



Title: Reviewing the Work of Parish and Town Councils in Reducing Crime

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<http://crc.staging.headshift.com/2006/12/05/reviewing-the-work-of-parish-and-town-councils-in-reducing-crime/> (accessed September 2011)

Additionally, an evaluation and good practice paper (2006) is available at:

<http://crc.staging.headshift.com/files/parishes%20and%20crime%20prevention%20Dec%202006.pdf> (accessed September 2011)

SCS topic headings: Travel Safety; Safety in Public Spaces; Environment Safety; Partnership Working; Community Engagement; Evaluation and Monitoring

This document is a REVIEW of practice to inform effective intervention approaches.

Summary of the intervention's aim

An evaluation by CJA Consultants Limited for The Commission for Rural Communities reviewed the extent to which recent reforms and initiatives to reduce crime and the fear of crime had been successful. Part of the evaluation included detailed surveys of parish and town councils experiences. This paper reports on these findings of this survey work and related research findings and highlights selected good practice case examples. It also presents observations and recommendations aimed at the parish sector.

Outcomes

In 2002 the Countryside Agency produced a guidance report 'Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998: a practical guide for parish and town councils'. It was designed to help town and parish councils fulfil these duties and take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Act. In particular, two strands of the Act contributed to a greater role for town and parish councils a responsibility for action on crime and disorder:

- **Section 5:** county and district councils are required, in formulating and implementing strategies for the reduction of crime and disorder, to co-operate with town and parish councils
- **Section 17:** every town and parish council has a duty to exercise its functions 'with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and

the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area’.

The document addresses each question of its research with highlighted quantitative evidence and qualitative explanations, alongside data in tabular format.

37% of survey participants (205 of 551) did not know whether the provisions of the Act had been useful. Of those who responded with an opinion (i.e. excluding the ‘don’t know’ responses’), parish councils in particular have not found the provisions to be useful, with an average rating of 1.93 (with 1 = ‘not at all useful’ and 5 = ‘extremely useful’), and only 5% of those parish councils respondents (14 out of 290) who provided a rating suggesting that they have found the provisions to be useful. Town councils found them slightly more useful, with an average rating of 2.52 (p.15). The vast majority of both town and parish councils (approximately 90%) do not have any delegated responsibility for crime and disorder.

Telephone interviews produced these additional findings:

- Many interview respondents did not seem very aware of the Act, and most did not think that it would be particularly useful to their areas, especially in the parishes and smaller towns where crime rates and fear of crime were not seen as being problematic.
- All of the parish (rather than town) council respondents said that crime was not a particular concern in their areas, and that they had had no reason to look into or apply the powers under the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*. None had used those powers, although one interviewee said that they would like to use the Act to take action on littering.
- None of the town councils had used or plan to use the powers under the Act.
- Four of the seven town councils also said that crime was not an issue for their towns.

The questionnaire data revealed that over 50% of town councils said that they were definitely involved in partnerships, a rate more than twice that of parish councils. Only 21% of parish councils were involved. 13% of respondents did not know whether they were involved.

Generally, local authority consultation was felt to be slightly more effective than that by the police, and town councils were more likely to be consulted and were consulted more effectively than parish councils by both police and local authorities. 62% of town councils responded that liaison with the local police was ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ close, while parish councils were split fairly evenly between those who felt that liaison by their local police force was ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ close (49%) and those who liaised ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ closely (50%).

In Question 12, participants were asked ‘In your opinion, in your council’s area, to what extent has the fear of crime increased or decreased in the last three years?’

Both parish and town councils felt that there had been a slight increase, with an average score of 2.64 across all 594 responses.

However, Question 13 asked 'In your council's area, if you are aware of any evidence, to what extent has actual crime and disorder increased or decreased in the last three years?' Town councils on average said that there had been no real change (3.09), while parish councils suggested that there might have been a minor increase in crime and disorder (2.77).

Question 17 asked 'Does your council discuss the impact on crime and disorder before taking specific decisions?' Only 18% of town councils rarely or never discussed crime and disorder, compared with 37% of parish councils. In almost 80% of town councils, crime and disorder had been discussed more than 10 times over the last three years (with nearly 40% of respondents stating that the issue had been discussed more than 25 times), with an average of 14.71 discussions per council. Only 50% of parish councils had discussed crime and disorder more than 10 times over the same period.

Over 53% of parish councils had spent no resources on the issue, compared to less than 24% of town councils. Of those which had expenditure on crime prevention, 45% of town councils had invested in CCTV (compared with 10% of parish councils), while 19% of parish councils had spent money on Neighbourhood Watch schemes (compared with 5% of town councils). Most of the expenditure had gone towards 'other' schemes (see table re: Q.19 & 20, p. 13).

In both town and parish council areas, the most common new initiatives were the introduction of PCSOs and measures to increase police presence, such as the introduction of new Beat Officers. These two types of initiative accounted for approximately 50% of all new measures in both towns and parishes. In towns, the next most common initiative was the introduction of new CCTV; in parishes it was increased police liaison (primarily through attendance at council meetings/events), action on anti-social behaviour, and the presence of mobile police stations and units.

The questionnaire survey data was backed-up by data from 20 telephone interviews – 10 with people who had responded to the online survey (five town and five parish councils), and 10 with people who had not responded to the survey (two town and eight parish councils). Key findings from the telephone interviews included:

- 50% of participants (four survey respondents, and six non-respondents) were not in post at the time when the booklet was distributed (compared to 39% in the online survey). Only one recalled seeing it subsequently (a locum Clerk who had worked in six parish and town councils since 2002, and had only seen the document once during that time).
- 30% of participants were in their present role in 2002, but did not recall seeing the booklet (compared to 26% from the online survey).
- Only 20% (all of whom were survey respondents) recalled seeing the booklet – one town and three parish councils – compared to 35% in the online survey.

Good practice case studies (details for each include summary, context, implementation, impact, long-term sustainability)

- Rural Safety Initiative, West Mercia
- Moulton parish council Community Safety Initiatives, Cheshire
- Details of good and interesting practice from telephone interviews with 30 parish and town councils
- Telephone interviews with 15 parish councils identified the following types of initiatives: *community officer, Neighbourhood Action Group, police bicycle patrols, traffic speed monitoring, community wardens, mobile police station, 'Bobby Bus', Safer Communities Panel, Safer Community Team, PCSOs, Police visits with mobile library, Community Police Officer, Introduction of Beat Manager, Neighbourhood Watch, Rural Communities Liaison Committee.*

Summary of evaluation conclusions

Overall, the research suggests that parish and town councils appeared to have had an increasing involvement in community safety following the Act. The increased involvement of local communities appears to have taken place partly through changes in policing policy at a strategic level. There is the impression that partnership working was beginning to deliver the opportunity for real community involvement in shaping the approach to delivering police services in rural areas, and that parish councils are seen as a key element in this process

However, the publication in 2002 of the Countryside Agency's guidance report on section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 seems, in some respects, to have been of doubtful value. In the survey, after excluding the clerks who were not in post in 2002, about a third of clerks recalled receiving it but, when the point was checked in the telephone survey, the proportion dropped to 20%. Only 5% regarded it as their main source of guidance and a further 5% rated it highly.

It was felt that people were inundated with information and that guidance documents and other literature invariably got lost or shelved before an opportunity to use it arose. That reaction suggests that online publications, which are readily accessible when they are needed, are likely to be commonplace.

The Commission for Rural Communities sought to encourage both the national Parish and Town Council Development Group and the various County Training Partnerships around the country to review the need for briefing and training to the parish sector on these issues.

How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

The researchers divided the questionnaire survey of parish and town councils into two parts, in order to achieve both a significant amount of data from a wide range of respondents in a large survey and then depth and flexibility in a smaller number of telephone interviews.

Stage 1: An e-mail was sent to a research sample of clerks of town and parish councils derived from the county associations of local councils (CALCs). This included an internet link in order to be connected to an online survey. This approach produced a response from 635 clerks and other council officers.

The online survey received 1005 'hits' between 23 November and 10 December 2005. 583 questionnaires were fully completed and a further 52 were partially completed (e.g. the respondent closed the survey before submitting responses to all four of the survey sections). The total number of 635 respondents came from 23 counties (five CALCs which previously offered to help eventually did not distribute the link), with an estimated potential survey size of 2,848, giving a survey response rate of 22.3%.

Of the 635 respondents, 29 were clearly elected members (councillors, Mayors etc), 17 were described as Chairmen or Vice-Chairmen, and the remainder were Clerks (the majority) or other officers (job titles given as parish Clerks, town Clerks, Acting Clerks, Deputy town Clerks, Finance Officers, Executive Officers, etc).

Details regarding the geographical distribution of interviews are provided in the main report. The survey itself asked for the council's location and the research team was then able to use the CRC's postcode data to identify the type of area from which each response was received, enabling these categories to be analysed separately. Based on postcode analysis, almost 50% of the respondents were from settlements classified as 'villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings'.

Stage 2: Follow-up telephone interviews were designed to achieve greater depth to respondent answers, rather than precise cross-sectional validity. The research team spoke to the clerk or other appropriate representative of 50 councils, split as follows:

- 30 councils where the replies to the online survey indicated interesting initiatives, either in their own use of section 17 powers or in other local approaches to crime and disorder;
- 10 councils which replied either that they had not made much use of the Countryside Agency's guidance report on Section 17 or that they could not recall seeing it, in order to probe for more information; and
- 10 councils which had not replied to the survey, in order to test whether non-reply was an indication that the guidance report had been of little use or that they had simply failed to take part but were using it – and then to obtain survey responses to compare with those received online.

Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request. Please contact info@scsn.org.uk

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