

Report to: **Partnerships Scrutiny Committee**  
Date: **30<sup>th</sup> March 2006**  
Report of: **Director of Community Services**  
Subject: **Local Council Charter for Easington**  
Ward: **All**

## **1. Purpose of Report**

To seek Members views on a draft Local Council Charter for Easington, involving the District of Easington Council, Town and Parish Councils and Durham County Council.

## **2. Consultation**

2.1 A draft Local Council Charter for Easington has been developed following close consultation with all the Town and Parish Councils within the District and Durham County Council. This has taken the form of a series of joint meetings to develop and debate the Charter, as well comments received on a series of drafts.

2.2 Internal consultation has also been undertaken regarding the Charter, including with Management Team, the Democratic Services Officer and the Monitoring Officer. All have influenced the contents of the proposed Charter.

2.3 It is important to point out that each of the parties to the current draft are now seeking formal consent from their respective Councils. At the time of writing three Parish Councils have already approved the Charter.

## **3. Background**

3.1 Local Council Charters set out how a principal local authority and parish councils will work in partnership together. They recognise the importance of Town and Parish Councils in local democracy and service delivery, and detail basic principles of the relationship between the councils involved. The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) advocate the adoption of charters, and have developed a model framework for interested Councils.

3.2 The value of charters is widely recognised. Recent research from the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) points to the benefits of improving relations between tiers of government, facilitating communication, and promoting partnership working.

# Item no.

Their role could be increasingly important in the current climate of increased neighbourhood empowerment, as Town and Parish Councils have a significant role in delivering this agenda.

- 3.3 The approach taken in Easington was to discuss the development of a single “tripartite” charter that would be agreed by the District Council, Durham County Council and all participating Town and Parish Councils in the District. This avoids the need for each Parish Council to have separate charters with each of the principal authorities, and furthermore a single “universal” charter helps to ensure that for each Parish or Town Council the underlying principles of the relationship are on an equitable basis.
- 3.4 The ODPM model was used as the basis of discussion. As the result of constructive debate, a number of improvements were made, for example relating to cognisance of Parish Plans, collaboration relating to elections, standards committee, financial arrangements and frequency of review. The end result is a Charter that is not only consistent with the national framework, but has included the expression of local priorities.
- 3.5 The tripartite approach is relatively uncommon, and if successful could be utilised as an example of good practice in the rest of County Durham and elsewhere.

## **4. Position Statement and Option Appraisal**

- 4.1 The Local Charter proposed for Easington is attached in **Appendix 1**. In brief it covers the following areas:
  - 4.1.1 Introduction: This section recognises the importance of Town and Parish Councils, whilst identifying the necessity for Principal Authorities to balance any local needs with those of the wider community.
  - 4.1.2 Local Governance: This sets out the minimum frequency of liaison meetings, assistance with elections and advice to the Parish Remuneration Panel
  - 4.1.3 Consultation: This section sets out standards in consultation, circulation of reports and attendance at meetings.
  - 4.1.4 Information and complaints: This sets out how the respective authorities will keep each informed and provides undertakings in relation to response to complaints.

# Item no.

- 4.1.5 Standards Committee: This section sets out the detailed arrangements for the Membership and operation of the committee with Parish Council involvement.
- 4.1.6 Devolving Services: This sets out the matters which would need to be addressed in the delegation of any services from a Principal Authority. It is important to point out however that any specific arrangements would be negotiated separately, and not included in a Charter.
- 4.1.7 Financial Arrangements: This sets out the principles of the financial arrangements between the Councils involved. It does not detail any specific budgets or allocations.
- 4.1.8 Planning: This sets out undertakings in relation to consultation on Local Development Plans, and the Principal Authorities taking cognisance of Parish Plans where they are available.
- 4.1.9 Practical Support: This sets out the principles of support, for example relating to training. It also provides for monitoring of the Charters on an annual basis, with a formal review every five years.

## **5. Potential Next Steps**

- 5.1 Clearly the Charter is not an end in itself, and should be used to build on the strong relationships that already exist. In particular, there is scope for further collaboration in the areas of procurement, where combined purchasing power could result in savings, and greater collaboration with grounds maintenance, extending the existing good practice of collaboration (for example on grass cutting and shrub/flower bed maintenance) to a wider number of Parish Councils.
- 5.2 Subject to Members views, there may be a role for Scrutiny to monitor the effectiveness of the Charter over the next few years.

## **6. Implications**

### 6.1 *Financial*

There are no financial issues arising from this report. The charter does include however a commitment to set out the financial arrangement and impact on Parish Councils in the Medium Term Financial Plans, and also sets out the financial principles to be considered should services be devolved.

# Item no.

## 6.2 *Legal*

There are no legal reasons to prevent the Council entering into an agreement of this nature. It should be noted however if a Charter is agreed then the Council would be obliged to honour any commitments made which may be ultimately enforced by law.

## 6.3 *Policy*

This report supports national guidance on improving relationships and quality service delivery.

## 6.4 *Risk*

Three principle risks have been identified for this Charter.

- i) That Members feel the obligations to onerous, should they be enforced. It is not considered that this is a significant risk given the Charter is based on the model of good practice
- ii) That not all Parish or Town Councils in the District would sign up to the Charter. The chances of this are more likely, but it would be possible for the Town or Parish Council to join at a later date should they choose.
- iii) That the Charter does not help to deliver improvements. The prospects of this risk occurring would be reduced by review and scrutiny of the Charter.

## 6.5 *Communications*

The Charter presents an opportunity for a significant press launch which would involve all of the participating Councils.

## 6.6 *Corporate*

The Charter is consistent with the Corporate theme of Quality services for our People

## 6.7 *Equality & Diversity*

The charter specifically recognises and respects the diverse views and culture of residents in the District.

## 6.8 *E-Government*

No implications.

# Item no.

## 6.9 *Procurement*

There may be increased opportunities for collaboration on procurement arising from the Charter.

## 6.10 *Sustainability*

No implications.

## 6.11 *Crime & Disorder*

No implications.

## 6.12 *Human Rights*

No implications.

## 6.13 *Social Inclusion*

No implications.

## **7. Recommendations**

7.1 Members views are invited on the proposed local Council Charter for Easington.

### **Background documents referred to:**

- i) Local Government Information Unit, Charters a Good Practice Guide
- ii) Officer of Deputy Prime Minister, Model Charter
- iii) Commission for Rural Communities, Charters between Town and Parish Councils and Principal Litter Authorities
- iv) Minutes of Town and Parish Partnership Meeting, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2005, 14<sup>th</sup> October 2005 and 10<sup>th</sup> March 2006
- v) Durham County Council, Cabinet Report, 10<sup>th</sup> August 2005 - Working with Town and Parish Councils