

Working with Parish Councils

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Summary: This paper summarises how the Board currently works with parish councils and introduces some ideas on how a closer relationship could be developed.

Purpose of Paper: To seek views on how the Board could work more closely with parish councils.

Background

1. There are 117 parish and town councils operating within the Chilterns AONB all of which are entitled to participate in the elections of 6 parish councillors to the Board. The Board's establishment enables serving parish and town councillors to seek election to the Board via the county electoral colleges of parish and town councils. Two can be elected by each of Buckinghamshire and one each from Beds and Hertfordshire (this broadly reflects the number of parishes in the AONB in each county).

Board Member	County
Mary Goldsmith	Beds
Barbara Wallis	Bucks
Shirley Judges	Bucks
Margaret Jarrett	Herts
John Griffin	Oxon
Julia Wells	Oxon

2. The direct election of parish councillors in this way to Conservation Boards is a unique arrangement for protected landscapes in England.
3. In creating the Board a close relationship with parish councils was deliberately sought to help develop a strong sense of involvement by local people. To underpin this objective the Board's establishment order requires all committees set up by the Board to include members elected by parish councils.
4. To date those members elected by parish councils have been involved heavily with the Board's work and all committees requiring parish councillor members have a full complement. All those originally elected in 2004 remain members of the Board. Several members of the Board not elected by parish councils are also past or serving parish councillors but have been appointed by a local authority or the Secretary of State.
5. With so many parish councils and the variability in the way they operate the Board needs to work with them at many different levels. Whilst it is hoped that all councils are aware of the Board and the AONB it must be assumed that the depth of that knowledge varies widely, not least as some parishes fall into

the AONB fully and others have only a small area of AONB. (Many parishes along the escarpment were deliberately planned to include a part of the plateau, escarpment and vale to provide a range of resources such as woodland, grazing and arable land together with water supplies from scarp foot springs).

6. Inevitably parish councils are most concerned with matters of specific relevance to their parish - wider Chilterns issues are of less interest. This creates a challenge for the Board.
7. The issue for the Board is how to develop its relationship with parish and town councils in order to:
 1. Learn about the issues local people are concerned about which the Board should respond to.
 2. Receive feedback on what the Board is doing or plans to do.
 3. Disseminate information about the AONB and Board's activities
 4. Foster a sense of local pride and stewardship
 5. Involve parish councils and local people in activities to help meet the objective of the AONB designation.
8. Currently the Board sends to all parish councils:
 - Annual Report
 - Annual accounts
 - Newsletter
 - Information about new publications
 - Notice of the Annual Forum
 - Notice of other events
 - Consultation drafts of relevant reports and publications
 - The Board's E bulletin
- 8, In 2006-07 the Board created a special fund to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Chiltern's designation as an AONB. Thirty seven parish councils received grants totalling over £7,600.
9. Despite this solid foundation there is scope to forge closer relationships with parish and town councils. The Board needs to bear in mind that parish councillors are volunteers, that some parish councils meet monthly or less and often, have a summer recess, have full agendas and are often overwhelmed by literature from many other bodies. Finally many have very efficient and easy to contact parish clerks. Some do not and a few suffer from rapid turnover over of clerks. The clerk is the key individual on whom rests the task of disseminating literature and information from the Conservation Board to individual members of council. A long standing problem has been timely dissemination from clerks to parish councillors. The Board should aims to

send all communications in electronic format – glossy publications are highly likely to stay in the clerk’s office.

10. In view of the Board’s preferred way of operating, partly dictated by resources, of seeking to extend influence and fostering a sense of stewardship, working with local people must be a top priority and a good relationship with parishes is an excellent way of achieving this. The question is what other ways can the Board achieve this? The following are suggested as options:
 1. Offers to parish councils to attend meetings.
 2. Special events for parish councils.
 3. An annual event for all parish councils (or by county)
 4. Special publications for parish councils, e.g. on planning and building design issues.
 5. Small grant scheme
 6. Best kept village/parish award.
 7. Involvement in specific initiatives, e.g. Land Use Survey.
11. There will be cost implications for all of the above, but most are likely to be affordable. Perhaps a bigger issue is the availability of staff and Board member time to attend meetings with parish councils.
12. Board members elected by parish council have contributed to this paper. It is also suggested that parish councils are contacted to seek their views.

Recommendations

1. **The Board seeks to work more closely with Parish and Town Councils.**
2. **The Board identifies how its wishes to achieve this aim to enable proposals to be incorporated in the budget for 2008-09.**