

## Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership

### 18 July 2024, 1900, Online

A meeting of Northants CALC's Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP) was held online on 18 July 2024 with special guest Tony Blake, Programme Director at Shared Intelligence, a small public policy consultancy specialising in local governance, local economies and local public service delivery (<https://sharedintelligence.net>). Invitations had been sent to the thirty largest parish and town councils in Northamptonshire based on electorate. There were forty delegates registered from twenty four of the thirty councils invited.

Danny Moody, Chief Executive of Northants CALC opened the meeting and welcomed all the attendees and introduced the guest speaker. Danny said that it was great to see so many people present, representing communities across Northamptonshire, from Brackley in the southwest, to Corby in the northeast and all points in between. Danny urged attendees to take part saying that the meeting was a great opportunity to spend time thinking about devolution and place shaping. He said "We know that some parish and town councils are keen to play a bigger role in place shaping. We also know that principal councils are coming under increasing financial pressure and must necessarily focus expenditure on their statutory functions; the things they must do by law. Please take this opportunity to ask questions and share your experiences."

Danny then handed over to Tony Blake who introduced himself and set out his credentials and explained what Shared Intelligence does. He mentioned that Shared Intelligence had recently run a webinar for parish and town councils on Net Zero and the potential contribution that town and parish councils can make to that agenda, and a piece of work for a London Borough looking at libraries run by community organisations, with learning from that relevant to devolution to parish and town councils. Finally, Tony mentioned that in 2018, working for another consultancy, he had a role in writing the business case for moving to unitary authorities in Northamptonshire, which had referenced the potential to devolve more things to town and parish councils.

The main purpose of Tony presenting to NLCP was to speak to the report he wrote for the Local Government Association (LGA) in 2021 called *Local service delivery and place-shaping: A framework to support parish and town council.*<sup>1</sup>, which had been commissioned by the LGA's People and Places Board.

The report sets out a framework to help principal local authorities who might be looking to support town and parish councils to play an increased role in local service delivery.

Tony encountered varying levels of appetite for principal local authorities working with town and parish councils, some very enthusiastic, some more wary. The diversity of what towns and parishes do became very clear very quickly, which is both a strength and a challenge.

Parish and town councils were concerned about costs being transferred to them or being presented with ultimatums: "If you don't take on this service/asset it's going to close/stop."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-service-delivery-and-place-shaping-framework-support-parish-and-town-councils>.

Principal councils were sometimes reluctant where they had been involved in negotiations in the past that had failed in some way. They were also concerned about accountability, should a transfer [of assets or services] go wrong.

During the research there was also heard quite a lot of frustration from parish and town councils at what they saw as an unwillingness on the part of principal council to enter into a creative dialogue about what might be possible. However, it also became clear that at their best, and whatever the scale of activity, parish and town councils could bring something really positive to local service delivery and place shaping, including a close knowledge of the needs of their communities and an ability to mobilise community action, backed by the ability to raise money locally through the precept.

The key question was how a principal council can create the conditions to harness the strengths of parish and town councils and how can there be a fruitful dialogue between the principal council and the parish and town councils in its area. The key is dialogue; if councils can create the dialogue, then there is a chance for positive action. Good dialogue is based on mutual trust and understanding.

First, the principal council must have intent. This could be evidenced by an action-focused Statement of Intent setting out what the principal council hopes to achieve and detailing how it will create a two-way dialogue. At a high level the statement could set out what was (and was not) on the table in terms of what the parish and town council sector could deliver, which helps keep the dialogue manageable.

A case study in the report from Milton Keynes described how the unitary Milton Keynes Council created a dialogue with parish and town councils about grounds maintenance then gradually evolved into other topics.

The report sets out the need for the principal council to listen to parish and town councils and identify where to focus efforts. In this regard it was helpful for the principal council to deploy their ward members to attend parish and town council meetings, meet councillors and discover where there is enthusiasm and energy to take things on. The phrase used was for the principal council to “follow the energy.”

Another key ingredient for success was for the principal council to have a “corporate front door,” i.e. a stated point of contact that town and parish councils can go to discuss and then submit an expression of interest in taking on a service or asset. An expression of interest form is useful to ensure consistency of information and approach.

The report says that principal councils should consider what material support they can provide to parish and town councils, for example capacity building, training, tapered funding, and expertise (e.g. risk assessment). These can be provided directly or by working with or through the County Association.

*Tony said “You cannot just click your fingers and hope that dialogue happens. So, think about some of the ingredients for good dialogue that is based on trust.”*

Noting that the framework was commissioned by the LGA for principal councils, Tony then reflected on what it means for parish and town councils and what messages parish and town councils in Northamptonshire could glean to try to get discussions going with the two unitary councils.

Tony said that referring to the topic as “place shaping” is important. It is about both tiers of local government working together at a time when resources are constrained to try and support and shape places in the way that is best for local people.

Parish and town councils should demonstrate why transferring assets or services to the local level would benefit communities and show the unitary councils the “what’s in it for them.”

Tony advised parish and town councils to find a “mobilising topic,” i.e. a service or category of assets that both tiers would find easy to talk about and to make progress on. This would help encourage joint working and would get place-shaping going, which may then develop into other areas in the future.

Tony referred to a paper commissioned by the Somerset Association of Local Councils and the Somerset Society of Local Council Clerks entitled "*Recommendations on the Role of Parish Councils in the event of Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset.*"<sup>2</sup>, which set out a vision for parish and town councils in localism and place-shaping in a unitary context.

Tony concluded his presentation with three key messages:

1. **Dialogue.** Fruitful action results from active dialogue and should evolve through experience.
2. **Flexibility.** Success relies on finding agreement between different sets of members – town or parish council members, ward councillors and council leadership, as well as between officers. This requires flexible and creative thinking.
3. **Patience.** “Evolution not revolution” as stated in a previous LGA – NALC publication holds true.

Danny thanked Tony for his presentation and opened the discussion up for delegates to make comments and representations or to share their experiences, positive or negative, about place-shaping or devolution.

Danny reported that the LGA Framework produced by Shared Intelligence had been shared with both unitary council Leaders in Northamptonshire and that discussions had been ongoing over the past several years. This led to Northants CALC writing to the Leaders in December 2023 to formally request that each unitary council create a “Devolution Task Group” comprising of the relevant director or assistant director, officer representatives from legal, assets, planning, and highways, the parish liaison officer, relevant portfolio holders, and a representative from Northants CALC. This would provide the environment for the start of the active dialogue described in the Framework. Whilst the request was received positively, neither unitary council has yet responded formally, and the groups are yet to be formed.

Both unitary councils have made it clear that they have no immediate plans for wholesale devolution. They are open to listening to suggestions from individual parish or town councils, which would be dealt with on an ad hoc basis prior to an agreed framework being developed.

#### **Delegate representations included:**

- I can see how this would work for the larger town and parish councils, but smaller ones may struggle with capacity. We waste so much time trying to get to speak to the right person at the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.northantscalc.com/blog/news-1/lgr-report-mel-uscher-90>

unitary council, so a corporate front door would be very useful.

- The unitary council has an Asset Transfer Policy, but it is complex and not straightforward to operate. It needs to work for the transferee as well as the transferor.
- There is urgency to this, but as a town council our enthusiasm and our passion will gradually diminish the longer we are kept at arm's length. There are enough parish and town councils in this situation where they want to take things on that we could put a little more pressure on the unitary authority to think about this dialogue [In his response to this point, Tony referenced the Locality resources on community asset transfer.<sup>3</sup>]
- The unitary authorities and parish and town councils should map what assets may be available to devolve. Our council went through this exercise.
- We talked about evolution rather than revolution, but evolution requires stability and politically we're heading into an unstable time with local elections in May 2025, so we don't know what the makeup of these councils is going to be after the elections.
- We are a new parish council and would like to take on the community centre so that we have a community-facing base of operations, but it is leased to a private operator. The unitary councils will be under severe financial pressure over the next few years and we're quite prepared to help them out a little bit, but our enthusiasm may run out if we cannot make any progress.
- We try to engage with our ward councillors [regarding transfer of assets] but often find they don't know anything about it or what the council's policy/position is. The unitary councils need to sharpen up their own dialogue and internal communications.
- I worked in another county that has been through this, and it took thirteen years for the dialogue to come to fruition. The conversations started because of the financial pressures on the authority but that's the wrong way to start a conversation. The place-shaping working groups would be a more positive way forward; town and parish councils should be on them so there is an understanding of how they work and the benefit they can add.
- Landscaping was transferred with a five-year plan including some financial support. All parish and town councils were given the same figure of how much landscaping cost, regardless of size of parish, but it was obvious that different parishes had different costs. It was very difficult for the officers at the unitary council to sort out and a challenge for the parish and town councils not knowing the costings when setting their precepts.
- Our experience to date is having to take something on [from the unitary council] because otherwise it would disappear. There wasn't a great deal of time to prepare. The likelihood is that a financial crunch is going to arrive with principal councils in the not-too-distant future, and we won't have had the time to have properly planned. If we don't get through that front door and have a proper conversation, both parties are going to be disadvantaged.
- Our council had dialogue with the district council before Vesting Day and open spaces were transferred. We had time to look at the plans, look at the costings and to risk assess. The precise costings weren't known, so we took a risk, but the feedback we get from residents is always very positive, so the risk was worth taking.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://locality.org.uk/resources/community-assets-transfer>

- Communications is a real issue. Sometimes we are fobbed off or don't get a reply at all. The unitary council doesn't even always inform us of consultations that directly affect our town.
- This is about identifying the low hanging fruit. Prioritise what is easy to devolve, and then progress to the the more challenging stuff. My council easily opened a dialogue with the principal council about an asset that they didn't want anymore, but when it's been assets that they were less happy to lose, it's been a real challenge to get any engagement and we've just been passed from pillar to post.
- This seems like it is all driven by politics when it should be driven by what's best for the community and what's best for the people of north and west Northamptonshire.
- In addition to low hanging fruit, we should add any asset transfers that are already in the pipeline but have not been executed and try to get them over the line.
- The unitary councils have a lot on their plates. If we are asking them to do more work [to create a devolution framework] we need to clearly demonstrate the benefits and push it up their priority list. Both tiers are there to serve the same people and we need to focus on the benefits to the councils and to our communities.
- As parish councillors, we are involved in the parish council because we want to do more for our community, so anything that will enable us to fulfil that role is certainly something that we would welcome.
- We would be happy to have properly structured conversations [with the unitary council] in the future.
- My members are happy to expand what we are doing. We just need to do it in a way that is affordable, sustainable and planned.
- We took on events and festivals previously delivered by the borough council and negotiated a three-year tapering grant. We need detailed discussions about proposed asset or service transfers so that the council can make an informed decision and assess the impact on the precept. We can do things differently and better and ensure that any asset or service we take on is sustainable with minimal impact to the community.
- Community Managed Libraries in Northamptonshire are outperforming the principal council run libraries. When they are in local control they become vibrant community hubs.

Tony Blake responded to the points as they were made, but in summary his main thoughts were:

- Pitch to the unitary councils in a measured way about what you want to do and why you think it's important to do it. Clearly demonstrate the benefits to the unitary council and to the community. Show the unitary councils that you're up for devolution / place-shaping.
- There's a number of enabling things that need to be put in place, including making sure unitary councillors are involved and properly briefed and creating that corporate front door. The county association plays a key role here.
- Dialogue is never going to be the kind of fruitful dialogue that we talked about if it is precipitated by crisis. That's why it is urgent to start the dialogue now, before the financial situation means

that options [such as tapered funding accompanying transfers] disappear. It's about getting ahead of the game.

- If you [parish and town councils] don't take it on it, it isn't going to happen. You want to get ahead of the game, and you want to start putting the right building blocks in place so you can make proactive, constructive proposals for asset and/or service transfers.
- The unitary councils could/should have a Statement of Intent that sets out their aspirations for a place-shaping programme. It should be action-focused and should set out the basic principles of good cooperation.
- Identify the low hanging fruit... i.e. assets or services that the unitary councils are most likely to be interested in talking about.

Danny thanked all the delegates for their thoughtful and useful insights and said that it had been a very positive and constructive meeting.

Danny thanked Tony Blake for attending and said that he looked forward to further discussions in the future.

In closing, Tony said *"It has been an incredibly constructive and thoughtful and pragmatic discussion with a clear desire to shake this up in a way that works for councils and for communities in Northamptonshire."*

A copy of the slides used by Tony Blake is available at: [www.northantscalc.com/events/nlcp](http://www.northantscalc.com/events/nlcp).

The meeting closed at 2100.

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