

Connected or Disconnected?

Re-thinking the role of local councils in changing
times



CONFERENCE SUMMARY
REPORT



30TH SEPTEMBER 2014



HUCCLECOTE VILLAGE HALL,
GLOUCESTER

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introduction

Angus McCabe from the Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, introduced the context for the event and set out the purpose of the day and thanked all those invited (see Attendance List) for their participation.

Local government, whether at a unitary, county, district, town or parish level, is going through a period of unprecedented change. Budget reductions, the drive towards localism, welfare reform and changes to the health and social care landscape require a rethink of the role of local government, the relationship between different tiers of government and, fundamentally, links across central government, local authorities and citizens.

Such changes have increased the complexity of local government – with a growing level of professionalism required by councillors and officers to ensure continuing local council accountability and services. Traditionally that complexity has been associated with principal authorities – responsible for strategic economic, environmental and social policy development and implementation. Equally the debate has assumed differences in the issues faced by urban and rural councils. Yet the complexity of the current landscape has trickled down to parish and town councils & the communities they seek to serve, with increasing expectations about their capacity to take over assets and services and engage with issues such as commissioning and neighbourhood planning.

These tiers of local government are expected to work together to deliver cost savings and cost effective and appropriate services. But is it working? Are the tiers of government fragmented and disconnected in their responses to national policy and local population change? Are there examples of new and emerging practice which, in challenging times, reconnect the levels of government and with citizens? How do the tiers manage the tensions between localism and the demands of central Government especially in the area of town and country planning? For example – HS2 versus the principle of local decision making or the Occupy Movement as an expression of Big Society & social activism?

The aims of the day were to inform debate in the run up to the 2015 general election and explore how local government arrangements can address current challenges as well as

- consider how the tiers of local and central government can 'connect up' to meet such current and future challenges
- generate good practice ideas about the capacity of local councils to respond to changing community needs and policy agendas
- identify what research would enable local councils to function more effectively and how quality standards can be 'mainstreamed'.

Participants were asked to identify their hopes for the day which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Hopes for the day

- Strategies for filling the vacuum between tiers of Government and communities.
- Work towards a rural manifesto for the 2015 election.
- Examine issues of collaborative working and identify best practice.
- Share ideas and learn from each other.
- The day is a chance to reflect and keep up with all the changes.
- Review issues of rural/affordable housing.
- A question – is there really an enthusiasm for all this change?
- Explore localism and how/whether we can do more at town and parish councils.
- Get a better understanding of the drivers of change.
- Gain practical ideas on the delivery of policy objectives.
- Enjoy the day!
- Get a better understanding of the role of town and parish councils in promoting local democracy..

Neighbourhood Planning: tensions between localism and central planning – James Derounian, University of Gloucestershire

This paper was presented by James Derounian to stimulate discussion.

First the good news.....

- ✓ Localism and Neighbourhood Plans have had a long gestation dating back to the 1960s Skeffington report (1969) which emphasised the importance of citizen contributions to (town & country) planning decisions. This idea then blossomed and took differing manifestations under Governments of varying political persuasion – as non-statutory ‘appraisals’ (Moseley: 81 in Derounian, 1998), then through the 90s as ‘Parish Plans’ (DETR & MAFF, 2000); and –since the [2011 Localism Act](#)– in the form of statutory *Neighbourhood Plans (NPs)*.
- ✓ Neighbourhood Planning allows **urban & rural** communities , “residents , employees and business, to come together through a local parish council or neighbourhood forum and say where they think new houses, businesses and shops should go – and what they should look like” (CLG, 2011: 12).
- ✓ In 2014 localism is seen as a delivery mechanism for the tainted & all-but-vanished *Big Society*
- ✓ In England, where there are parish councils, these lead the formal NP process.
- ✓ In July 2014 there were an estimated 745 neighbourhood plan areas designated (Neighbourhood Planner online). Research by Turley consultants (2014) reported “Seventy five neighbourhood plans have been published for consultation, but only six...are formally in place (“made”) at the end of February 2014.”
- ✓ As a **strong positive** the concept of greater community participation in UK decision-making generally and planning in particular is longstanding (see above re Skeffington etc). For example a Conservative administration (1995: 2) supported “local initiative & voluntary action.....Local people are generally best placed to identify their own needs & the solutions to them”.
- ✓ Community-based action is like blood group *O* – in that it is acceptable to all. **And regardless of detail I foresee this general trajectory of community-based work continuing regardless of any change in central government** during 2015. (Even though the detail will invariably change).

And now for the bad news.....

Progress to date with rural NPs

- The overarching impact of a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)/Chancellor/policy drive towards growth via housebuilding to get the economy to pick up is having a **substantial and detrimental impact on towns and villages**. We are witnessing a field day (excuse pun) for housebuilders; whereby development

bears little or no resemblance to 'sustainable development' and is doing little to provide desperately needed affordable homes for sale or rent. It would seem that economic development trumps sustainable development; and centralism trumps localism. And inspectors representing Government approve appeals over local decisions.

- I would extend this further to Local Enterprise Partnerships – like Rural Development Areas before them – that seem blind to rural and social initiatives.
- Turley Consultants (2014) research report [*Neighbourhood Planning: Plan and Deliver?*](#) highlights more NPs published “in affluent than in deprived areas....more in areas that have Conservative-controlled councils....take up of neighbourhood planning is concentrated...in the south” of England. **The danger in localism is that it is further advantaging the advantaged....**take my small town (Winchcombe, Gloucestershire. population 4,500) that is teeming with capable volunteers (social capital) – whilst disadvantaged places are left to sink or swim.
- **There is a research gap & a need to understand whether the 20 or so 'made up' NPs are having any real impact on the scale, type and phasing of rural housing.** Are NPs influencing Local Planning Authority (LPA) housing allocations, or are parishes and their NP policies simply according with numbers handed down from principal authorities? **I recommend that such action research is funded with all speed.** There are (a few) examples of LPAs – e.g. **Mid Sussex & Arun Councils** – seeking to use NPs to identify sites for housing; similarly Arun is basing employment site identification on NP inputs; while **Mole Valley (Surrey)** has been radical in asking NP groups to review Green Belts boundaries. Furthermore, in East Sussex, LPAs asked for local communities to say how many houses they would be willing, voluntarily, to take, and the total number came almost exactly to that which the LPA wished to allocate.

In terms of (lack of) sustainability, the extent of rural poverty remains a blot on policies expounded by all parties: official reports since the 1980s repeatedly point to **around 1 in 5 English rural households in or at the margins of poverty**. This is shameful & all stakeholders should address this. From my experiences working as an activist within my own community and in an official capacity as an Examiner for Neighbourhood Plans across the country I offer the following recommendations:

Neighbourhood Plans.....

1. Are a **fact of rural life** and – where a community chooses, they should be undertaken by the community

2. **LPAs are patchily & ill-prepared** (or even hostile): even though they have a “statutory role to play in supporting neighbourhood planning” (House of Commons Library, 2014). How can they realistically fulfil this obligation against a backdrop of cuts & strained staffing?
3. Are not *the/only* form of community-led plan (CLP) – **communities must decide what form of CLP works best for them** & their particular circumstances
4. **Are complicated, highly technical and take a lot of time** (2-4 years) and money – Thame NP (Oxon) is estimated to have cost around £70,000 to complete. NPs are not for the faint hearted - even for keen places a **heavy burden on volunteers**.
Central Government must simplify!
5. Are being damaged by Government delaying the local plan process by imposing tough demand for **5 year housing supply (plus a 20% cushion)**
6. Should foster a genuine **symbiotic relationship** with NPs influencing LPA policies and vice versa

Working towards better news (recommendations)

- ✓ In order to amplify localism/NPs I recommend that the following is rectified: even though a business impacts on its immediate locality (in terms of jobs, traffic etc) it is more distant principal authorities that currently receive 100% of business rates. So in Winchcombe town the rates from an industrial estate & 200+ other businesses go to Tewkesbury Borough Council. It then disburses the money across its entire portfolio and geographic patch. This is at best constrained localism, & provides a clear example of how **centralism overrides localism**.
- ✓ I recommend that, to enable parish activity around localism, a **20% share of business rates should remain with local councils to support community projects and priorities identified in Parish & Neighbourhood Plans**.
- ✓ I would also recommend exploration of a new **Community Right to Claim**; whereby public sector property derelict for 1+ year, could be taken over by a parish/town/Neighbourhood Forum for purposes set out in a Parish or Neighbourhood Plan e.g. for affordable homes, workspace etc.
- ✓ Parish & Town Councils (PTCs) **must precept** in order to finance NPs – where they choose to undertake them; they must lead by example. In tandem central government should **leave PTC precepts uncapped**, so these authorities can finance

NP assembly and implementation. Likewise funders should place a monetary value on volunteer inputs (to NPs) to offset against grant awards. In the case of Winchcombe I **conservatively** estimate volunteers have saved my town about £40,000.

- ✓ This emphasis on volunteers can be exploitative: take the training and ‘employment’ of 5,000 organisers via the organisation, [Locality](#). 4,500 of these have been part-time volunteers, with just 500 paid full time senior organisers – for 1 year only. It displays a fundamental misunderstanding, in that working with (rural) communities takes time & requires trust to be established. It means that from day 1 a senior organiser will be distracted in to pursuing succession funding and probably looking at alternative employment.
- ✓ To ensure genuine sustainability and empowerment I would recommend exploring the possibility of **a social enterprise/s based on the expertise of ‘community consultants’**: those who have already gained expertise in neighbourhood planning, or exercising community rights could form a task force to assist other communities lacking the experience - and be paid for their services. It would directly reward volunteer inputs, rather than exploiting them.

Localism & Neighbourhood Plans as a ‘curate’s egg’

[Punch cartoon of 1895]

Right Reverend Host: "I'm afraid you've got a bad Egg, Mr. Jones!"



The Curate: "Oh no, my Lord, I assure you! Parts of it are excellent!"

- Furthermore community development work is discretionary & will therefore be especially vulnerable to budget & funding cuts. So although localism and *neighbourhood planning* are key to UK Government policy they are built on the shaky foundation of support and delivery by principal authorities that continue to make cuts. Community-based work is therefore ripe for (further) cutting.
- Overall, whilst the localism house is under construction as a “grand design”, its foundations are being undermined by cuts and centralism dressed in sheep’s

clothing. Nevertheless, although localism may be attacked on various fronts; long live the community.

Key question – do local councils have the capacity/capability to capitalise on Neighbourhood Plans?

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Key discussion points

Participants were asked to reflect, in small groups, on James Derounian's arguments on 'the good' and 'the bad' of localism and neighbourhood planning – and to suggest what could be done better. Participants made the following points. NPs and related localism could be a force for good:

- A tool for building local democracy
- A mechanism for bringing people together and building consensus on often difficult local issues
- A way of developing responsibilities and accountability at the local level
- Enabling a greater potential to influence planning decisions
- A means of raising the potential/higher profile for town and parish councils
- A mechanism for highlighting other, non-planning, issues – social needs, employment etc.
- A way of creating a sense of shared purpose and goals

Bad or problematic aspects of NPs include:

- The lack of adequate resources to deliver
- The capacity of planners in terms of their skills in working with communities and, with the cuts, they are an increasingly scarce resource.
- Lack of real involvement of the private sector in many areas
- Neighbourhood planning, to be effective, is a long hard process
- Concern that strategic/spatial plans don't really take notice of local voices
- Difficulties in relating/integrating very local plans with broader county/regional plans
- In some cases paid consultancies with little or no local connections or accountability do the work.

What could be **done better** was:

- More creative use of monies from Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure levy
- There could be scope for peer NP consultancy services
- Allowing the time to build consensus
- Enhance the capacity of planners to engage effectively with communities
- Build greater local awareness of the neighbourhood planning process and its potential benefits/difficulties
- Learning from the 'first time' neighbourhood planning process – lessons from the first round of plans could be used for the future.

And then there were **the questions**:

- How do the tiers of planning fit together and can it work?
- What are the demographics of community engagement? Only older people/the usual suspects?
- How long should a neighbourhood/parish plan really take?
- Why get involved? For short term 'wins' or for very long term outcomes?
- What is it realistic for volunteers involved in the process to realistically offer? It's a very time consuming process and there is a real risk of 'burn out'.
- How do you effectively resolve, or at least manage, the tensions and conflicts that can arise in the planning process?
- How do you create real ownership of the process – and its outcomes?
- What are neighbourhood plans really for???
- Why do communities want to get involved?

The Relationship Between Different Tiers of Government – Ron Ley, One Ilfracombe

Ron Ley is Chair of One Ilfracombe and Out Place Champions Network. One Ilfracombe is a partnership between the Town Council, the private and voluntary sector and other statutory agencies such as the police and NHS. The aim is to regenerate the town and restore it as a key tourist attraction for the north coast of Devon. Some of the projects One Ilfracombe had undertaken so far were the development of 750 new homes, a car park for tourists in the

town centre, a tourist train and a traffic management scheme. The partnership had also been successful in attracting inward investment including new restaurants, new art galleries and boutique hotels. One Ilfracombe was also a pilot for neighbourhood budgets and created a 'virtual bank' so that local residents were aware of exactly how services were funded in the town.

Other successes included a 51.6% reduction in the numbers claiming Job Seekers Allowance, creating work placements for those not in employment, education or training and implemented dementia awareness training for staff

To watch the One Ilfracombe video follow <http://tinyurl.com/q965ujr> and to view the more detailed presentation from the day see Appendix 1.



Key discussion points

Participants were asked to reflect on the key messages and lessons they could take away from the Ilfracombe example and apply in their own local context. The key themes were the importance of:

- Genuine partnership working and involving all key local players
- Review partnership membership regularly

- Involving the private sector/local business fully
- Creating a shared ownership of neighbourhood plans
- Transparency and accountability
- Developing new ways of engaging people – particularly young people – in the process
- Having – and keeping – a long term vision that goes beyond annual budget setting etc
- Branding and marketing the local plan effectively – both with the local community and beyond.
- Using the media more effectively.
- Passion for their place
- Change attitudes from a ‘victim mentality’ to one of ‘can do’
- Provide clear leadership.

The Capacity and Capabilities of Local Government – Elisabeth Skinner, Society of Local Council Clerks

This paper was presented by Elisabeth Skinner.

The current agenda for local council action is extremely challenging. Can they deliver what is needed? If necessary, what does the sector need to ask of a new central Government? And what research would help the sector to be better informed and act with confidence?

The challenging agenda includes

- Localism accompanied by centralised control
 - Especially Neighbourhood plans, the planning system and community rights
 - With an increase in detailed regulation at the same time
- Shrinking resources in principal authorities including money and staff
 - Leading to shrinking services and an increase in commissioning
 - Leading to a service delivery challenge for local councils
 - Often leading to complex negotiations with principal authorities
- The democratic and community engagement deficit
 - People distrust or ignore the political system including the vote, councils and Government (especially young people)
 - Councils would benefit from more community engagement, creating more community ownership
 - Councils need to demonstrate effective community leadership

Do local councils have what it takes ?

- To deliver localism
- To deliver services especially those dropped by principal authorities
- To negotiate especially with principal authorities and developers
- To represent and lead the community
- To contribute to effective strategic planning (eg Neighbourhood and Local Plans and Our Place)
- Capacity: Does a council have sufficient resources? Eg Time, staff, money?
- Capability: Does a council have the skills, knowledge and understanding it needs?

From where I'm standing:

- Some have some capacity and capability some of the time
- Many are stuck in the past
- A few are brilliant
- Many lack motivation or will to make changes although changes are being achieved – slowly
- Many fail to represent the broad range of people in their communities

The new Local Council Awards Scheme

- The new three-tier scheme is designed to improve local councils so that they are better equipped to meet current challenges.
- It is soon to be piloted and due for launching early in the New Year
- It is designed with a Foundation Award to encourage more councils to prove they have met minimum standards before progressing to the Quality Award
- It has an aspirational level (Quality Gold) to set the bar higher for good councils and to build on the Quality Award
- Benefits lie in achieving improvement and in being recognised for proving minimum, good or best practice standards.

Questions

- How can the capacity and capability of local councils be expanded significantly?
- What can the sector ask of a new Government?
- What research questions could help both Government and the sector better understand the capacity and capabilities of local councils?

A summary of the Local Council Award Scheme is included at the end of this report.

Key discussion points

Participants were asked to reflect on how the capacities and capabilities of town and parish councils could be more effectively developed in light of Elisabeth Skinner's presentation.

The key points were;

- Mandatory training for town and parish councillors. This raised the question of who would pay for this – and would mandatory training put people off from standing at election?
- Think of ways of incentivising engagement
- Recognise that it is only real/hot issues that will get people engaged in the process
- Constantly reflect on partnership membership. Who is/is not 'at the table'?
- Allowing people to say no to engagement if they don't have the time/skills/resources
- Undertake asset mapping. What are the skills and knowledge local people have? Don't start from a deficit model that only focuses on 'the problem'
- Promote a wider understanding of the role of town and parish councils? Should this be part of the citizenship curriculum in schools?
- Recognise that listening – and reaching out – to communities is skilled work
- Create more opportunities for town and parish council peer learning
- Recognise that councillors and clerks increasingly require new skills sets – negotiating, business management, project planning etc. Engagement of people with experience of business/the corporate sector may help in bringing new skills
- Mentor potential town and parish councillors in advance of elections
- More resources were needed – but unlikely to be forthcoming in the current climate. Government therefore also needed to examine where policy was actually a barrier to localism and neighbourhood planning
- A question – should the size of (particularly) parish council's be reviewed? Fewer parish councils but with more collective power/influence
- Would powers be transferred from district/county councils to the very local level if 'higher tier' authorities thought that town and parish councils lacked skills?
- Protect training budgets – even/especially in hard times these are not an optional extra
- Explore the potential of community ownership of assets to generate income for community benefit – over and above precept.
- Importance of a shared vision between councillors and clerks
- Better use of social media and engaging people 'in their living room'
- Creating a post code transparency on council spending
- Recognise the increasing complexity of the town and parish council – particularly as/if they take on discretionary services that have been cut by county/district.
- Planning is about engaging and negotiating with passionate and committed individuals. It is an emotional – not just a 'logical' process.
- What is a sustainable 'unit of planning'? For example market town councils can serve populations of between 2,000 and 20,000
- Successful town and parish councils are outward rather than inward looking
- Take risks whilst realising that this is hard to do when there may be so much at stake
- It's important to 'take ownership of the future' rather than getting stuck in 'victim mode' – 'we can't do anything because...../it's not our responsibility'
- Contested elections help strengthen local democracy
- It's about the town not the council and it's about services, not ceremony.

National Policy Response - James Kingston, Department for Communities and Local Government

James Kingston started with a note of caution. There is no one Government policy towards localism and local democracy. Rather there are a whole series of policies that impact at the local level – and James also noted that it was often hard to relate a particular policy to specific outcomes.

However, in outlining current Government thinking on town and parish councils the unifying theme was empowerment – through the Localism Act and, for example, the changes to the Local Audit Act. The theme of empowerment was linked to encouraging greater transparency and accountability to local electorates in terms of Town and Parish Council functions – and recognising that they had a key role to play in addressing current concerns around democratic deficit.

I'm getting tired of changing the capitals!

Picking up on earlier points, it was acknowledged that there was a general lack of awareness about the role of town and parish councils – and yet there were real examples of best practice – in Ilfracombe and Queens Park – for example. These needed to be built upon and the Government was committed to developing networked opportunities for peer learning and sharing best practice in the immediate future.

The Government recognises the strengths of town and parish councils including their local knowledge and enthusiasm, their efficiency and access to volunteer networks. The size of Town and Parish councils was also seen as an advantage. They were closer to local communities than higher tiers of Local Government and were therefore more likely to get community 'buy in' to developments and the planning process. As planners and deliverers of services they may also have a commitment to the locality that larger providers did not necessarily have. There were therefore opportunities to do things differently, do things better – and more efficiently.

Indeed the current economic climate – austerity measures and the reform of local government/public services - offered a strategic opportunity for greater dialogue between Town/Parish Councils and District/County authorities. Who was best placed to deliver what? Could services be transferred to the very local? But here there were real issues of time. The pressure may be on town and parish councils to take on services 'now' when they may not be in a position to do so – rather than this being a planned, and slightly longer, managed process.

With the transfer of powers and services there was a further strategic opportunity to review the relationship between Town and Parish councils themselves. How did a town plan impact on neighbouring rural parishes? Were there mechanisms for shared and more co-ordinated planning between towns and parishes? And size mattered. Local Councils needed to be large enough to have real power and influence – but not so big that they became remote and removed from their communities. The Government genuinely wants town and parish

councils to come up with solutions. The Government is offering real support through locality; and future funding is likely to focus on networking.

A final challenge for the Government was, as Town and Parish councils took on more roles, ensuring that they were accountable for their actions and the services they provided – but that this needed to be proportionate and not over-burdensome.

Developing a research agenda

As noted, part of the purpose of the day was to develop a research agenda around localism and town and parish councils. Participants were asked to develop research questions on issues/themes that would be particularly helpful for practitioners. These included:

- A ‘follow up’ to the Aston University town and parish councils survey in 1992 especially in the light of new powers to town and parish councils in the Localism Act 2011. What has changed since then. What is the profile of those that stand for election? Who gets elected and how long to they stay? What are the motivations of councillors?
- An audit of councillor and clerk skills to identify new skills sets needed and gaps in skills/knowledge.
- What price democracy?
- What is the ideal/sustainable size for town and parish councils
- Different mechanisms for service delivery at the local level – what is effective and how can town and parish councils work together more effectively to plan/commission deliver services?
- Leadership styles in town and parish councils – what works?
- The relationship/changing relationship between councillors and clerks/officers?
- Precepts and management of local assets.

It was noted that research funding was both increasingly scarce and more competitive. Without promises, however, the organisers of the event were committed to taking forward the research agendas identified.

Concluding remarks

By way of conclusion, Ian Briggs (Institute of Local Government studies, University of Birmingham) commented:

A key issue that is happily challenged today is a frequently heard belief that Town and Parish Councils are often somehow a problem to higher tier councils – clearly we have a growing number of examples of where effective working between the District, County or Unitary

Council and local councils are not just relevant to local people but are also delivering a level of integration that is cost effective.

However, we must not forget the pressure that higher councils are under, there has been a significant loss of 'corporate knowledge' with downsizing, tensions are visible around resourcing issues and there are perhaps some unwelcome perceptions between elected members at differing levels that can be problematic when we are seeking examples of better integrated working. Clearly, what would be vitally important at such times is a better understanding of where the true capacity of Town and Parish Councils lies and where some of the examples of really innovative practice can help higher tier councils meet the challenge of change.

Finally, thanks was noted for Kim Bedford and colleagues at Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils for hosting the event and providing the administrative support.

Attendance

Connected or Disconnected?

Re-thinking the role of local councils in changing times

Tuesday 30th September

Attendee	Contact
Andrew Tubb	Cirencester Town Council
Andy Dean	Rural Services Network
Angus McCabe	Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham
Deb Appleby.	Locality
Dr Gordon Morris	Exeter University
Dr Trish Jones	Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham/Housing Associations Charitable Trust
Elisabeth Skinner	Society of Local Council Clerks
Fabian Sharp	Paddington Development Trust
Gill Claydon.	Stokenham Parish Council
Howard Midworth	Society of Local Council Clerks
Hugh D'Alton	Seven Oaks Town Council
Ian Briggs	Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOv), University of Birmingham
James Derounian	University of Gloucestershire
James Kingston	Communities and Local Government
Jo Lavis	Hastoe: Review of Rural Housing
Kim Bedford	Gloucestershire Association of Town and Parish Councils
Lesley Smith.	Devon Association of Local Councils

Linda Larter,	Seven Oaks Town Council
Liz Hawkes	Anstey Parish Council
Richard Levett	Worcestershire County Association of Local Councils
Ron Ley.	Onellfracombe. & Ilfracombe Town Council
Sarah Jeffries	Maiden Bradley with Yarnfield Parish Council
Tony Beirne,	Tewksbury Town Council

THE LOCAL COUNCIL AWARD SCHEME

The aim of the Local Council Award Scheme is to show that a council has met a recognised standard of practice in governance, community leadership and council development. The purpose of the scheme is to recognise achievements, encourage continuous improvement and celebrate excellence among the variety of local councils.

The scheme was created in 2014 and is managed on behalf of local councils by the Improvement and Development Board (IDB).

Councils can apply for an award at one of three levels.

- The **Foundation Award** demonstrates that a council meets the minimum requirements for operating lawfully and according to standard practice.
- The **Quality Award** demonstrates that a council achieves good practice in governance, community engagement and council improvement.
- The **Quality Gold Award** demonstrates that a council is at the forefront of best practice and achieves excellence in governance, community leadership and council development.

The scheme sets out criteria to meet at each level covering selected aspects of the council's work. Councils can progress through the tiers over time thereby raising standards. In most cases the criteria relate to documents, information and conditions that should be in place for good governance and providing evidence of council improvement and action on behalf of the community. Councils of any size can aspire to an award appropriate for their budget and level of activity.

To support transparency, councils achieving an award at any level must use an online facility for publishing documents and information. In many instances the accreditation panel responsible for assessing a council's application, reviews selected documents and information online. In all instances the council confirms that the required documents, information and conditions are in place (whether published or not) by resolution in public at a full council meeting. For **Quality Gold**, councils also provide statements for submission to the panel demonstrating excellence in their activities. The panel may ask for additional information to check the accuracy of claims.

This guide sets out in brief what is required for each award and then explains in more detail the evidence that an accreditation panel is looking for. Councils should find this additional guidance helpful in identifying what is required. The final section describes the accreditation process from registration to re-accreditation.

The criteria in blue have been chosen to demonstrate **good governance** in managing the business and finances of a council.

The criteria in green have been chosen to represent a council's role in the community. This includes community engagement, activities that serve the community, **community leadership** and promotion of the democratic process.

The criteria in red have been chosen to represent **council improvement** through the management and development of staff and councillors.

The Foundation Award

To achieve a Foundation Award a council demonstrates that it has the minimum documentation and information in place for operating lawfully and according to standard practice.

The council confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it publishes online:

- 1 Its standing orders and financial regulations
- 2 Its Code of Conduct and a link to councillors' registers of interests
- 3 Its publication scheme
- 4 Its last annual return
- 5 Transparent information about council payments
- 6 A calendar of all meetings including the annual meeting of electors
- 7 Minutes for at least one year of full council meetings and (if relevant) all committee and sub-committee meetings
- 8 Current agendas
- 9 The budget and precept information for the current or next financial year
- 10 Its complaints procedure
- 11 Council contact details and councillor information in line with the Transparency Code
- 12 Its action plan for the current year
- 13 Evidence of consulting the community
- 14 Publicity advertising council activities
- 15 Evidence of participating in town and country planning

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it has:

- 16 A risk management scheme
- 17 A register of assets
- 18 Contracts for all members of staff
- 19 Disciplinary and grievance procedures
- 20 A policy for training new staff and councillors
- 21 A record of all training undertaken by staff and councillors in the last year
- 22 A clerk who has achieved 12 CPD points in the last year

The council notifies the accreditation panel co-ordinator when the resolution has been agreed and provides a link to its website.

What is the accreditation panel looking for?

The panel seeks assurance that a council acts lawfully and according to standard practice. Unless it is a matter of law, the panel is not making a judgement on the quality of the evidence at this level; it simply carries out spot-checks to confirm that the documentation and information is in place, up-to-date and complies with the guidance below. For those

documents that are not posted up online, the panel will ask to see the evidence if it is considered necessary.

- All policies should comply with current legislation and guidance and note the date of the next review.
- **Standing orders, financial regulations, the Code of Conduct, publication scheme and complaints procedure** are public documents tailored to the specific council. Standing orders or financial regulations explain procedures for contracts and internal controls. All policies and procedures should demonstrate compliance with The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 including an open media policy which does not restrict engagement with the press. For councils with an annual turnover of less than £25,000 they also demonstrate compliance with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities.
- The council does not need to publish the councillors' **registers of interests** on their own online site provided that there is a link to the registers on the principal authority's website.
- The council's online site should include the name of the clerk and **contact details** (address, phone, e-mail) for the council as a corporate body. It should also publish the names of councillors and councillors' responsibilities in compliance with the Transparency Code.
- The council posts up a scanned copy of the last **annual return**. The panel checks that the council has a limited assurance (unqualified) opinion from the external auditor; the opinion may contain recommendations for consideration as long as a qualified opinion is not given. The panel checks the arrangements for internal audit and internal controls. From 2017, councils with an annual turnover of less than £25,000 will not be required to complete an annual return. Panels check that these councils comply with the Transparency Code for smaller authorities.
- **Information on all payments** must be transparent and in accordance with financial regulations and statutory proper practices. The panel will check the minutes of meetings, financial regulations, the annual return (if relevant) and compliance with the Transparency Code.
- The **calendar** (in any format) includes the Annual Meeting of the Council and the Annual Parish/Town Meeting and both meetings must be held during the correct statutory period. The calendar also shows that the council has at least four full council meetings a year.
- Similarly the **minutes** for full council meetings over the last year include the Annual Meeting of the Council. If relevant, the council also posts up the minutes of its Finance Committee to demonstrate transparency according to statutory regulations and of its Planning Committee showing that procedures for reviewing planning applications are correct. The panel checks that minutes and **agendas** demonstrate the lawful convening of meetings and decision making and that all meetings allow the public to make representations to the council.

- The council can post up the current or next year's **budget** (or both). Budget documents would normally show columns comparing the year in question with the two previous years; they include information on income and expenditure (or receipts and payments) and show how the precept was calculated.
- The council must publish an **action plan**; as a minimum this is a one-page document listing the council's objectives for the current year. It is not a parish plan which is a plan for the future of the community; the council can extract objectives for action from the parish plan depending on its areas of responsibility.
- The panel seeks at least one piece evidence from council publicity that it consults and actively serves its community. Publicity might include an annual report, web material or news bulletins. The information gives a flavour of any council **activity** such as lobbying principal authorities, giving grants to community groups, the provision of a service or helping with community events. Similarly any form of **consultation** is suitable including surveys, online polls, focus groups or public meetings.
- Council documents demonstrate that the council participates in the **planning system** by, for example, commenting on planning applications or working on a neighbourhood plan. Decisions on planning matters must be made in properly convened meetings and, if required, by delegation to a committee. Some decisions may be delegated to an officer.
- **Contracts, disciplinary/grievance procedures, a risk management policy and register of assets** can be based on a model but tailored to the specific council. They are not published.
- A **training policy** for new staff and councillors can be a short statement of intent while a **training record** gives dates, titles and providers of development activities undertaken by named individuals in the last year, including, for example, updating events, online courses, CPD activity and qualifications. Councillors should note that they should undertake training on financial management for which they are all responsible. In particular, the **clerk's** training record includes evidence of CPD (Continuing Professional Development) such as training, conference attendance, mentoring and studying for qualifications. CPD points are allocated according to a system published by the IDB.

The Quality Award

To achieve the Quality Award a council demonstrates that it meets all requirements of the Foundation Award and has additional documentation and information in place for good governance, effective community engagement and council improvement. A council with a Quality Award is eligible to use the general power of competence.¹

The council confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it meets all requirements for the Foundation Award and that it also publishes on its website:

¹ Localism Act 2011 ss1-8

- 1 Draft minutes of all council and committee meetings within four weeks of the last meeting
- 2 A Health and Safety policy
- 3 Its policy on equality
- 4 Councillor profiles
- 5 A community engagement policy involving two-way communication between council and community
- 6 A grant awarding policy
- 7 Evidence showing how electors contribute to the Annual Parish or Town Meeting
- 8 An action plan and related budget responding to community engagement and setting out a timetable for action and review
- 9 Evidence of community engagement, council activities and the promotion of democratic processes in an annual report, online material and at least four news bulletins a year
- 10 Evidence of helping the community plan for its future

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it has

- 11 a scheme of delegation (where relevant)
- 12 up-to-date insurance policies that mitigate risks to public money
- 13 addressed complaints received in the last year
- 14 at least two-thirds of its councillors who stood for election
- 15 a printed annual report that is distributed at locations across the community
- 16 a qualified clerk
- 17 a clerk (and deputy) employed according to nationally or locally agreed terms and conditions
- 18 a formal appraisal process for all staff
- 19 a training policy and record for all staff and councillors

The council notifies the accreditation panel's co-ordinator when the resolution has been agreed and provides a link to its online site.

What is the accreditation panel looking for?

The accreditation panel checks that the criteria for the Foundation Award are in place if the award was granted more than a year ago. It then considers the additional criteria for the Quality Award.

The panel assesses the quality of documents and information with a light touch, seeking reassurance that the council is acting lawfully and according to good (rather than best) practice. The panel carries out spot-checks to confirm that the documentation and information is in place and up-to-date and complies with the guidance below. For those documents that are not posted on the website, the panel will ask to see the evidence if it is considered necessary.

- All council policies should comply with current legislation and guidance and note the date of the next review.
- **Draft minutes** (marked *Draft*) of all council and committee meetings keep people up-to-date with decisions and action should be posted up as soon as possible after the meeting and within at least four weeks. The minutes will show that the council monitors its actions, internal controls and performance against the budget at least every three months.
- A **community engagement policy** demonstrates the council's commitment to hearing what people in the community think and communicating its own actions and decisions. The council also gives grants to community organisations and publishes a **grant awarding policy**.
- **Councillor profiles** normally contain a photo and reference to the ward represented (if relevant) but personal contact details are not required.
- The council is required to publish its **Health and Safety** policy which includes its duty of care to staff and its **equality** policy which shows compliance with legislation.
- Evidence that electors can contribute to the **Annual Parish or Town Meeting** can come in any form; for example, it could be an invitation to attend and participate in discussions or a record of how community groups spoke about their use of grant funding over the last year.
- The **action plan** (or similar forward plan) summarises findings from community engagement and sets out aims and objectives that respond to community views. The action plan includes a timetable for actions to be completed with dates for reviewing the plan. The council's **budget** shows how the action plan is put into practice and manages risks to public money.
- The council is expected to produce an **annual report, online material** and at least four **news bulletins** a year. The annual report and news bulletins must be online even if they were also distributed in hard copy such as in printed newsletters or village magazines. If the council uses social media such as Facebook or Twitter, this will be evident from the council's online site. The accreditation panel will read the materials looking for evidence of community engagement, council activities and promoting democratic processes. The panel expects to see that the council consults the community in at least three different ways (such as surveys, focus groups, online or street polls and community workshops) and engages with other organisations including community groups and the principal authority(ies). It will look for at least three positive actions for the community in the last year.
- The **annual report** should be distributed widely. It is accepted that it cannot always be distributed to all households, but copies can be left at prime locations in a community including a library, doctors' surgeries, schools, pubs, shops or residential homes.
- The panel seeks evidence from council documents and online information that it supports the **community in planning** for its future. This can include at least one

contribution to creating, implementing or reviewing a parish or town plan, a design statement or a neighbourhood plan, holding community planning events, facilitating debate in the community about planning applications or registering community assets.

- The panel also seeks evidence of **promoting elections** and the value of the democratic process; this might include explaining how the system works, advising people of election dates and promoting the value of being a councillor.
- At the time of making the resolution, at least two-thirds of the seats on the council must be filled by **councillors who stood for election** at either the last ordinary elections or a by-election. This shows that the council represents the community through the democratic process. Councillors who stood for election, even if elected unopposed, do count, while councillors who were co-opted or appointed cannot count. If two thirds is not a whole number, then it must be rounded up to the next whole number using the table below.

Total council seats	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Two thirds	4	4	5	6	6	7	8	8	9	10	10	11	12	12	13	14

- The panel may wish to check that a council properly operates the delegation of decision-making to committees, sub-committees and officers (where relevant). Arrangements for delegation may be set out in standing orders or in a separate **scheme of delegation**.
- The panel may wish to check that **insurance** policies have been reviewed and are up-to-date and that the council recognises insurance as a way of mitigating risks to public money.
- The panel may also seek evidence that any formal complaints received by the council during the last year have been properly addressed.
- A **qualified clerk** is defined in Parish Councils (General Power of Competence) (Prescribed Conditions) Order 2012. The clerk (and deputy clerk) should be properly remunerated with a contract in accordance with terms and conditions set out in the national agreement or in a local government scheme.
- The panel can ask to see the document setting out the formal **appraisal process** that must be in place for all staff. It checks that the council has a training budget and may ask to see a general **training policy** for staff and councillors with a detailed **record of all training** undertaken by staff and councillors in the last year. The panel seeks assurance that a training culture is embedded in the council. The clerk is expected to achieve at least 12 CPD points every year.

The Quality Gold Award

To achieve a Quality Gold Award a council demonstrates that it meets all requirements of the Foundation and Quality Awards, and is at the forefront of best practice by achieving an excellent standard in community governance, community leadership and performance management.

The council confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it meets all requirements for the Foundation and Quality Awards and also publishes on its online-site:

- 1 A business plan covering a financial forecast for at least three years linked to revenue and capital plans for the council and its community
- 2 An annual report, online material and at least four news bulletins a year with evidence of
 - a engaging with diverse groups in the community using a variety of methods
 - b community engagement leading to positive outcomes for the community
 - c a broad range of council activities including innovative projects
 - d co-operating constructively with other organisations

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting, that it has prepared statements (of no more than one page each) to be presented to the accreditation panel showing how it

- Ensures that the council delivers value for money
- Meets its duties in relation to bio-diversity and crime & disorder
- Provides leadership in planning for the future of the community
- Manages the performance of the council as a corporate body and of each individual staff member and councillor to achieve its business plan.

The council notifies the accreditation panel when the resolution has been agreed and provides a link to the online site.

What is the accreditation panel looking for?

The accreditation panel checks that criteria for the Foundation and Quality Awards are in place if an award was assessed more than a year ago. It then considers the additional criteria for Quality Gold.

The panel assesses the quality of documents and information in some depth. It seeks reassurance that the council is acting lawfully and aspires to excellence. Complying with the guidance below, the panel carries out spot-checks to confirm that up-to-date documentation and information for Quality Gold is in place. The panel may ask for further information, talk to councillors and staff or visit the parish. The panel will be interested to note whether the council already has a reputation for being at the forefront of best practice. Councils seeking the Quality Gold Award should be aware that the panel is a peer group applying their own standards of excellence to the criteria explained below.

- In confirming excellence, the panel ensures that the council operates within the law as explained in standard works of reference, demonstrates transparent, efficient and effective decision-making and governance and exercises sound financial management.
- The panel also seeks reassurance that the council is not experiencing destructive internal conflict or that nothing has occurred to bring the council into disrepute.
- The council works to a forward plan (or **business plan**) created for at least three years even if this takes the council beyond the next election. This plan explicitly responds to community engagement. It sets out the council's aims and objectives for both the council and the community and shows how they will be achieved including financial forecasts for both revenue and capital for the duration of the plan.
- The **annual report, web material and news bulletins** publicise the work and achievements of the council and contain substantial evidence that the council, takes the lead in actively representing and serving all parts of its local community. The council therefore addresses the **diversity** of its community including, for example, different age groups, service users, physical locations, housing types, language, employment status and skills.
- These sources of information also show that the council seeks out and responds to views and ideas expressed by its community. The council uses a variety of ways (at least four) of consulting and involving local people to understand their views. There should be evidence that the council identifies local needs and views through **community engagement** that are then addressed in constructive **council action**. These sources also show that the council promotes local democracy.
- The panel seeks at least four **positive outcomes** achieved for the community in the last six months and a broad range of council activities. The council is innovative; this is the case if the council undertakes actions that are still relatively unusual for a local council of its size in that county. The panel also checks that the council is co-operating with **other organisations** including community groups, its principal authority(ies) and other agencies to provide an effective service to the community. Co-operation includes but is not limited to partnerships.
- The statement on ensuring **value for money** explains how the council reviews the quality and costs of its activities to confirm that the costs are appropriate. This could include, for example, the cost of the clerk's role in serving the council, the purchase of computer equipment or a grass cutting contract.
- The statement on duties related to **biodiversity and crime & disorder** demonstrates knowledge of the law and includes ways of reminding councillors of these duties and examples of how they are implemented.
- The statement on leadership in **planning for the future** shows how the council engages with a range of activities that influence the planning system and facilitate community-led planning. Activities may include, for example, identifying and representing community views on planning applications and local plans, working on

parish or town plans, or holding community-led planning activities such as Planning for Real[®] or community conferences. The statement should include the council's approach to neighbourhood planning.

- Finally, the statement on **performance management** explains the process by which the performance of the council as a corporate body is constantly improved and shows how the performance, skills and knowledge of each individual in the council is managed to help the council achieve its objectives on behalf of the community. This includes confirming that each member of staff has their own professional development plan and that the majority of councillors participate in a member development programme. It is important to show evidence that the council is a good employer.



Cllr Ron Ley FRICS

Chair of One Ilfracombe

Chair Our Place National Champions Network

Tuesday 30th September 2014

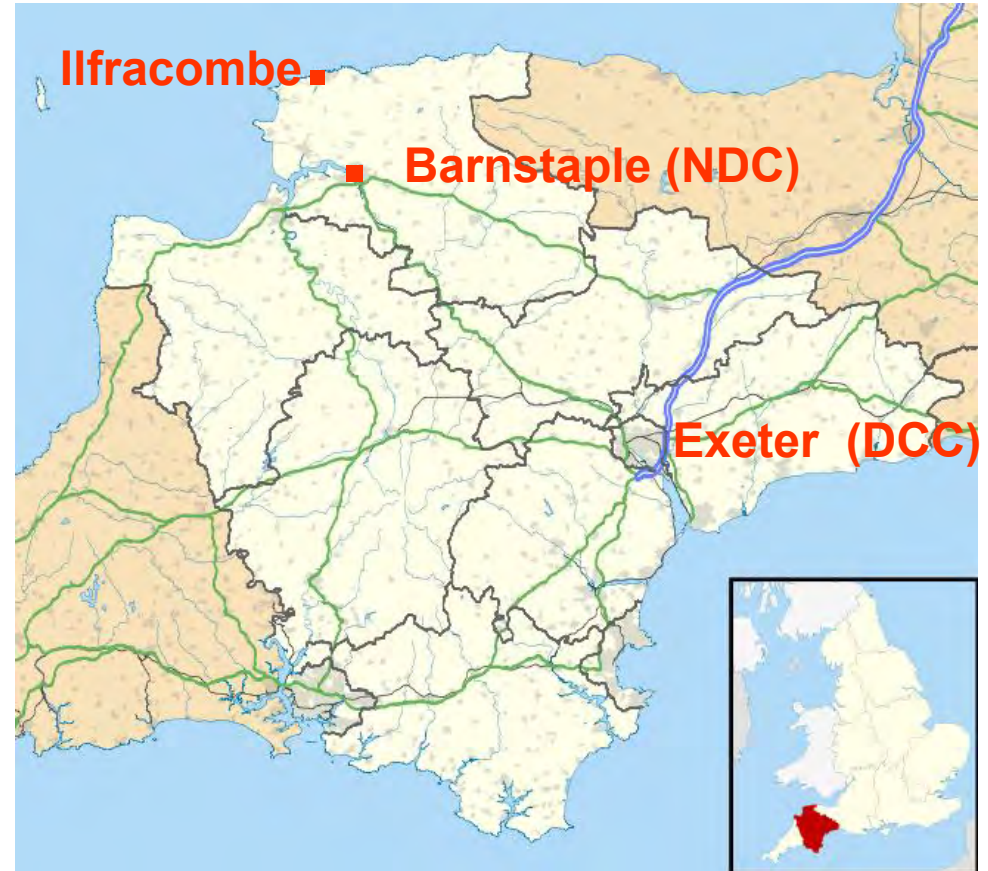
We know Our Place!

An aerial photograph of Ilfracombe, showing the town built on a hillside overlooking a harbor filled with boats. The entire image is framed as a jigsaw puzzle, with several pieces missing, represented by black silhouettes. A white diagonal banner is overlaid on the center of the puzzle.

**Understanding the
bigger picture**

Where?

- 12 miles from Barnstaple
- 55 miles from Exeter
- Poor transport
- Sense of remoteness
- 2,500 square miles
- 1m resident population
- Key areas Exeter, Plymouth & Torbay



A town with a proud history

- Population 12,500
- Tourism industry in decline
- Lost key transportation links
- Highest deprivation in Devon (Central ward)
- Amongst top 10% deprived areas in country
- Lower life expectancy
- High teenage pregnancy rate
- Since 1974 no power & little influence



Begging bowl attitude

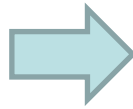
- 'Done to' victim mentality
- Focus on deprivation
- Lack of self esteem
- Perception other towns looked after better than ours
- Took no responsibility for community predicament



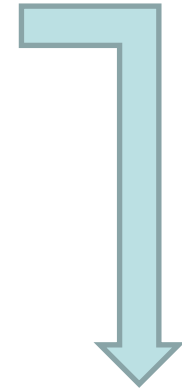
What is **one ilfracombe** ?



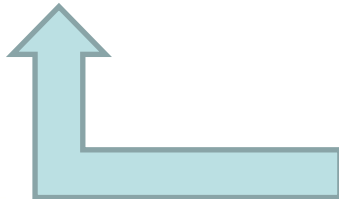
Our public sector partners



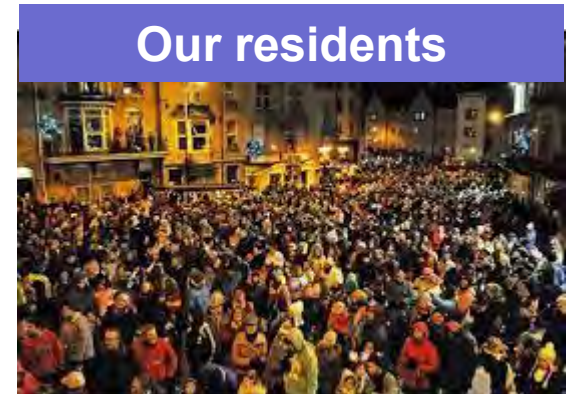
= TEAMWORK



Community volunteers



Our Businesses



Our residents





2002

A Town Council in crisis

The Daily Telegraph

11 Jan 2003

Two held in council row

Two Ilfracombe councillors have been arrested on suspicion of harassment...

(Charges subsequently dropped)

2003

Local citizens fight back

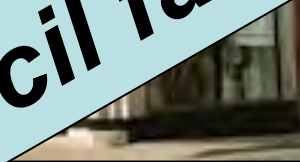
- Town Council elections May 2003
- ***Ilfracombe Together*** formed
- 16 candidates for 18 seats
- 14 seats won
- Electorate turnout 43%



2005 – 2008

The first big project to modernise
the council

**£1 million grant funding
secured creating a one
stop shop & modern
council facilities**



2009

Ilfracombe strategy developed

- **A vision, mission & plan**
- **10 year plan - 17 Objectives**
 - Assume management of our town
 - Destination tourist resort
- **Continue to build partner relationships**
- **Plan for 2015 succession**

Understanding the bigger picture



**Ilfracombe
Strategic Plan
2010 -2020**



ILFRACOMBE TOWN COUNCIL
Adopted 11 January 2010

2009

Notifying the World

BBC
NEWS

M DAILY
Mirror

Da

USA
TODAY

ail

rious

S THE
Sidney



THE TIMES

Sidney

Herald

CAPE TIMES

2013

Ilfracombe in the national & international news again



**BBC
NEWS**

**Will Damien
Hirst's bronze
statue Verity**

regenerate Ilfracombe?

2014

**Old buildings demolished
97 space car park created in heart of tourist
area**



2003 – 2014

Other town projects



- New tourist land train
- Café culture
- 750 new homes
- Ilfracombe in Bloom awards
- Street pastors
- Developing a traffic management plan
- Citizen awards

2012

The Council's new role



- Community engagement team
- Listening
- Better communication
- Surveys
 - Lantern Centre
- Public meetings
 - Fire station changes
- Council meetings around the area

2013

A new way to engage....



Mayor, Deputy & councillors

- **National Takeover Day**
- Junior school children elected to takeover the council for a day
- Opportunity to debate & vote on spending £500 on projects in the town



2014

Open for business



EACH ROOM
A UNIQUE &
INDIVIDUAL
DESIGN

Inward investment:

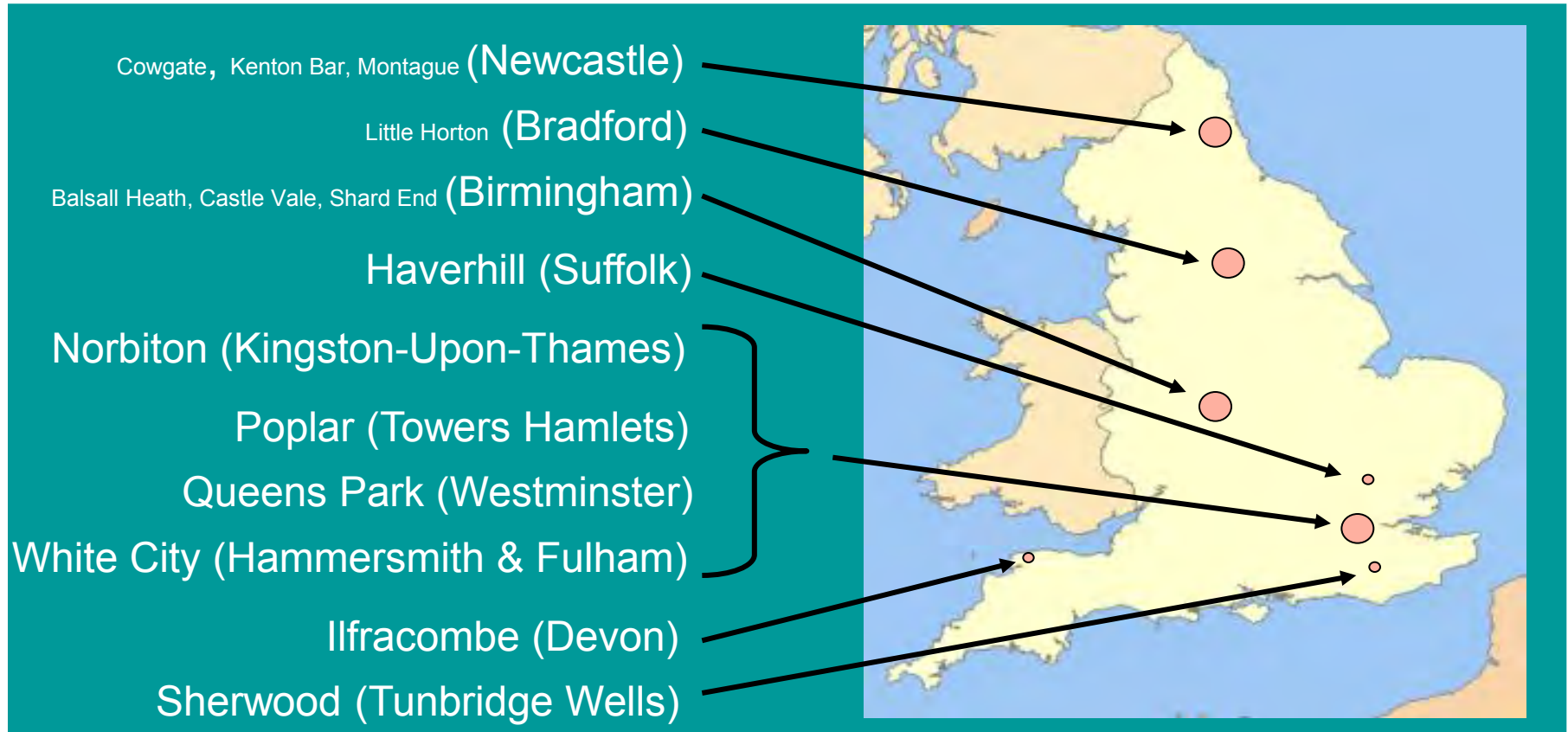
-Wetherspoon's
New art galleries
Variety of quality
restaurants

Tunnels Beach
wedding venue

- Boutique hotels

Neighbourhood Community Budgets Pilot Programme 2012 - 2013

Now the Our Place programme



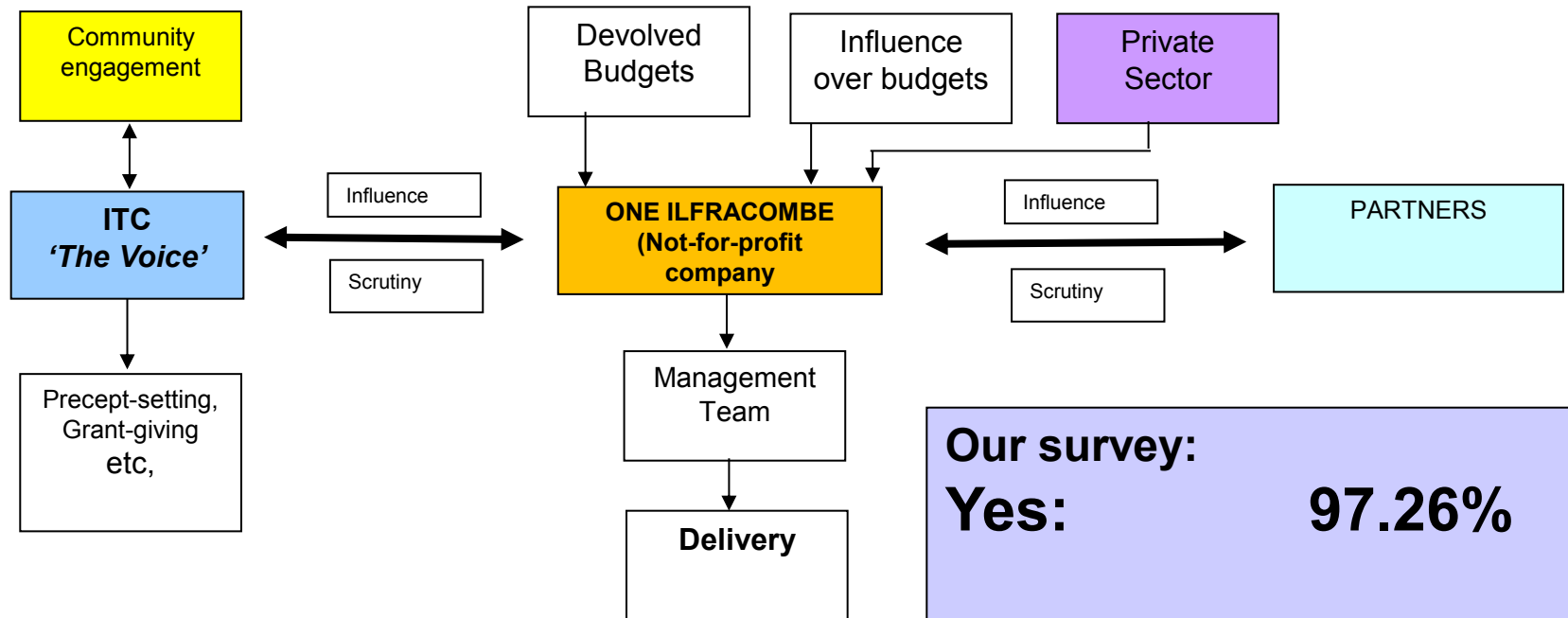


The old silo culture



- Remote decision-making
- Poor communication
- Inefficient

How partners are working together



Our survey:

Yes: 97.26%

No: 2.73%%

Don't Know: 0.34%

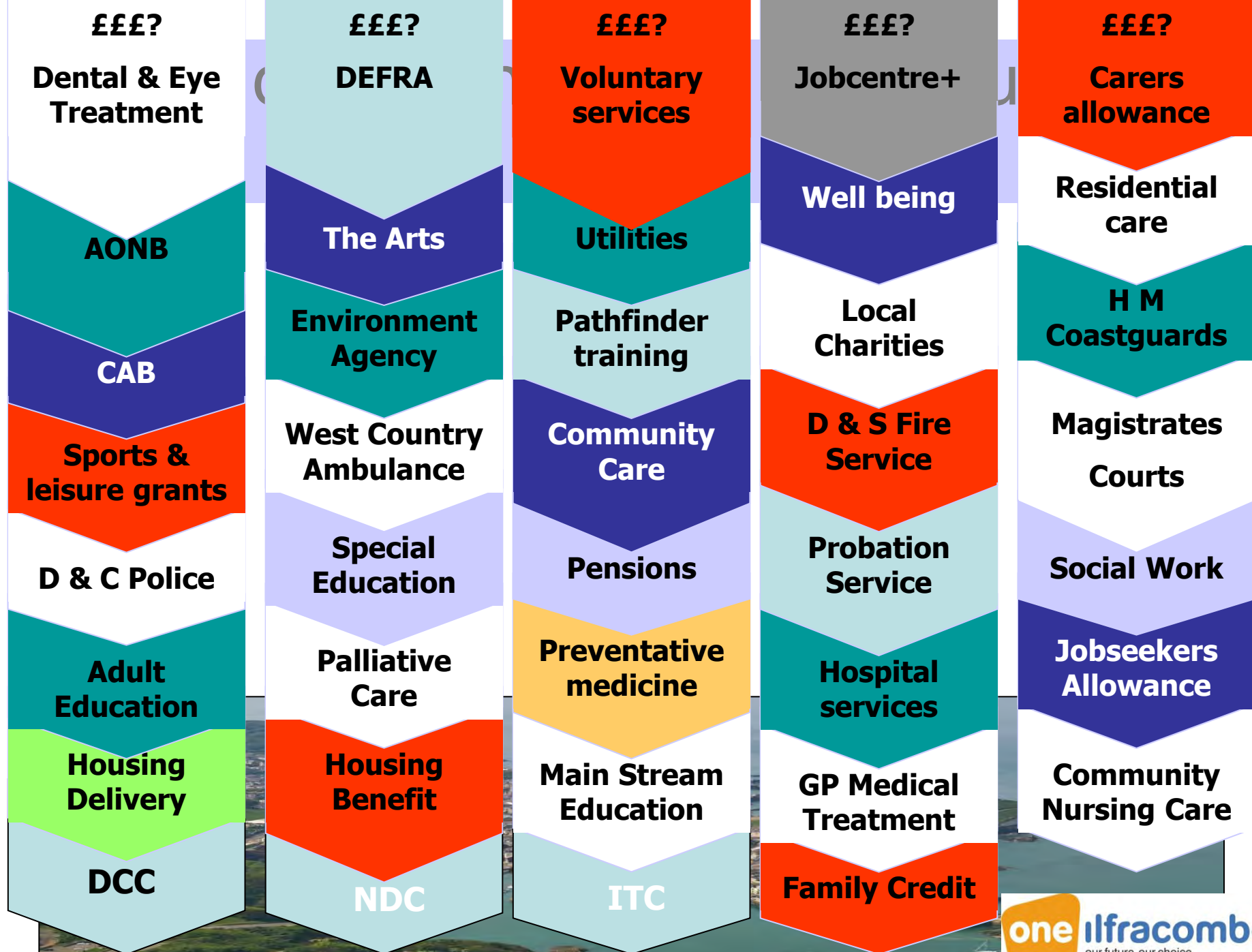
(Sample: 1037 residents as at 30/09/13)



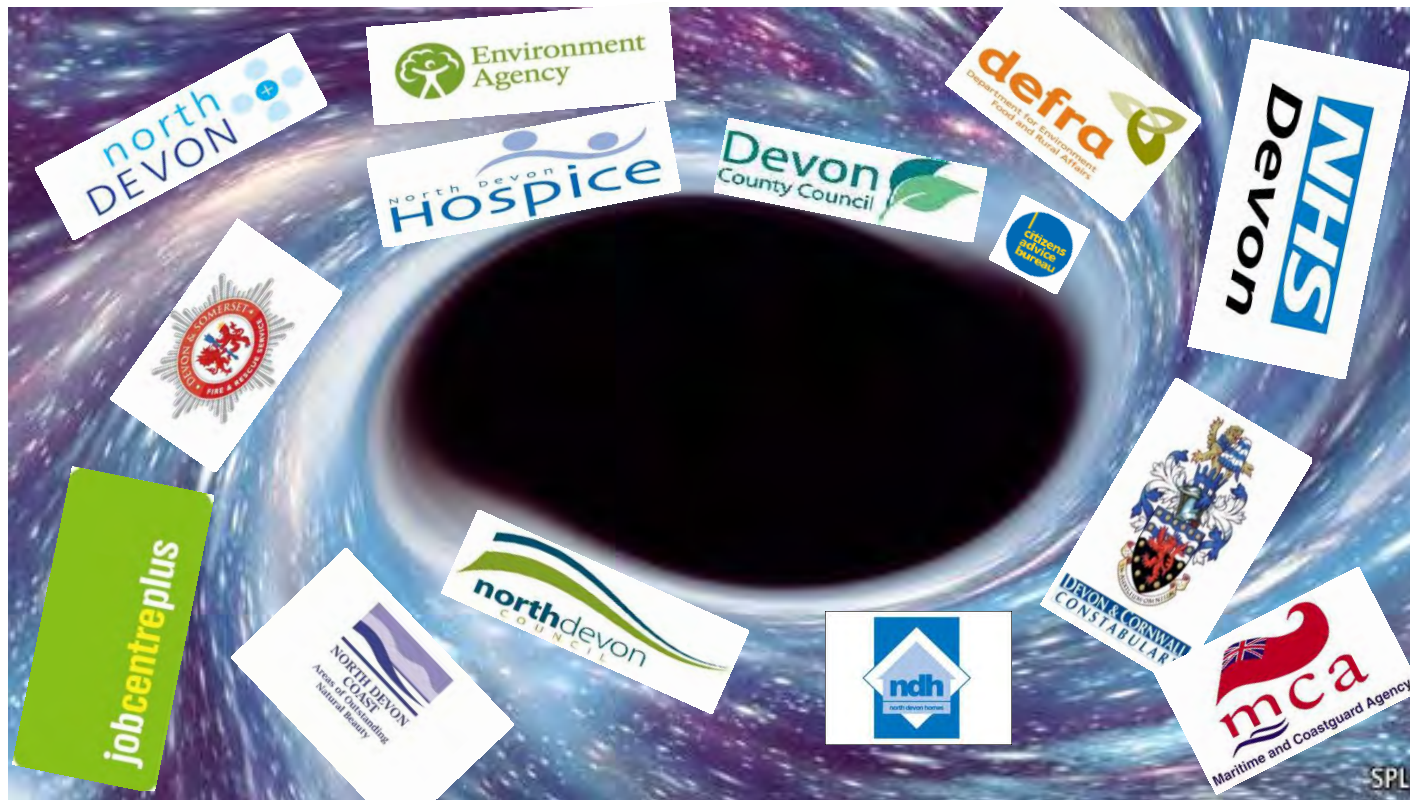
is different



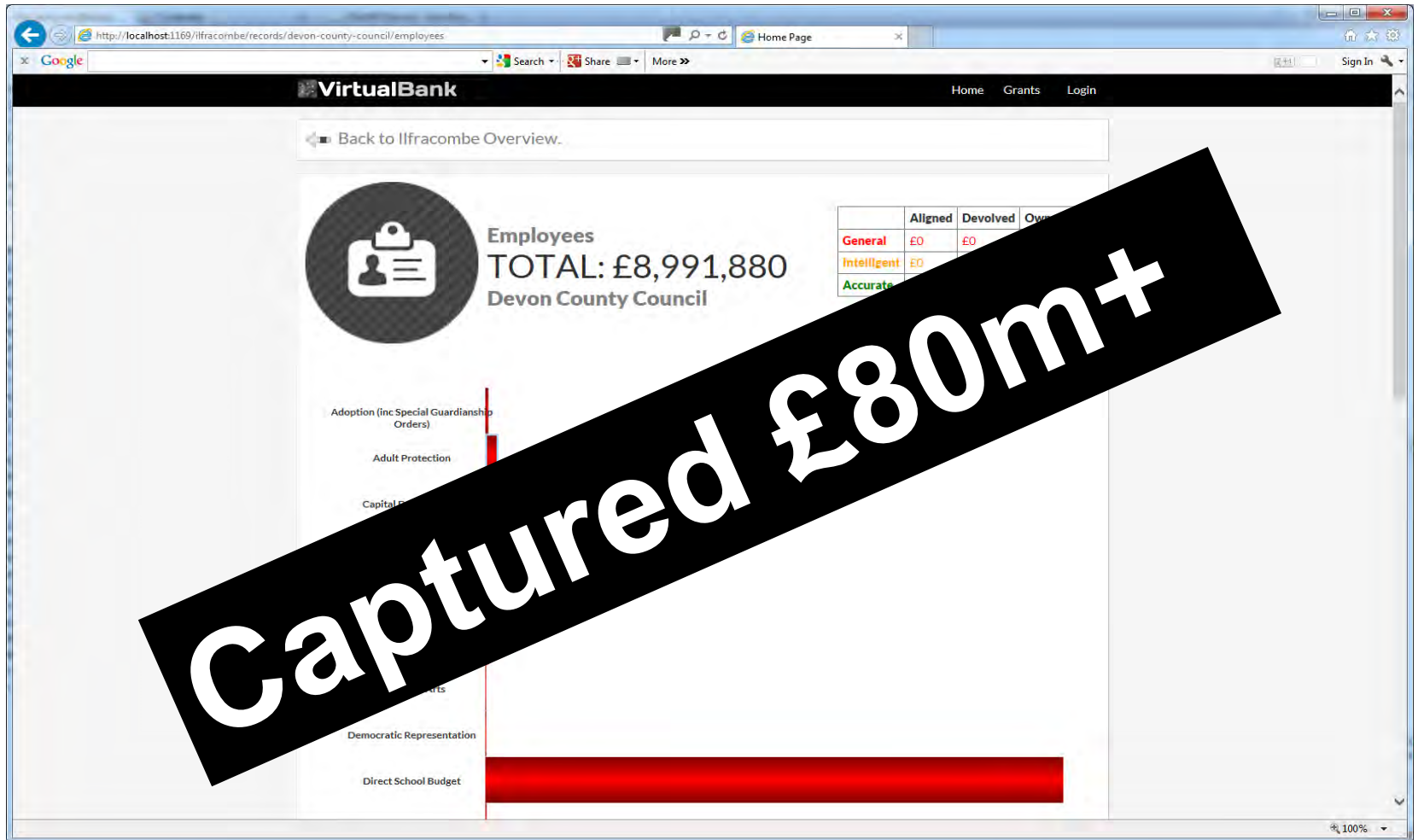
- **Not-for-profit company owned by partners –**
 - Ilfracombe Town Council
 - Devon County Council
 - North Devon Council
 - Clinical Commissioning Group
 - Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service
 - North Devon Homes
 - *Associate members –*
 - Devon & Cornwall Police
 - Jobcentre plus
 - North Devon Hospital Acute Trust
- **15 Directors – 6 independent**



Where does the money go?



Virtual Bank





Three themes



EMPLOYMENT



Town Team

- Police
- Fire
- Hygiene operatives
- Street cleaners
- Off street parking
- Harbourmaster
- SW Ambulance Service



28 strong and growing



Town Team role

- Talk to each other
- Report problems
- Work with volunteers
- Training
- Share team base
- Better planning
- coordinated intelligence
- Branding





Living well



Feel better with a book



Ilfracombe Works



1st COURTEOUS TOWN

Faceless community?



Anonymous unless in need?

Disconnected

Do their own thing

Undervalued

See public service as bureaucratic



Jobseekers allowance



NEETS

**Not in Employment,
Education or Training?**

Aged between 16-24 years of age?

10 work placements



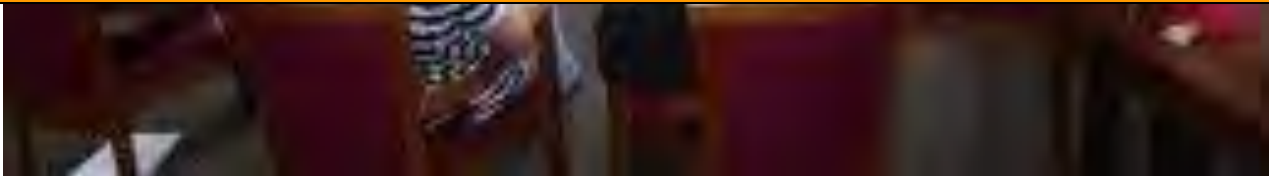
Careers in Care



Young Advisors



- Representative group of students
- Helping conversations
- The young person's view of our work
- Citizenship skills.....the politicians of the future?



Out of the Blue Cadetship Programme

- Partnership with Fire & Rescue Service, Police, RNLI, SW Ambulance service
- 10 week programme for 13/14 year olds
- Developing teamwork, problem solving and leadership skills
- Helping to raise aspirations and promote healthy and safer lifestyles

Social isolation – connecting Ilfracombe



Dementia awareness training
Town team members

DCC Targeted families

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, seen from the back, holding a baby in her arms. They are standing in front of a wall covered in colorful graffiti. The woman is wearing a dark blue t-shirt, and the baby is wearing a pink top. The image is partially obscured by an orange text box in the center.

**77 families identified
49 engaged**

Our Place



Our Place update



A National programme that is growing

Summary

- **Ways in which local government can work in partnership**
 - Reduce threat
 - Manage politics
- **Ingredients for success**
 - Give in return
 - Passion
- **Strategies for overcoming barriers to success**
 - Relationship building
 - Lead the community
- **Building capacity of parish and town councils**
 - 21st Century solutions for 21st Century problems
 - Improve engagement not just accountability



Reflection

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

Thank you

Contact

Ron Ley

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Mob: 07771 50 30 40

About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

Third Sector Research Centre, Park House, 40 Edgbaston Park Road,

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2RT

Tel: 0121 414 7073

Email: info@tsrc.ac.uk

www.tsrc.ac.uk

Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

Contact the author

Enter author's name

Tel: enter phone number

Email: enter email



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