations	Would be welcomed – being listened to and valued	Feeling disillusioned – better relationships (all levels)
Charter good for town councils but not parishes	Towns and parishes are different – need different relationship – different messages	Just guiding principles needed for parishes?
What happens when DC don't help – rights of redress?	Lack of understanding among DC officers about role of parishes and how they work	'Working together' – too vague, hasn't worked pre 2019 – a much stronger alliance between unitary and parishes and towns
Non-central towns and parishes feeling excluded (Beaminster Town)	Contact methods and Dorset contact access difficult – councils to have access to Dorset central A-Z – via ROI Portal?	Not sure designating document as 'SLA' or equivalent would work
Knowing who can help in DC due to staff turnover/restructure	Lack of area geographic knowledge of DC staff so when issues reported officers don't know villages	Previous documents have been DC/DCC led
Reliance on online digital comms is isolating vulnerable elderly residents	Better website (languages)	Strategic level questions from town and parish councillors bouncing around, no clear response e.g. asset transfers
Asset management process clunky	Guiding Principles for all councils - a living document – keep simple – 1 page only	Politics/politics!
Lack of time for all involved	Relations with DC councillors	Getting parishioners to do direct to DC more rather an via the clerk
Capacity of parish council e.g. no. of clerks/staff in organisation. Too much information coming out of DC which is then hard to pass on capacity wise	Conflicting priorities/not enough money	How will it be used? Concern about being stuck on the shelf!!
Measurement and reporting?	Getting DC officers to take it seriously and use it	Issue of 'one size fits all'
Breaking down barriers – councillor buy in + resistance to change/cultural challenge step change/keep it simple/one page commitment similar to civility and respect pledge	Needs all officers to sign up	Differences between different towns and parishes

Politics!	'SILO' working at DC	Organisational culture shift
Scepticism – especially from members	Must not be a stick to beat people with	Consistency of approach, pre and post adoption
Potential resource issue for smaller councils	Continuity when change of clerks takes place	Make sure no patronising content – avoid 'telling' town and parish councils the basics

Session 1 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

From the sample document are there any omissions or items to be removed?



Possible omissions

Waste services, highways, street cleaning, climate, tourism, procurement

Ward member performance

Is there an opportunity to define and share best practice in terms of ward member liaison / reporting and case handling?

Issue resolution

How to escalate any future issues to get problems resolved

Make it shorter and simpler

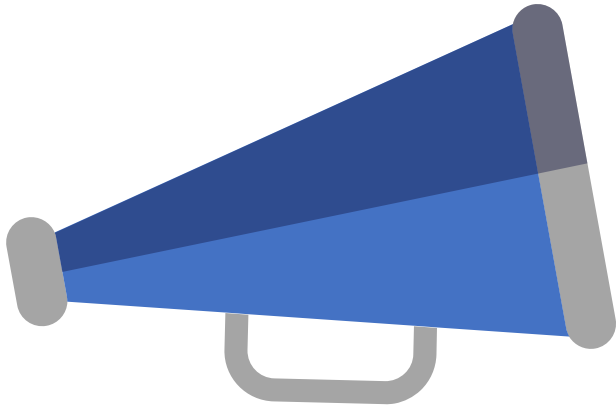
Don't over complicate the headline document – focus more on outcomes

Fewer chapters, with more covered in each	Chapter on tourism	Accountability and scrutiny
Need more time to analyse	Remove to dictatorial words – ‘must’ or ‘will’ – wrong tone	Need more time to go through – remove unneeded content. Just need principles
Guiding Principles for all councils - a living document – keep simple – 1 page only. Guiding principles - include a mission statement, reason for document, what this looks like, escalation process	Town councils could have separate additional charter with DC with more details	Need reason why for item included – what are the benefits
Need action if someone doesn’t do the agreed thing (follow the charter) – escalation process – champions to take up the cause	Role of ward councillor missing	Recognising parish councillors are volunteers and DC meetings are held during the day – councillors can attend if working and so it then falls on Clerk to attend – needs to be more flexible.
Asking ward councillors to provide a report if they cannot attend meetings/updates	Better IT solution for all levels to have a consistent way of meeting (e.g. since covid all meetings via Teams is not good)	Highways – is the preferred model for all departments
Environmental Health – bonfires/noise pollution/pest pollution/air quality – more understanding and advice (possible webinars for info)	Introduce town and parish sector to DC staff inductions. This would assist us greatly and hopefully avoid issues with lack of understanding of the role of towns and parish councils	Service provision – be clear on what this covers
Question? – will everyone have to sign up for it and what does DC want from the Clerk?	1 page SLC- on top/front page of charter	Missing chapter – Highways at the forefront of resident enquiries
Missing chapter – Waste services at the forefront of resident enquiries	More collaboration/sharing of information with communications team – joined up engagement	Missing chapter – street cleaning including dog warden
Missing chapter – Climate change and raising the bar	Consider a shorter, simpler document	Principles rather than detailed for each service
Member involvement	Put communities first	Include implications for towns and parish councils in reports

Highways	Property services	Climate – cross cutting issue
Joint procurement – making the most of DC’s purchasing power/use of Framework Agreements	Guide to how to access	Share best practice

Session 1 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

Any thoughts on the draft timeline?



Elections May 2024

Need to be mindful this could be an issue

Would like regular updates

Once underway important to keep everyone informed

Timescale could be too tight

Might be difficult to get this agreed ahead of May 2024 elections

Importance of annual review

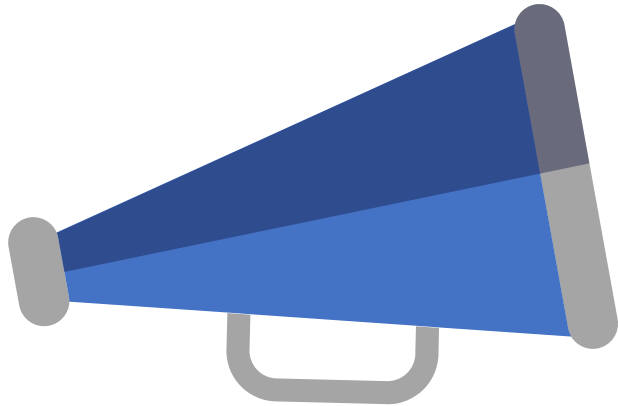
Need to keep it live and relevant

Any thoughts on the draft timeline?

Complete pre-elections and then review	Would like monthly updates on progress etc	Need to do before elections
Timescale is ok	To tight for elections	Timeline is optimistic
Why 2 years for last two stages?	Can we get it in by next elections otherwise will slip to new administration and begin over again	No concerns
Definitely needs concluding prior to the elections	Yes – reasonable timeline	Yes please to annual review to keep it up to date and keep it live
Timeline feels realistic and takes into account the varying size of councils	It's just as much about the process and the conversation	Possible challenge to meet Oct to Dec deadline
Need to be flexible – recognise that election timetable may be an issue		

Session 2 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

What can clerks / colleagues do differently to operate more effectively in a unitary structure?



Get connected

Link in with ward members more effectively, sign up to newsletters, meeting papers and outputs from committees

Look at communications format

Could there be improvements in messaging and communications with clear call to action?

Understand unitary council structure

Factor into training and briefings how we get a better working knowledge of DC

Opportunity to help DC officers

Help DC officers understand how parish and towns function / work

Dedicated process for councils to use and get feedback on particular issues	Better communications from officers and members	Away days and briefings to raise awareness (sections & departments)
Identify tools needed	More focused communication	Gain better understanding of how unitary works
Staying updated	Make more use of unitary councillor	One page of inform so can signpost people – 1 What DC does & 2 What parish does
CHO highways model works really well. Would like to see this for more services	DC officers need to respond – not ghosting. Failure to respond creates more work overall.	Who are their colleagues?
Plain English description of jobs & departments (on A-Z internet)	Clearer, better communications – managing expectations	Trickle down and well as trickle up communications
To have clerks webinars not involving councillors as they make it about them so clerks don't get opportunity to ask questions	Read/sign up to DC newsletters	Clerks/officers could attend DC meetings where they're impacted
Work to move our councillors towards the thinking of a unitary authority instead of districts/boroughs	Communicating in a timely manner with clear standards/acknowledgement	Review communication methods e.g. sometimes a phone call is better!! Appointment in Diary?
Learning and development of DC staff should include training on parish and town councils as 'mandatory'	Face to face visits from DC staff e.g. highways	DC need to provide clerks with clear understanding of the unitary structure as part of clerks induction
Could emails be 'categorised' so its clear what clerks need to do with it?	Address information overload!	Town Council and DC communications works well ie monthly on line communications with Matt, John etc
Parish Councils communications is more challenged – feels like there is a divide between towns and parishes	DC councillors interpretation of clerk intervention at officer level – tipping point.....	The 'working together' document to include the parameters to avoid conflict – 'just need to get the job done'
Stakeholder meeting, in local areas	Member induction/clerk induction – explaining DC and town and parish council roles	Town councils act as conduit
Have reasonable expectations and work constructively	Understand constraints and existing policy	Find a way to help and engage at early stage

What can clerks / colleagues do differently to operate more effectively in a unitary structure?
Page 2

Be proactive in using existing information online e.g. agenda papers	Attend briefings	Try to build positive relationships with ward members
Ensure dual hatters are an effective link		

Session 2 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

How do we engage elected members about the proposed document?



Communications

Input and messaging from Cllr Laura Beddow and look at future in person engagement events

Elected member input

Establish and get agreement how elected member contribute across the DC area and from different sized councils

Have a clear view of benefits

Important to be able to see tangible benefits from the creation of a document

Must recognize differences

Important that different sized councils are both involved and the outcome reflects and accommodates this

How do we engage elected members about the proposed document?

Councillors need to be able to fully understand the document and then comment on it	Review document in draft form at later point in process once further developed	Presentation – kept simple at 1 st draft – summary of benefits
Workshops (clerks/councillors)	Discussions	Better relationship with county
Training	Some councillors want an improved relationship – would attend a workshop. Explain the benefits and keep it simple	Some councillors are not interested and won't engage
Instruction & oversight of Ward members by DC (Laura's team?)	For Ward members to be included in the 'charter' – ward members commitments	Attend – compulsory conference/café style exercise
Informal exercise	They need to be involved in development to get their buy in	Put a section in working together document about Ward Councillor expectations for their town and parishes
Sell the benefits of working together to councillors	Could do online/in person presentations to explain/update to DC and town and parish members	Clerks have a role to play in this
Political leaders to disseminate to their members	Representative(s) in working group	Video from Councillor Laura Beddow
A simple 'charter' that they agree to – 'one best way' approach	Simple flow chart to explain/define the role of the clerk and that of elected member ie technical – clerk	Summary/overview for councillors – short!
Training/seminar type events	Recognise diversity of sector – one size doesn't fit all	Stress early engagement to build member sense of ownership

Session 2 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

How would you as clerks like to be engaged going forward on this topic?



Inclusive

Must recognize different sized councils and clerk's input is important as they will interact with DC regularly

Online / in person events

Roundtable discussions beneficial as well as online updates

Regular updates

If not directly involved would like to hear regular updates

Must recognize differences

Don't forget different challenge for small/large, coastal/inland

How would you as clerks like to be engaged going forward on this topic?

Representation of clerks to be able to comment as it develops	Inclusive focused working group to develop	Ideas fed back from groups of council sizes and locality
Further discussion events/workshops	Want regular updates	Want an opportunity to contribute
Need a range of clerks representing big and small parishes	Set up representative working party made up of different size and type councils to discuss and record views (coastal, rural, urban)	Develop working together document with DC councillors
Dorset councillors need to lead the belief in the working together document	Appreciate co-ordination by DAPTC due to their knowledge/relation of/with both sectors	Must include parish clerks!
Small working group and then present it periodically – to be kept informed via survey monkey (mail chimp?)	Pilot with 2 towns and 2 parishes with one department i.e. planning to help iron out any issues – establish best practice and then extend out to zones i.e. northern area etc	Working group under DAPTC, representative of size/characteristics of our town and parishes
Early engagement to help shape document	Ensure everyone has the opportunity to engage and be inclusive across councils	Possibly working groups of large/medium/small councils

Session 2 | KEY PHRASES AND COMMENTS

Anything else to consider and how should issues be reviewed?



Annual review

Panel of members and officers to give input to an annual review

Keep it simple

Don't over complicate the document

Improve communications

Need to make communications and engagement more effective

Who does what?

Set out clearer picture of who provides and does what.....

Anything else to consider and should issues be reviewed?

Make more presentable and clearer as it develops	Concise and attractive	Regular review
Ongoing discussions – idea gathering	Targeted	Champion for DC services idea – for escalation/grievance process – authority to act – SLCC or DAPTC could help?
Appendices – outlining who does what	Much better communications	Accountability
Kicking the can down the road – independent review process	Respect and civility pledge (NALC) to run through the working together document	Through DAPTC
Questionnaires – mechanism for continuous feedback	Bi annual/annual	Face to face review
Don't want 'bookshelf document'	Induction process for DC staff to include town and parish councils	Appreciate DC Chief Executive has 165 'chief executives' trying to contact him. Is there a better way? Specific officer?
Annual reviews	Simple plain English	Not 'hot air'
Needs to be measurable (SMART)	Don't call it a charter!	Keep it simple – set of guidelines
Make is shorter, concise information to avoid any ambiguity	Training/coaching relating to key departments i.e. planning (Council -> train the trainer sessions) i.e supply tools such as PowerPoint	Focus on 5 or 6 key things that need addressing
Keep it simple, principles only	Could establish some goals/targets/benchmarks to monitor effectiveness	Annual review – possibly establish a panel of members and officers
Need to capture positives as well as negatives		