

Report to Modbury Parish Council 7 March 2023

The Future of Local Councils

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to advise Councillors of the main findings and recommendations of a Society of Local Council Clerks report entitled 'The Future of Local Councils'.

Background

There are some 10,000 local councils (parish and town councils) across England and Wales providing a range of services to their communities. In recent years the demands of austerity in upper tiers of local and regional government have led to local councils taking on additional responsibilities and the Society of Local Council Clerks has undertaken a programme of research to determine how this has changed the nature of local government at the lowest tier. This included a survey of 591 Parish Clerks between late September and late October 2021.

Summary of results from 'The Future of Local Councils'

Almost all local councils surveyed employed a Parish Clerk, a quarter also employed a deputy, almost a third employed administrative staff and a similar proportion employed other, front-line workers. Fewer than 20% relied on unpaid staff to perform their functions.

The average size of councils in the survey was 12 members. Some 56% had to rely on co-option to fill vacancies – an increase of 18% since 1991.

The smallest council had less than 100 voters and the largest more than 64,000. The most common size was an electorate of between 2001 and 4000.

Approximately one third of local councils surveyed had completed a Neighbourhood Plan, some 70% managed children's playgrounds, 60% managed parks and open spaces, over half nominated or appointed trustees to local charities, one in five listed community grants and donations as one of their top three areas of spending and 80% reported members of the public regularly attending Council meetings.

In recent years political leadership of local councils has become more aligned with that in the higher tiers of local government – approximately a quarter are now controlled by national parties.

Conclusions from 'The Future of Local Councils'

A number of conclusions were identified in the study:

- The role of the Clerk has been increasingly professionalised.
- More councils are now employing staff across a range of occupations:
 - 30% employ grounds staff.
 - 25% employ building caretakers.
 - Over a quarter employed street cleaners.
- Only 25% report having unpaid staff on a regular basis.

- The take-up of powers in the Localism Act 2011 is patchy.
- Over a fifth of councils remained detached from higher tiers of local government and this was especially noticeable in unitary authority areas.
- There was little engagement with central government departments.
- Only 55% of councils engaged with neighbouring local councils in the previous 12 months.
- Local councils are becoming increasingly innovative in seeking the views of their communities.

Recommendations from ‘The Future of Local Councils’

1. National associations across the sector should work with central government to deliver a public information campaign.
2. The government should offer financial support to local councils to generate more interest in local elections.
3. Further training should be made available to support the Seven Principles of Public Life.
4. Training budgets should be increased to support the building of organisational capacity.
5. Councils should review their arrangements for engaging with young people and different community groups.
6. National associations should develop a graduate career path into the clerk profession and improved terms and conditions.
7. Local councils should work with principal authorities to establish frameworks of collaboration between the different tiers of local government.
8. Collaboration should be facilitated by central government.
9. Local councils should re-evaluate their use of Localism Act powers supported by a central government review of the effectiveness of the legislation.
10. The government should launch a national consultation on the future roles and responsibilities of local councils as part of a strategic review of local government in general.

Financial implications

At this stage no financial consequences have been identified from this report.

Risk implications

The main risks associated with this report are that failure to understand trends in the development of local council responsibilities could lead to intolerable pressure on Council budgets or a failure to adequately deliver Council services and meet the aspirations of the community.

Recommendation

Council is recommended to note this report and decide how to respond to the issues raised.

Phil Smith

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3 February 2023