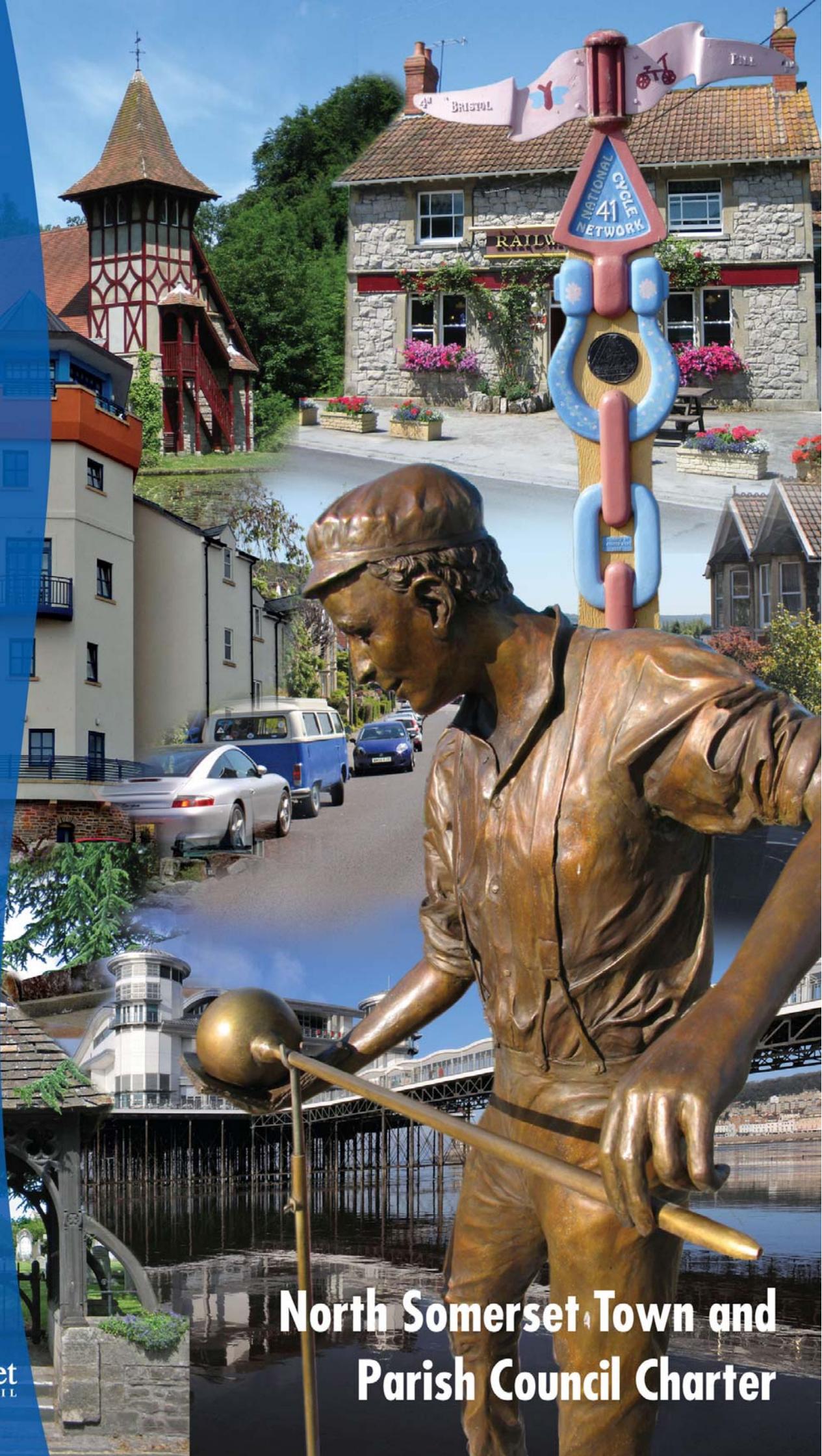


North Somerset Town and Parish Council Charter



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STATEMENT OF INTENT

1.1 The aim of our new Town and Parish Charter is:

“To create a framework for North Somerset Council and town and parish councils to work in partnership to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area.”

FOREWORD

2.1 Town and Parish Councils have an important role to play within local government. They are the most local level of government and can influence decisions that affect the local area and help bring life to their communities. The North Somerset Town and Parish Council Charter sets out how North Somerset Council and the area’s local councils will work together to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

North Somerset Council will work in partnership with local councils to:

- Promote lifelong learning opportunities
- Enhance health and well-being
- Protect and improve the environment
- Build safer and stronger communities
- Increase prosperity
- Maintain high performance

INTRODUCTION

3.1 North Somerset has 39 parishes, four town councils based in Clevedon, Nailsea, Portishead and Weston-super-Mare and 35 parish councils representing the many rural villages and small towns that make up the rest of the region. A total of 61 district or ward councillors represent the area making decisions, developing and reviewing council policy and scrutinising decisions taken. They are a key part of local democracy and play an important role within North Somerset.

The town and parish charter aims to make a difference to the quality of life of people living in North Somerset. It explains how North Somerset Council and the 39 local councils will work together to provide high-quality cost-effective services for people of the district.

In this charter, the term 'local councils' refers to both town and parish councils.

3.2 All towns and parishes were consulted and comments were sought from the public on the draft document. The charter working group came together following agreement between district, town and parish councils to update the first North Somerset Town and Parish Charter written in 2005. Since then, there have been changes in the way that local government operates, and the powers that are available to all tiers of local government. Our new Town and Parish Charter aims to respond to those changes.

MUTUAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

4.1 North Somerset Council and local councils are partners. In signing up to this Charter, we undertake to work in partnership to understand the challenges faced by each partner in delivering services to our respective communities.

4.2 Local councils are the foundation of local government. They are the form of government closest to the people and as such have a vital role to play in improving the quality of life for local people. They should influence decisions that affect local people, and help bring life and colour to

local communities. A key ambition of the coalition government is to put more power and opportunity into people's hands. Towns and parishes are integral in achieving this vision.

4.3 They are also a key partner in making sure that public services respond to, understand and address residents' needs and aspirations.

For example, in April 2011 responsibility for the 'North Somerset Museum' in Weston-super-Mare transferred from North Somerset Council to the Town Council. The agreement and transfer saw the attraction being relaunched as 'Weston-super-Mare Museum', led to efficiency savings for the council and secured the continuation of a permanent display for residents and visitors to the area.

4.4 North Somerset Council plays a vital role across the district in the delivery of services and in doing so is committed to meeting the needs of its diverse and varied communities.

4.5 The relationship between the district council and its towns and parishes is based upon:

- Openness and honesty
- Respect for the roles, responsibilities and opinions of each of the partners in local government
- An awareness at all times that we have a common purpose to serve the public of North Somerset. They are, and will remain, the focus of the objectives in the Charter.

4.6 To ensure that this document continues to meet our objectives it will be reviewed regularly. The Charter Working Group will monitor the progress of the new Charter and welcomes feedback from the community at any time.

4.7 This Charter is not intended to deal with every area where North Somerset Council and local councils work together. Instead, it addresses some of the major issues affecting the relationship between local councils and North Somerset Council, such as communications and planning issues. We set out obligations that the signatories to the Charter will endeavour to uphold. We also believe that the contents of this Charter should be the *minimum* standard of co-operation between North Somerset Council and local councils.

INFLUENCES

5.1 This Charter has not been created in isolation. As well as consulting with partners and all levels of local government in North Somerset, this Charter also reflects, and makes use of, wider policy influences and the tools provided by recent legislation. We have also made use of other local authorities' good practice.

5.2 There are five major influences that affect this Charter:

- The Duty to Involve
- The Sustainable Community Strategy
- Parish Plans
- Quality Council Status
- The Localism Act

Duty to Involve

6.1 On 1 April 2009 the new Duty to Involve came into force. The new duty, set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health (LGPIH) Act 2007, applies to many organisations, including local authorities and requires them to 'embed a culture of engagement and empowerment. This means that authorities consider, as a matter of course, the possibilities for provision of information to, consultation with and involvement of representatives of local persons across all authority functions'

This includes day-to-day functions as well as significant one-off decisions.

6.2 North Somerset Council must demonstrate that:

- Community interests are understood
- Information, consultation and involvement opportunities are accessible and well targeted
- Engagement activities are co-ordinated with partners where appropriate
- Local people are aware of how to get involved and feel that the council provides good engagement opportunities.

6.3 North Somerset Council believes that local councils are essential partners in meeting the Duty to Involve. Town and parish councils acknowledge the value of the Duty to Involve, and will endeavour to support North Somerset Council in discharging the duty.

The Sustainable Community Strategy

7.1 The North Somerset Sustainable Community Strategy was developed by the North Somerset Partnership and launched in 2008. The strategy provides the vision and priorities to improve the economic, social and environmental well being of the area leading to better opportunities and quality of life for all.

7.2 The North Somerset Partnership brings together a range of public organisations, businesses and community groups to deliver the Strategy's vision to create:

'Sustainable, inclusive, safe, healthy, prosperous communities thriving in a quality environment'

7.3 The Sustainable Community Strategy was developed using six shared priorities:

- Tackling disadvantage and promoting equality of opportunity
- Developing strong, inclusive communities
- Ensuring safer communities
- Improving health and wellbeing

- Developing a prosperous economy and enterprising community
- Living within environmental limits.

The full strategy can be viewed at www.northsomersetpartnership.org

North Somerset Council and local councils will have regard to the Sustainable Community Strategy in their work.

Parish Plans

8.1 Many local councils within North Somerset have done work towards producing a parish plan. Parish plans are community led plans setting out the vision and aspirations of an area. Produced by and for local communities, parish plans help shape future activity within an area. They are an ideal way for local councils to find out what matters to their communities, and work with them to take action. The main challenge of Parish Planning is to make sure that the whole community is able to participate in developing new Parish Plans, and that each Plan links with wider strategies like the Sustainable Community Strategy. Parish Plans provide a better understanding of individual parishes and areas. This information can then be fed into projects and community based service planning.

For communities to address planning issues such as allocating sites for development, a new way forward is to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan, or Neighbourhood Development Order (NDO). This also enables communities to bring forward sites for development, for example for affordable housing or a community building through a “Community Right to Build” order (see section 12 on The Localism Act). North Somerset Council can advise communities on which would be the best course to choose, depending on the issues they want to address.

Local councils will:

- Ensure that new and updated plans have taken account of the North Somerset Sustainable Community Strategy and the North Somerset Council Core Strategy
- Ensure that North Somerset Council is consulted on draft Parish Plans and provided with a copy of each new Plan.

North Somerset Council will:

- Give advice and guidance, if required (co-ordinated through the Parish Liaison Officer)
- Make Neighbourhood Plans and Parish Plans available via the council website, or provide a link to the local council’s website, whichever is most appropriate
- Ensure that council activities in local councils’ areas take account of the Neighbourhood or Parish Plan
- Make local councils aware of training and other opportunities in support of Parish Planning
- Provide a graphics design and printing service (subject to agreement of fees)
- Wherever possible, provide research and consultation support (subject to agreement of fees).

Quality Council Status for town and parish councils

10.1 Launched in 2003, the Quality Council scheme is open to all local councils in England, irrespective of size, population, or budget. The aim of the scheme is to provide a benchmark of minimum standards for parish and town councils and enable them to better represent the communities they serve. In order to achieve Quality Status, parish and town councils must demonstrate that they have reached the standard required by passing several tests.

The tests are based on 10 themes:

- Electoral Mandate
- Qualifications of the clerk
- Council meetings
- Communication and Community Engagement
- Annual Reporting
- Accounts
- Code of Conduct
- Promoting local democracy and citizenship
- Terms and conditions
- Training

10.2 Achievement of Quality Council status demonstrates the ability of the local council to themselves, the local community and the principal local authority.

The Sustainable Communities Act

11.1 In 2009, communities and stakeholders across North Somerset were invited to submit proposals to government that would improve the economic, environmental or social wellbeing of the area. Individuals and town and parish councils made several proposals which were submitted to the Local Government Association (LGA) in their capacity as Selector under the Act. However the proposals submitted by North Somerset were not taken forward by the LGA as government assistance was not deemed necessary in progressing these further. Proposals that were successfully submitted were scrutinised by government during 2010 and are still under discussion in 2011.

The Localism Act 2011

12.1 The Localism Act gained Royal Assent in November 2011. It devolves greater power to councils and neighbourhoods and gives local communities more control over housing and planning decisions. It includes

- new freedoms and flexibilities for Local Authorities,
- new rights and powers for communities
- reforms to make the planning system clearer, more democratic and more effective
- reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally

12.2 The Act includes the following key measures:

- a 'general power of competence' which replaces the power of wellbeing from the Local Government Act 2000. This gives local authorities and eligible local councils the legal capacity to do anything that an individual can do that is not specifically prohibited
- abolition of the Standards Board, and the requirement for Councils to draw up their own codes of conduct
- 'community right to challenge', giving community organisations and local councils the right to express an interest in running a council service
- 'community right to bid', through which the community are given time to develop a bid to buy any assets identified as 'assets of community value' when they come up for sale
- a right for communities to draw up a Neighbourhood Plan, or Neighbourhood Development Order, with technical advice and support from the Council
- a 'community right to build' giving local communities the right to bring forward development proposals identified in their Neighborhood Plan

North Somerset Council has specific responsibilities in relation to Neighbourhood Planning, giving technical advice and support in the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans, Neighbourhood Development Orders and Community Right to Build schemes. This can include attendance at Steering Group and other meetings subject to resources, and arranging the necessary public examination and referendum.

A good example of community participation in service delivery is Congresbury library. During recent budget discussions the council looked to reduce operational costs of the Library service. Positive discussions around reducing library staffing commitments took place in early 2010 with Congresbury Parish Council. This resulted in the establishment of a team of local volunteers to support a reduced staff presence at the library. Volunteers are managed through the parish council and trained by North Somerset Council. This has worked very well and has also added value to existing services by supporting children's story times, community events, activities and fund raising. During 2011/12 the library is working towards the installation of a self service issuing system and greater volunteer involvement in the day to day operation of the library, with support from North Somerset.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF EACH PARTNER

Communications

13.1 Local councils, and North Somerset Council, recognise that a lot of information passes between them. Some of this information, such as planning applications, is time sensitive and often requires a speedy response. It is therefore important that local councils and North Somerset Council are able to communicate and share information effectively and in a timely manner.

13.2 Parish Voice is a forum held before each of the three Area Committees which gives parishes an opportunity to raise issues with the district Councillor. It is a platform to exchange views and bring particular matters to attention. In many areas this function is well used and is a valuable democratic tool. The Chairman of the Area Committee must be notified of matters to be discussed prior to the meeting in order for consideration. Comments around individual planning applications are not items for discussion as parish councils are able to comment upon applications direct to the planning department as a consultee in the planning process.

13.3 All parties within this Charter acknowledge that electronic communication (internet and email) is an effective method of communication. However there must be an agreed process to ensure that the right information is provided to local councils, at the right time.

13.4 Another objective is to reduce information overload among local councils, especially the challenges to clerks and councillors of reading, disseminating and storing large quantities of information: most clerks are part-time employees.

13.5 North Somerset Council is also committed to help parishes understand the parameters which officers often have to work within, for example in the planning and transport services. Officers can be constrained by legislation or government policy which prevents them from taking particular action.

North Somerset Council will:

- Provide information electronically wherever possible, including planning applications. (Please see the section below on planning issues for more information.)
- Provide support to encourage local councils who are not online, to do so. This may include encouraging each town and parish council clerk to maintain an email account and address, or

providing reconditioned or surplus IT equipment to encourage 'off-line' councils to make use of the internet in their business.

- Make sure that town/parish clerks and councillors have access to IT training provided by North Somerset Council
- Endeavour to provide feedback to parishes on the outcome of a particular issue especially when they have tendered a response.
- Improve internal communications to raise awareness of the new Charter and the general needs of local councils, throughout the council.
- Improve understanding of local government by inviting parish representatives to attend briefing sessions highlighting what is and is not possible within key service areas. e.g. planning, highways, development
- Ensure Councillors, especially new ones, are aware of what is within their remit and emphasise what they are able to do.
- Ensure that consultations give local councils sufficient time to respond unless the consultation is time-bound, such as planning applications. As a guide, non-planning consultations should aim to give local councils at least eight weeks to respond
- Feedback the results of non-planning consultations to local councils.
- Respond to written correspondence – letters and emails – within 10 working days, and to telephone messages within one working day, in line with the council's customer service standards.

Local councils will:

- Respond to North Somerset Council requests for information as soon as practicable, ideally within 28 days.
- Endeavour to make full use of IT in their work
- Take advantage of training opportunities offered by North Somerset Council
- Respond to consultations if they are able to do so before the given deadline.

Development Management and planning applications

14.1 We recognise that one of the main areas of North Somerset Council work that impacts upon town and parish councils is the planning process.

14.2 Currently, while planning applications are made available online, notifications are still passed to some town and parish councils in paper format. This can be time consuming, expensive and may reduce the amount of time available to town and parish councils to respond to consultations. North Somerset will work with those local councils who still receive paper copies of planning applications to ensure that they can view them instead electronically on the council's website. To support Town and Parish Councils to move to electronic working, North Somerset started a 'paperless parishes' scheme in November 2011 to gradually replace paper based consultation with electronic consultation. The majority of local councils took up the offer of subsidised ICT equipment which was provided as part of this initiative. In addition, the Development Management team have run training sessions at several Town and Parish Council Forum meetings and are also available to visit clerks and local councils to give training and offer advice on the new process.

Many local councils have been using technology to great effect for a number of years to view applications online. For example, at Winscombe and Sandford Parish Council a laptop and projector are used during parish council meetings and Councillors have found this preferable to using hard copy paperwork. It also gives members of the public who attend meetings a better opportunity to understand and become involved in matters being discussed.

North Somerset Council's Development Management service is committed to:

- Making it easier for town and parish councils to respond to planning application consultations
- Encouraging town and parish councils to respond to planning applications electronically
- Making savings where possible (without reducing quality of service)
- Extending the consultation period for towns and parishes councils who adopt paperless consultation processes for planning applications, from 21 days to 28 days
- Consulting with town and parish councils on any changes to the process

It is the objective of North Somerset Council and town and parishes councils to:

- Work together to find ways to increase the efficiency of the consultation process using electronic methods wherever possible.

Resources

15.1 It is our joint objective to make sure that our work is based on the best information and expertise available: making use of training opportunities, producing documentation that is accessible and appropriate, and developing a comprehensive understanding of our communities.

15.2 North Somerset Council has resources that local councils may wish to use in order to help them realise their ambitions and achieve their objectives.

Local councils will:

- Endeavour to make their consultation and research findings available to other town and parish councils
- Provide feedback to everyone who participates in research, including use of parish websites, magazines or newsletters to publicise information as necessary

North Somerset Council will, subject to the agreement of fees (if applicable):

- Update town and parish clerks on the latest training courses
- Provide graphics - design, typesetting etc - services to town and parish councils
- Provide consultation and research support to local councils
- Provide printing services, such as leaflets, forms, booklets and reports

Procurement

16.1 When drawing up new procurement framework contracts North Somerset Council will endeavour to ensure that local councils can buy goods from the suppliers at the same price as it does. However, there may be instances where North Somerset Council is unable to include local councils in these framework contracts.

16.2 To facilitate the process local councils can inform North Somerset Council of the types of procurement contracts they would like to be able to access. This information should be supplied to the council's Strategic Procurement Team.

Parish Liaison Officers (PLO)

17.1 Each local council has the opportunity to request that North Somerset Council provide Parish Liaison Support. Since January 2011 we have been providing support to every town and parish across the district.

17.2 The role of the Parish Liaison Officer is to:

- Foster co-operation between North Somerset Council and their respective local council
- Act as a lead officer, representing North Somerset Council at their respective local council meeting
- Be a focus for issues raised by the local council that relate to North Somerset Council – i.e. to be a point of contact.

17.3 To achieve this, the Parish Liaison Officer should:

- Offer support to their local council in resolving issues relating to North Somerset Council services
- Promote and encourage good working relationships between the local council and North Somerset Council
- Attend meetings of the town or parish council at least once every six months, if requested
- Maintain regular contact with the clerk to the council, and alert them of any issues that may be of interest
- Liaise with the relevant ward member(s) to keep them informed of any issues that relate to the Ward Member's work, or to North Somerset Council
- Liaise with relevant teams, officers or departments to ensure that they are aware of any relevant issues raised by the town/parish
- Be accessible, as far as is possible, to meet with the local council on any major issue affecting the local council's area, and facilitate attendance of other council officers as appropriate.

North Somerset Council will:

- Provide appropriate Parish Liaison support to local councils, and ensure that if the post becomes vacant, that it is filled swiftly
- Ensure that Parish Liaison Officers are able to develop a strong working relationship with their allocated local council
- Carry out a biennial survey of clerks and Parish Liaison Officers to obtain views of the Parish Liaison system.

Local councils will:

- Develop a strong working relationship with their Parish Liaison Officer, based on mutual respect and working in the best interests of local people
- Work with North Somerset Council to review and appraise the Parish Liaison Officer function as appropriate.

Area Officers

18.1 North Somerset Council assign an Area Officer to a cluster of local councils who will provide a single point of contact for the following issues:

- Highways, highway verges, footpaths, footways and cycle ways
- Street lighting
- Car parks
- Public open spaces
- Refuse, street cleansing and public conveniences
- Fly-tipping
- Abandoned vehicles
- Street furniture
- Drainage on the highway and public open spaces.

Area Officers are also able to receive comments regarding other council services and escalate them to the appropriate team or officer as necessary.

18.2. Area Officers produce regular newsletters highlighting issues they have responded to. These newsletters are circulated to the relevant councillor and form an important part of advising members of issues and forthcoming events within their ward.

Climate Change and Carbon Reduction Commitments

19.1 North Somerset Council's Policy on Climate Change was approved by the Executive in June 2008. This identifies three areas of work for the council's response to climate change:

- **Management of its own estates and operations** - Through consideration of the use and impact of council buildings, transport, waste, the public realm and parks, the council can cut emissions and save money.
- **Service delivery** - The services provided by North Somerset Council have a direct and crucial role to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and ensuring the local area is resilient to the effects of climate change.
- **Community leadership** ('leading by example' and 'promoting awareness and action'). - In addition to taking action on its own estates and through delivery of services, North Somerset Council can also use its understanding of local priorities, risks and opportunities to play a key role in motivating the wider community to take action.

19.2 These commitments are further underpinned with the following objectives:

- Improving energy efficiency, reducing energy use and increasing use of renewables
- Reducing material resource use
- Improving the environmental impact of new and existing buildings
- Reducing emissions from transport and travel
- Protecting and adapting land and landscapes
- Reducing the amount of waste and pollution released to air, water and land
- Protecting and increasing the diversity of wildlife.

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| North Somerset Council is committed to these objectives and will support and encourage local councils to make similar commitments. |
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Equality and Diversity

20.1 One of North Somerset Council's key corporate values is to 'value everyone equally and respect diversity'. Together with its partners, the council aims to build safer and stronger communities where diversity is valued and everyone has equal chances to live, work, learn and feel part of the community, free from prejudice, discrimination and harassment.

The Equality Act 2010

20.2 The Equality Act 2010 brings together 9 pieces of primary legislation and over 100+ statutory instruments. Its aim is to 'harmonise discrimination law, and to strengthen the law to support progress on equality'.

It introduces the concept of 'protected characteristics, of which there are 9:

- people of all ages

- disabled people – a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment which has substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day to day activities
- transsexual people – a person who proposes to, starts or has completed a process to change his or her gender.
- people who are married or in a civil partnership
- women who are pregnant and/or during any period of statutory maternity leave
- people of all races – race includes colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins
- people who have a religion or belief and those who have no religion or belief
- men and women
- gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual people

Specific exemptions apply and local councils should familiarise themselves with the details of the legislation.

20.3 The Equality act also extends the public sector equality duty to cover all of the protected characteristics listed above. It came into force in April 2011 in England, Scotland and Wales. This duty replaces the existing race, disability and gender equality duties.

20.4 Responsibilities

Both North Somerset Council and town and parish councils are required to demonstrate that they comply with the 'General Equality Duty' as set out in the Equality Act 2010. Local councils are encouraged to demonstrate their understanding and commitment to these responsibilities.

In carrying out functions, public authorities are required to have 'due regard' to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Having 'due regard' for advancing equality of opportunity involves:

- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people
- Encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where the participation is disproportionately low

Practical examples of where it would apply includes:

- the accessibility and conduct of meetings
- involving a diverse range of people in consultation events
- considering the implications of a decision on a diverse range of people
- recruiting staff in a fair and equitable way in accordance with the requirements set out in the Equality Act

More information about the Equality Act and the General Equality Duties can be found at:

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/new-equality-act-guidance/equality-act-starter-kit/>

Implementation and Review of the Charter

Development of the charter began during 2009/2010. A formal consultation period for local councils was held between March and July 2010.

Once the final Charter has been agreed the following groups will have been consulted:

- North Somerset town and parish councils: including presentations by members of the Charter Working Group as appropriate,
- North Somerset Council Community Services Policy and Scrutiny Panel
- North Somerset Council Executive
- North Somerset Council Corporate Management Team
- North Somerset ALCA

The implementation and progress of the new Charter will be assessed and reviewed by a working group involving local councils.

APPENDIX 1 – LIST OF NORTH SOMERSET TOWNS AND PARISHES

1. Abbots Leigh
2. Backwell
3. Banwell
4. Barrow Gurney
5. Blagdon
6. Bleadon
7. Brockley
8. Burrington
9. Butcombe
10. Churchill
11. Clapton-in-Gordano
12. Cleeve
13. Clevedon Town Council
14. Congresbury
15. Dundry
16. Flax Bourton
17. Hutton
18. Kenn
19. Kewstoke
20. Kingston Seymour
21. Locking
22. Long Ashton
23. Loxton
24. Nailsea Town Council
25. Pill & Easton-in-Gordano
26. Portbury
27. Portishead Town Council
28. Puxton
29. St Georges
30. Tickenham
31. Walton-in-Gordano
32. Weston-in-Gordano
33. Weston-super-Mare Town Council
34. Wick St Lawrence
35. Winford
36. Winscombe & Sandford
37. Wraxall & Failand
38. Wrington
39. Yatton

APPENDIX 2 - POTENTIAL TO DELEGATE OR TRANSFER SERVICES TO TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

Some services can work best when they are delivered and managed at a local level. The Localism Bill and the recent Open Public Services White Paper emphasise the importance of empowering local communities and encourages local authorities to explore the opportunity of delegating or transferring more functions and services to local councils and communities.

In signing up to the Charter North Somerset Council and local councils will aim to follow these guiding principles:

Any delegation/transfer should:

- Deliver value-for-money improvements in provision of council services
- Reduce costs to either or both North Somerset Council and the town or parish council
- Not burden either party with additional costs over the lifetime of the contract, agreement etc.
- The minimum expectation will be that a delegation/transfer will result in nil-additional-cost overall or savings through the life of the agreement, contract etc.
- Contracts and agreements, including background research and discussions, will be carried out in co-operation and may be subject to charges where appropriate
- Link to requirements of the North Somerset Sustainable Community Strategy and the relevant local council's Parish Plan.

These delegations or transfers could cover:

- Buildings
- Land
- Specific services in an identified area.

Proposals or requests to transfer or delegate assets or services will come from North Somerset Council or towns and parishes. The final decision on whether to carry out a transfer or delegation will require the appropriate level of sign off of each party.

North Somerset Council and town and parish councils will however be free to discuss possibilities and options with one another at any time.

APPENDIX 3 - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why doesn't North Somerset Council always give Town and Parish Councils enough time to respond to consultations?

Sometimes, such as with planning applications, North Somerset Council has a statutory duty to resolve the application within a set period. This is unavoidable, however the council is always looking at new ways of advising Town and Parish Councils about new applications as soon as they are registered. An extension from 21 days to 28 days to respond to planning applications shows the commitment of North Somerset. The new Charter reinforces that North Somerset will try to give as much time for consultations as it can.

Why do Town and Parish Councils receive so much paperwork from the Council?

North Somerset Council provides over 600 different services to the public. They all want to make sure that Town and Parish Councils are kept informed. We *have* reduced the amount of paperwork being sent to parishes but to reduce this further, in line with the new Charter, North Somerset Council has undertaken to look at ways of sending out information electronically – via email – so that Clerks and Councillors can decide for themselves what information is most useful. However, paper copies may still be available upon request.

What is the best way for Towns and Parishes to get in contact with North Somerset Council?

At the moment, they can contact North Somerset Council through Council Connect on 01934 888 888 or via Parish Liaison Officers or Area Officers. Where the name of the relevant officer is known, that may also be the best way to contact North Somerset Council, and of course letters or formal contacts made to the Chief Executive as a result of decisions made at Town and Parish meetings. North Somerset Council will deal with enquiries within agreed timescales and will make sure that the right person deals with your enquiry. North Somerset Council is always looking for ways to improve communications with local councils.

What plans does North Somerset Council have for the future?

At the moment they are looking at the roles of officers who support Town and Parish Councils. By comparing this with the things that Towns and Parishes actually want from North Somerset Council, they will develop a process that makes the best use of all these resources for the greatest benefit to Town and Parish councils. Some Town and Parish Councils have asked for a list of officers they can contact. The problem with doing this is that it becomes out of date very quickly, and it is difficult to monitor how quickly you get a response. North Somerset Council are instead looking at the possibility of setting up a dedicated telephone line so Clerks can contact North Somerset directly and be sure of a speedy response to their enquiry.

Will we be involved in that process, and properly heard?

Yes. The whole purpose of the new Town and Parish Charter is to build a relationship based on mutual respect and cooperation.

What happens if the new Charter doesn't achieve what it sets out to do?

Everyone involved in drafting and approving this document is committed to seeing it work. It will be reviewed regularly and feedback from Town and Parish Councils, Clerks, the public and North Somerset Council officers and Members is essential.